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# WILD AT HEART

Is the end in sight for stocked fish in rivers? asks Simon Cooper



**F**OR SOME WHILE NOW I HAVE THOUGHT the Environment Agency (EA) have been on manoeuvres in respect of the stocking of rivers. I say “on manoeuvres” because there has been no major policy discussion. No announcements. No new guidelines. But clearly something is afoot as they pick off individual owners one by one with stocking permit reviews, often resulting in the reduction in the size and quantity of trout permitted to be stocked.

What is going on? Is there a concerted move within the EA to reduce the level of stocking across England and Wales? Is there a rewilding faction at work deep within the EA, being prodded by interested pressure groups? Is the EA privy to new evidence that proves stocking to be bad? I wish I could give you answers to some or all of these questions, but my requests for an interview have gone unreplyed. So, let me give you a little background and what I have gleaned.

Until a decade ago anyone who wished to stock farmed trout (since 2015 all must be triploid, *ie* infertile) in a river had to apply for an annual Section 30 permit which stated the species, number and size of fish to be stocked that season. Each application was reviewed by the local EA officer, who would assess whether the section of river could sustain such a stocking taking into account local characteristics. Inevitably, the decision was fairly subjective and I rarely came across a Section 30 that was refused provided you didn't step far outside historic stocking policy on your stretch. However, the EA rightly concluded the process was repetitive and administratively burdensome, replacing it with a permit that perpetuated your Section 30 stocking without the need of an annual renewal. It is these permits, first granted in 2012, that are under review.

The process is, at first sight, benign as the local EA officer contacts you, the permit holder, in what is

presented as an administrative tidying-up exercise. You confirm all the basic data along with, most crucially, how many fish and of what size have been stocked in the past two years. Often that is the end of the story when the officer calls back to confirm all is well with your permit: no changes. No issues. However, that is not always the case when, out of the blue, you will be told either a) reduce the number of fish and/or b) reduce the maximum size to 1kg. And sometimes these changes are swingeing. I know of one fishery where the number of fish has been compulsorily reduced by 38 per cent, with a promise of more reductions to come along with the imposition of an upper limit size of 1kg.

Now, I'm not necessarily saying the EA are wrong in what they are doing, but we need an open debate about stocking to be convinced they are right. If they have a new policy, it should be open to scrutiny. Take the 1kg limit. It seems a fairly arbitrary number, so how was it arrived at? What is the science? Explain the logic? Does it apply to all rivers, everywhere? Will the limit change over time?

Stocking has been part of the management of recreational fisheries for nearly 200 years. In fact, recreational fishing would likely not exist as a sport for the common man and woman without stocking and probably won't exist except for a privileged few if this policy becomes the norm. For the EA to upend long-accepted practices from behind a cloak of secrecy is simply wrong. It is time for them to open up and tell us what is going on. ■

*Simon Cooper is managing director of Fishing Breaks (fishingbreaks.co.uk) the leading chalkstream fishing specialists. He is author of Life of a Chalkstream and The Otters' Tale.*