

Chairman's Report 2018 AGM

A warm welcome was given to all members and guests. Guests included the main speaker Bill Beaumont, Senior Fisheries Scientist, Game & Wildlife Trust; Adrian Dowding, West Country Trust; Paul Carter, EA; Paul Ashworth and Charles Inniss, Torridge; Richard McLaughlin, Lyn; Roger Furniss and Mark Thomasin-Foster, Exe; Adrian Dowding, Westcountry Rivers Trust and Wayne Thomas, North Devon Journal. Paul Ashworth, a member of our Committee as well as the Torridge's has been our Salmon & Trout Conservation Representative, but now sits as Torridge Representative which better describes the very useful role he performs.

Thanks were given to the Committee for the work done during the year. Particular thanks were given to Anthony Pope who is standing down after many years' valuable service.

- Turning to fishing – 2017 promised much. For a change we had good water height most of the time. Good for salmon fishers, not so good perhaps for sea trout fishers. Early and mid season were productive, but the season ran out of steam with no real late run. There were grilse about, but not in any numbers.
- I have continued to do the annual beat survey, canvassing all riparian owners. Last season's survey results are very nearly complete: 286 salmon and 214 sea trout against 2016 figures of 185 salmon and 302 sea trout. The provisional numbers from the EA for 2017 are 233 salmon (87% returned) and 188 sea trout (81% returned). This against final EA numbers for 2016 of 145 salmon and 299 sea trout. The netsmen took 25 salmon and 37 sea trout; we took 31 salmon and 36 sea trout according to the EA's provisional figures. Netsmen's figures for 2016 were 44 salmon and 55 sea trout. The thing that jumps out in these numbers is the dramatic drop in our sea trout catch. I haven't

gone back into darkest history, but I don't believe sea trout numbers have ever before dropped below salmon numbers. The reason for this is unclear, but this drop in the sea trout catch is reflected pretty generally across the south-west rivers. Sea trout numbers can fluctuate quite dramatically and we must hope for a bounce back. As you will all appreciate there is no specific form of remedial action available to us. Brown trout fishing had another good year with about 2,300 fish caught, roughly the same as 2016, even though conditions were not so favourable. We continue our efforts to bring the brown trout fishing community more fully into RTFA.

- You will all know that the new IFCA netting byelaws were finally signed off. The salmon and sea trout by-catch in the estuary is now a thing of the past. You will no longer see drift nets there. The only nets you may now see are those of the 3 salmon netsmen and those used for catching sand eels for bait. This was a long and at times difficult campaign. In the interests of time I won't try to thank everyone who has played a part, but will simply thank the membership for taking part in the crucial consultation. This is a very big win for us.
- I hope there may be another big win round the corner. You are all aware of the EA's consultation on salmon and sea trout fisheries and each of you will have played a part, I'm sure. The proposed new byelaws have been published. Without getting into too much detail and simply focussing on the Taw, and assuming the new byelaws are enacted, by next season there should be no more salmon netting in the estuary. There will be no mandatory catch and release for us, but a 90% plus release rate should be our aim. We would have preferred to operate wholly under a voluntary code of conduct, but for our fly-

fishermen treble hooks with a gape of more than 7mm will be banned. As with the IFCA byelaw review there is sure to be a serious kick-back from the commercial netting interests. The campaign is not over yet, but we look to be in a strong position.

- After good news some bad I'm afraid. Having taken on board the threat to water quality from certain types of farming activity, particularly winter maize, we have now recognised another major problem. South West Water has at least 35 sewage treatment works on our catchment. These all outflow into our river system. It is unclear how many are currently fit for purpose and how many will be fit for purpose when all the new houses in our towns and villages have been built. These STWs are "operator self-monitored", a curious concept. Fish Legal, on our behalf, is asking the EA to clarify its overseeing role, which we have strong reservations about. You will all have heard about Upstream Thinking where SWW makes funds available to others to clean up their act. It would be good if we can persuade SWW to do some Downstream Thinking and clean up their act. We are putting a lot of effort into this new STW campaign. I am hopeful that an article will appear soon in the Western Morning News which will bring useful publicity. We do not want our river to be turned into a drain - to use a euphemism.
- River work carried out for us by Westcountry Rivers Trust last year on a jointly funded basis focussed on the Little Dart. Indeed it was WRT's initial walk-over survey there that identified the Chulmleigh STW problem and led to us to realise the scale of the threat across the catchment. Adrian Dowding and his colleagues deserve thanks for the work done on the Little Dart and its tributary, the Sturcombe. 13 debris dams

were cleared and 17 spawning gravel sites were cleaned. Selective coppicing and wood debris enhancement work was carried out over about 3 km of bank. I should also mention that Adrian works constantly to identify sources of funds for river improvement work on the Taw. We are hopeful of good news on that score later this year. We value our relationship with WRT. It continues to be a very smooth one.

- The Northam Landfill reared its ugly head again earlier in the year when severe storms ate away at the Burrows coast line and brought the threat of serious pollution that much closer. 650,000 cubic metres of household and other waste lies in the landfill. This has been a bête noire of mine for some time, but has now received greater publicity. As a result a number of interested parties are coming together. We face two main problems. Natural England is against any hard engineering solution and the two councils involved, Devon CC and Torridge DC, are short of the necessary funds and prefer sticking plaster solutions.
- I would ask everyone to see if they can do some recruitment work for us, preferably by finding new members who bring down our average age. New, younger members are what we ideally need.
- That brings me to the end of my report. The start to the season has been difficult with some horrendous weather conditions. As the weather improves we can discover what's swimming about out there. I wish everyone a successful season and let's hope the sea trout come back in numbers.

Alex Gibson