

RTFA 2019 AGM – Summary of Proceedings

The AGM held at Highbullen Hotel on 22 March was well attended as was the dinner.

Changes to the Committee were agreed unanimously. Ian Blewett becomes our new Secretary in place of George Marsh who stood down, Pete Tyjas becomes a Lower Taw Representative, having previously represented the Upper Taw. Simon Hillcox stood down and Charlie O'Shea who runs the Rising Sun and its fishing becomes a Lower Taw Representative. Gordon Murray, Chairman of the Taw Fishing Club becomes an Upper Taw Representative. The position of Associate Member's Representative ceases to exist.

The new constitution was agreed unanimously - there is now one class of member - as was the new single subscription rate of £25 which will take effect next season and be reviewed in 3 years time. It is hoped that many riparian owners will keep their standing orders at £35 with the balance above the subscription rate being treated as a donation to RTFA for river improvement work.

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT - Extracts

- Last season was a depressing one for our anglers. You can't fight weather conditions – the Beast from the East, some early, bad spates and then the worst drought conditions we can remember. Without a good last ten days the season would have been even worse.
- I have continued to do the annual beat survey, canvassing all riparian owners. Last season's results show 72 salmon and 71 sea trout against 2017 figures of 286 salmon and 214 sea trout. The provisional EA numbers from the EA for 2017 are 45

salmon (2 retained) and 43 sea trout (11 retained). The netsmen took 35 salmon and 23 sea trout. These will be the last fish the nets take. In such a bad drought year the numbers don't tell us much about our fish stocks, but the thing that jumps out is that sea trout numbers are below salmon numbers for the second season running, both for rods and nets. We know sea trout numbers can fluctuate quite dramatically. Unfortunately it is not clear what the cause is or what remedial action we can take. Sea trout as we know are little understood and slightly mysterious creatures. Brown trout fishing had another respectable year despite the drought with about 2,000 fish caught, slightly less than 2017. We continue our efforts to bring the brown trout fishing community fully into RTFA, remembering that the water they fish is of crucial importance to our river. It's where the fish spawn and spend their early life; the brown trout fishermen are our eyes and ears there.

- I would like to thank all members who took part in the EA's consultation on salmon and sea trout fisheries. We got the result we wanted: no more salmon and sea trout netting in the estuary and no mandatory catch and release. There is a sting in the tail however and all members will have received an email from me recently on this. We are being required to reach and maintain a C&R level of over 90%. Failure to do so could result in the imposition of 100% C&R. I won't repeat what I said in my email except to emphasise the Committee's recommendation that we practice 100% voluntary C&R wherever possible and extend this practice to sea trout for the simple reason that we are now catching less sea trout than salmon. On C&R, care for the fish is paramount. A badly treated fish will not survive. We have a good practice guide on our website and I will be sending out another email on this subject shortly.

- Turning to river improvement work – unfortunately the work planned for last year was not carried out. We had committed £10k and this is being carried forward. A further £10k has been committed and Westcountry Rivers Trust will do two year’s work for us this year. Given the funds at our disposal the Committee has decided that our priority, having already sorted out fish access up and down the river, is to do all we can to protect and improve the spawning areas. Until our farmers stop practices that result in silt - that is their soil - washing into our river the best measure at our disposal is gravel washing. (You will all have seen first-hand evidence of the increase in siltation where you fish.) We have identified sites after looking at last season’s EA juvenile survey and previous surveys by WRT. Our decision is that we should prioritise our best and second best spawning areas where the most productive return can be expected. This work will be carried out in a balanced way across the catchment by WRT on the Taw and Mole/Bray systems. Sites have been identified on the Upper Taw, the Mole, the Molland Yeo and the Crooked Oak. Additionally trash dams will be removed.
- We continue to be concerned about the 35 STWs on our system given the extensive housing expansion already going ahead and in the planning stage. The problem as we see it is under-maintenance and under-investment by SWW. Progress is slow, but South Molton and Chumleigh STWs, perhaps the worst, have gone on what’s called PR19 which means they will get attention between 2020 and 2024. We will continue to work closely with Roger Furniss, the incoming Executive Chairman of South West Rivers Association on this. A similar threat is posed by the three biodigesters on our system, one the Mole and two on the Little Dart. They are owner self-monitored. We can do

no more than keep our fingers crossed that no spillage occurs. The other problem here is that they consume huge amounts of maize which is the main reason why so much winter maize is now grown in our catchment and almost certainly the main cause of increase in siltation in the river. Those who fish the Mole will have noticed a distinct change in turbidity there following spates.

- I am delighted that we now have a new constitution with a single class of member and a single subscription rate. I see this as a progressive move which should help with recruitment and fundraising both from within the Association and from without.
- I would ask all members to help with the recruitment of new members. Younger members will be particularly welcome. We would like all who fish the Taw to be part of the Association.
- As we all know salmon and sea trout are under threat from many directions. We will continue to do what we can to face up to the in-river threats. Let's hope for some sensible weather and many more fishing days than we were given last season and also a return of our sea trout in good numbers.
- Richard Nickell will mention membership numbers, but I would ask everyone here 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.

Alex Gibson

TREASURER'S REPORT – summary

- Accounts as at 31.12.18 showed income of £8,795 and expenses of £2,326 which resulted in an increase in our bank

balance from £2,998 to £9,467. The reserve account balance was £13,946. Overall a strong position for the Association.

- During the year there were 8 new Associate Members and 2 new Full Members. Total Membership is now 62 full Members and 103 Associate Members.
- We are always looking to recruit new Taw anglers and are particularly keen to find young ones. To this end I am planning a Junior Fishing Day later in the season at Blakewell Fisheries. Details will follow, but meantime please let me know if you have any candidates – richard@blakewell.co.uk.

Richard Nickell

GUEST SPEAKER

Andy King, a molecular ecologist at Exeter University, currently working on the SAMARCH project – Salmonid Management round the Channel - a European programme aimed at improving management of salmon and sea trout in southern England rivers gave an extremely interesting and topical talk on “What can genetics tell us about trout populations in south-west England”.