

River Dart salmon protection Emergency Byelaw Briefing

22nd July 2015

The following briefing details the reasoning for the introduction of an Emergency Byelaw to protect salmon stocks on the River Dart, Devon, England. A more detailed justification is available on request.

The Environment Agency has received reports of diseased fish in recent years from many rivers across the SW, including the Dart. Whilst these reports are of concern and have been investigated, there are usually no associated reports of significant mortalities.

From the end of April 2015, the Environment Agency received many reports from members of the public and anglers relating to salmon and trout in the River Dart with fungal infections, a significant number dead or dying. The River Dart salmonid populations appear to have been particularly badly impacted in 2015 compared to other rivers in Devon in Cornwall.

The Environment Agency, through South West Rivers Association (SWRA) and the Dart Fisheries Association (DFA), organised a catchment wide survey in July 2015 to gain a better understanding of the number of salmon and sea trout remaining in the river and those exhibiting signs of disease. Just 3 salmon were observed, all showing signs of fungal infection. The Dart Angling Association (DAA) report that is the worst occurrence of disease on the river since the early 1970's.

Wherever possible we have arranged for samples of diseased fish to be collected. Live fish samples have been obtained from other affected rivers in Devon and sent for analysis by the Environment Agency Fish Health team in Brampton. We await results, but hope to learn more about the disease affecting our rivers.

River Dart salmon stock is currently deemed to be "At Risk". The River Dart salmon rod catches in 2013 and 2014 were low with the catch in 2014 being the lowest ever recorded. Juvenile fisheries surveys from 2014 also confirm that juvenile salmon stocks were lower than in previous years.

Given the current state of the salmon stock, and the additional impact of disease this year, it is considered essential to protect any remaining salmon so that as many as possible survive to spawn. Additionally Salmon on the Dart are a qualifying feature of the Dartmoor Special Area of Conservation (SAC), this requires a precautionary approach to maintain the SACs favourable status.

We have attempted to broker voluntary controls to enable greater protection of salmon in both the rod and net fisheries. However, it has proven to be difficult to obtain agreement from all parties on suitable protection measures for salmon for the remainder of this season.

To provide timely and suitable protection for salmon we have therefore implemented an 'Emergency Byelaw'. The main provisions of this are:

1. No retention of salmon taken by any instrument (rod and line or net) within the River Dart catchment or its estuary with immediate release at the point of capture.
2. Closure of the River Dart net fishery at the end of July (shortening the season by two weeks).
3. All rod and line fishing in the River Dart catchment to be undertaken by artificial fly only.

We believe these measures will provide the protection salmon stocks need to give the fishery the best chance of recovery. -These provisions will remain in place until 1 June 2016 and will be subject to review at this time.

We are contacting all relevant external parties to make them aware and provide additional information. We are also arranging for additional enforcement associated with the byelaw to ensure it is being adhered to. The public are still being asked to report any sightings of diseased fish through our incident hotline number 0800 807060 and any general enquiries should initially go through Customer Contact Centre 03708 506506.

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