

Theft of Fish

When it comes to tackling angling's more controversial and emotive issues, there is one organisation that has always led the way. From Canoes to Cormorants, NAFAC has never failed in its responsibility to protect our Fisheries and Angling interests. Now NAFAC is 'on the case' again; leading the fight to protect our fisheries and fish stocks from the increasing threat posed by fish theft and illegal fishing. The sad results of which can be seen from the accompanying photos.

Week in, week out, 'Fishing for the pot' by Eastern European immigrants, large scale illegal netting operations and the illegal transfer of fish by unscrupulous fishery owners and fish breeders, continue to make the pages of the angling press. However, it is a fact that the great majority of incidents still go unreported. While fish thefts to date have been most prevalent in the South and South East of England, evidence reveals that it is now a growing problem throughout England. With many more migrants from Eastern Europe coming to live in England in the near future, the potential for a dramatic increase in these illegal activities is clear.

A number of determined steps have already been taken at Local, Regional and National level to get to grips with these problems. In July 2005, the Anglian Regional Fisheries Consultative Forum, in consultation with the EA, recommended changes to the current Regional Fishery Byelaws to offer a greater and enhanced protection to river and stillwater fish stocks.

Currently the law allows for anyone to take two* sizeable fish per day from rivers, but does not specify an upper size limit. Proposed changes are, e.g. removal of the byelaw - making it an offence to remove, take or kill any fish without prior EA consent. Consent would be granted for tasks such as management of fish stocks and to fish farms that supply the food industry. An allowance would also be made for Pike anglers to use limited numbers of small fish as bait. Further suggestions in line with these changes include greater enforcement powers for the EA to enable them to prosecute anyone caught stealing fish from rivers and stillwaters. (The EA currently cannot prosecute in either instance).

Stillwaters are already covered by the Theft Act, but attempts to prosecute in this way can often prove extremely difficult and expensive to pursue with little guarantee of success. The proposed changes would both simplify the process and increase the possibility of securing a conviction and penalties. It was further recommended that any changes be made at National level as opposed to Regional level, as is the case at present.



Example of nets, illegal set lines and dead fish recovered following reports of illegal fishing on a club fishery on a the River Nene, evidence of the growing problem clubs and fisheries face!



The first half of the new Fisheries Bill has now been drafted and once approved the Byelaw changes could be promoted. The earliest projected date for the new legislation to be in place is Autumn 2007. In the meantime, there is a great deal that we can and must do, to improve the situation. Currently it is a fact that the greater majority of fish theft and illegal fishing incidents are not being reported by anglers on the bank. The following simple procedures are intended for use by anglers, club officials and non-anglers alike who may have witnessed or found evidence of illegal fishing activity:

1. Telephone the EA immediately (0800 80 70 60), or as soon as possible. This step is vital and will help the EA to respond promptly to incidents.
2. Request an Incident Report Number from the Agency. This is extremely important as it will ensure your call is recorded on the EA's Database, even if the EA cannot respond immediately.
3. Phone your Club Bailiff/Club Official to inform them of the situation advising them of the Incident Report No. They will record and log details of incidents which can be cross referenced with the EA and their local Fisheries Consultative and Regional groups.
4. If you have a mobile camera phone, or camera, take photos of evidence of illegal fishing



activity, i.e. nets, stakes, hook lines, firepits, etc. and send to your Club, local Fisheries Consultative and/or Environment Agency (if possible quote the Incident Report No. in order for photos to be cross referenced with report.

5. Speak with other anglers about any problems on your waters and in your area.

It is recommended that Clubs include the above procedures on a dedicated page in their individual club book. Information sheets outlining these procedures and other information should be prepared by Consultatives for distribution through local tackle shops.

It is often said that anglers are the 'Guardians of the Riverbank', and we are, but we can enhance that reputation still further by doing all that we can to stamp out this growing menace to our fisheries and to fish stocks.

(* Numbers allowed may vary area to area)

Steve Hellen