

# Conservationists blamed for fly-fishing foul-up

This was the headline and below is the text that appeared in *The Times* after the first article and the subsequent letters that it evoked.

THE spiritual home of fly fishing has become a battleground between fishermen and conservationists.

Two years ago the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust banned fishing on a 1,300-yard stretch of the Itchen, north of Winchester. The trust, which holds the riparian rights to the stretch, accused the Abbots Barton fishing club of over-management of the river, to the detriment of wildlife, and argued that the banks should be allowed to return to their natural state.

Now the fisherman, who have caught trout on the stretch and looked after it for more than 20 years, claim that the banks are so overgrown and unkempt that wildlife is discouraged and that the conservation status as a Site of Special Scientific Interest is under threat.

The argument is an emotive one for fly fishermen. It was along these banks, between 1883 and 1938, that George Edward Mackenzie Skues pioneered the use of nymphs — artificial, immature insects — to catch trout.

The river is a shrine to the sport. Fishermen worldwide, especially from America, are keen to return to its banks but cannot do so while the trust's ban remains in force.

The Salmon and Trout Association, fearing that the dispute is damaging Britain's reputation for fishing, has intervened in an attempt to negotiate a deal between the

## Anglers condemn the 'ignorance' of returning historic stretch of trout stream to nature, reports Valerie Elliott

trust and the fishermen. Tony Bird, chairman of the association, said: "This is a world heritage site and is known as the home of our sport. Yet it is now split and we are willing to do anything to run it again as a whole fishery."

He emphasised that the association wished to work with the trust, as it does with other wildlife trusts throughout the country. He added, however: "It must be understood that these chalk streams are man-made and need regular maintenance." He has offered the trust practical help to restore the stretch. But the trust and the fishermen have very different views about the best way to manage a chalk stream.

The fishermen say that without constant management over hundreds of years, such as the cutting back of reeds and the repairing of banks, the area would have reverted to swamps and tiny streams years ago.

The trust says that management of the site, known as the Winnall Moors reserve, has been overzealous. It did not approve of the rigorous

cutting back of weed, or the removal of pike, which kill trout, by electrodes before the start of each fishing season.

Roy Darlington, who runs the Abbots Barton club, is particularly depressed by the state of the river. He can only survey the affected stretch from the boundary because the trust has now banned the public and its own members from the site, except with special permission.

He is convinced that the river is in such a mess it would take two years to put right. "I'm really saddened by what I see," he said. "The parts we used to look after no longer have spawning trout. It seems such a shame the river is not being maintained."

He is unhappy that silt has not been cleaned from the gravel on the riverbed to encourage the trout to spawn. He believes that the river is so clogged up with reeds and with other vegetation that animals such as water voles are being put off setting up home there.

Broken trees have been seen on the river, and part of a weir has been washed away, sluicing the stream into reed beds. Mr Darlington said: "It's all so unnecessary. It's dogma and ignorance all mixed up, a whole chunk of history and tradition just wasted."

Norman Maclean, Professor of Genetics at Southampton University's School of Biological Sciences, and a member of both the club and the trust, said: "I am very disappointed

that the trust has proven to be a very poor guardian of the reserve. It seems to have a view of conservation that is outmoded, which is to leave everything to itself and do nothing. But now in most of the world's environment, good conservation is about good management."

He hoped that the two sides would be able to work together in the interests of the sport and nature conservation.

The trust declined to answer the detailed criticism of the fishermen; nor would it confirm if it was considering an approach from the Salmon and Trout Association. It said in a statement that the reserve

was being managed "for the benefit of wildlife" and it was monitoring the "biological response to the management".

The statement added: "We have also engaged the services of independent experts to look into specialist matters such as aquatic invertebrates." The trust, which is subject to monitoring by English Nature and the Environment Agency, said that it would make its findings public when the studies were complete.

English Nature is siding with the trust. David Withrington, the agency's senior fisheries officer, said that the fishermen had "over-manicured" the site in the past. He

believed that there had been a "slight improvement" in wildlife on the reserve since the trust took over.

"Just because you can't see the water vole holes on the bank, it doesn't mean they aren't there," he said. "We think there are plenty running around."

Nevertheless, Mr Withrington believes that there should be a compromise and sees no reason why some fishing cannot be allowed on the stretch and why the trust cannot allow a limited number of fishing access points.

The fishermen are waiting to see whether the trust will accept such a deal.

## THE ANGLER'S VIEW

### A HEALTHY RIVER...

Willow trees edge banks

Cattle prevented from coming to the bank

Grass banks kept mown

Reeds cut to knee-high

Trout often seen feeding on the surface

Water flowing quickly over clean gravel bottom

Damselflies often spotted in the reeds



Holes in the bank - a sign that there are water voles about



Willow trees die and fall into river

No holes in banks: water voles gone

Long grass on banks

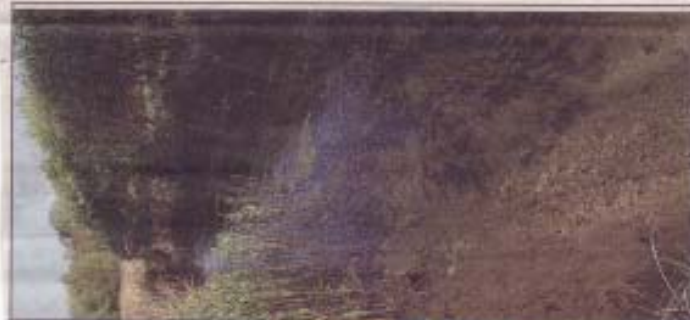
Fishing not allowed

Masses of brown reeds block bank

Watercress sprawls from bank

Pike are the only fish seen

River full of young trout and grayling



## How keepers put care into catches

FISHING syndicates such as the Abbots Barton fishing club employ a keeper who usually manages a three-mile stretch of river (Valerie Elliott writes).

He is paid £15,000 to £20,000 a year, less if a tied cottage is provided. The keeper's work is geared to the season which starts on about April 3 — though the start can sometimes be as late as May 1 — and lasts until between the end of September and mid-October.

At the end of the season the keeper will start to plan the following year's fishing. A priority is to ensure next year's fish stocks. In October/November, keepers clean the gravel on the river floor so that trout can spawn — females lay their eggs and males fertilise them on the gravel. Over December, January and February, the keeper will spend hours standing in the water repairing banks, mending bridges and trimming over-hanging trees. In March he mows banks and checks river stocks. A team of four usually goes out in a flat-bottomed punt to check the fish. Two will use electrodes to stun fish such as pike, which are predators,

and grayling, which compete with trout for food. They are netted and removed from the water.

The trout are left and new stocks of farmed trout, about 200 over two miles, are released in the water. These are a mixture of one- or two-year-old trout and baby trout known as fry. On four or five days in the season, keepers on the river all cut overgrown vegetation so it floats downstream at the same time.

Costs for the season vary between £650 and £1,200, but some American tourists may pay as much as £300 for a day's fishing. Among the people often seen fishing on the Itchen and Test, the finest chalk streams in the country, are Jimmy Carter, the former US President, Eric Clapton and Roger Waters, the rock musicians, Geoffrey Palmer and Bernard Cribbins, the actors, and Jeremy Paxman, the broadcaster and author.

A Chinese proverb says: "A day spent fishing does not count against your lifespan."

Is nature best left to itself?  
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