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JUST ENOUGH

Simon Cooper probes chalkstream fishers about catch-and-release



WE REGULARLY DEBATE IN THE office how many fish makes a satisfactory day on a chalkstream. It is not quite the abstruse philosophical question you might assume. Somehow, in our fishing rules, we have to reflect what is a reasonable number of fish to take home and how many it might be deemed reasonable to catch and release in a single day.

Now, I have an idea in my head as to what constitutes reasonable, but it is hardly what you might call a scientific opinion. The numbers we lay down in our rules are based on experience, past practice and, if I'm absolutely honest, a bit of guesswork. So, after a flurry of unhappy correspondence from river owners and anglers after days when 20-30 fish were recorded to a single rod, I decided to poll the readership of my bi-weekly *"Life of a Chalkstream"* newsletter. I asked the questions of brown trout and grayling; I think you will be surprised and shocked by the answers, not least by the numbers, but perhaps gratified by similar attitudes to both species.

The opening question, asking whether you agreed with the principle of catch-and-release for brown trout, was less than controversial. Overwhelmingly, 95% of you did. No great surprise there, though I suspect that 20-30 years ago that number would have been closer to 50%; in this respect we are far more enlightened now. Interestingly, when the question was turned on its head – whether you agreed with the principle of catch-and-kill – only 74% said yes. Over a quarter of you don't believe any trout should be killed. The same questions asked of grayling revealed little difference in response.

The key question, at least in respect of the genesis of this survey, asked how many brown trout was a reasonable number to release in a day. About a third of you thought somewhere between four and six, a quarter of you up to ten, 16% opted for 11-20, while I was

shocked to see that 11% thought no upper limit should apply. When it came to catch-and-keep, two brown trout in a day was the overwhelmingly choice. Again, I think this reflects changing fishing mores because historically four fish would have constituted "the bag".

When it comes to grayling, the number we are happy to release in a day is little different to trout, with up to ten the choice of two-thirds of respondents. Unsurprisingly, a minority wanted to keep a grayling, but for those 32% who did, two was the chosen number. I think we'll gloss over the 7% wishing to keep three or more, bearing in mind the legal limit is generally two!

So, what to conclude from this survey which, with more than 700 respondents, has to be one of the most comprehensive of its kind? Well, we have most certainly become a committed band of fish-releasers and less concerned about taking fish home. It is also good to see that grayling and trout are held in equal regard, not something I could have said at the outset of my chalkstream life. However, most worryingly, the results point to a certain disregard for fish stocks and the long-term quality of our fishing with roughly one person in ten believing they should be able to release without limit, with twice that number suggesting up to 20 in a day was acceptable. I beg to differ.

It seems to me that as an angler you have a duty to care for the fish you seek. A responsibility to moderate your desires when Mother Nature is bountiful. To leave for others that follow what you desire. It will always be hard to walk away. But it is the better thing to do. ■

Simon Cooper is managing director of Fishing Breaks (fishingbreaks.co.uk) the leading chalkstream fishing specialists. He is author of Life of a Chalkstream and The Otters' Tale.