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CHALK TALK

Abolish the rod licence

Simon Cooper puts the case for a radical overhaul of fishery funding

YOU MAY NOT HAVE NOTICED, but we are, at least judged by the latest sales figures for angling, taking part in a sport that is in a spiral of decline. I'll spare you all the gory details, but the headline figure is that, since 2010 rod licence sales are down by 40 per cent from close to one and a half million annually to under nine hundred thousand. This year, the decline is 15 per cent.

Maybe I'm wrong, but fishing doesn't feel to me a sport in a nosedive. Certain sectors - carp fishing, high-end destinations and family leisure to name but three - are doing very well. Fishing gets its fair share on social media, and on television we have *Mortimer & Whitehouse: Gone Fishing* on BBC, Robson on ITV, *River Monsters* on ITV and any number of shows on satellite. In my own little niche within a niche of chalkstreams we are about to close out a record year. So what is going on? In common with nearly all outdoor activities, the lifestyle surveys suggest a gradual decline in angling participation, but nothing on the scale indicated by licence sales. The reasons must lie elsewhere - cost, ease of purchase and social attitudes.

As far as freshwater species are concerned I think we can cross the cost factor off the list. In real terms the annual licence at £30 has changed little over the past eight years. However, I am not so sure about the salmon and sea-trout licence: £82 is quite a wedge. I'd think twice about going fishing with that to spend, which equates to a full day's pay for anyone on minimum wage or half a week's State Pension.

It has, in many respects, never been easier to buy a rod licence - all you need is five minutes on a PC and a credit card. But therein lies part of the problem. The Environment Agency, the government body charged with the duty of selling licences has, for perfectly understandable reasons, closed all the outlets for licence sales bar on-line and the Post Office. In the past there was a whole network selling licences: tackle-shops, hotels, fisheries, keepers, local stores, agents

like myself and more, who received a small commission for our trouble. Buying your licence was part of the ritual associated with preparing for the new season. Buying on-line breaks that connection. Out of sight is out of mind, and as for Post Offices: their decline is well documented. This is not a phenomenon unique to our licences. Since the DVLA went to a paperless system there has been a worrying drop in road tax sales. It's tempting to call this evasion, which indeed it is, but the reasons are clearly more complex.

I don't know this for sure, but I suspect that if you polled the under-35s, most would be blissfully unaware that such a thing as a fishing licence existed, let alone that it is required. And let's face it, the whole concept is totally out of date and misguided. You don't need one to shoot. Walk in a National Park. Canoe. Ride a bike. Own a cat. Fish in the sea. Fish in Scotland. This is a generation raised on the concept of free. Put the barrier of a fishing licence in the way and they'll say, "Nah. Too much hassle." And I don't blame them.

We could probably brainstorm a dozen or more ways to boost licence sales, but the truth is that a radical solution is needed. Abolish the rod licence. It only raises about £20m a year (probably more like £12m if you deduct administration and enforcement costs), a pinprick in the tax revenues of HMRC. However, wishing it gone will not make it happen. Most governments are loath to a) relinquish any kind of licence and b) wave goodbye to revenue. So, what do we do?

Firstly, we have to make the case for angling: as a healthy, life-fulfilling pastime for all ages and socio-economic groups it is hard to beat. All those TV shows suggest a British public that finds angling interesting, however surprising that may be. That done, it is on to the corridors of power. Which one will lead us to abolition? I identify three.

The Treasury needs to be convinced. Angling is a billion-pound industry. The tax revenues run into hundreds of millions by way of VAT, business rates, employment taxes and import duties. Here is a thought: a single fishing trip that requires £50 of fuel will contribute more to the

"If you polled the under-35s, most would be blissfully unaware that a fishing licence existed"

Chancellor of the Exchequer in tax than a fishing licence. It won't take much to extrapolate that kind of thinking to turn abolition into a revenue generator. Then there is DEFRA. Michael Gove has promised that, post-Brexit, the £4.1 billion rural budget will be used for conservation. Is there any reason why we shouldn't have a share? And finally the Department for Culture, Media & Sport has a budget of hundreds of millions that is handed out each year to leisure activities. We should be knocking hard on that door.

The fact is that our rivers, regardless of fishing, badly need the environmental support that the licence revenue provides, but that is a fast-diminishing revenue stream. It is time for anglers to make a fuss. Demand the same fair share of the public purse that agriculture, the arts, museums and sport have been receiving for decades. **TRG**

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