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RULED BY RULES

Simon Cooper is surprised by the complexity of our angling regulations



I'VE JUST BEEN ON A JOURNEY. I AM SURE you are familiar with the 21st Century iteration of this word. No longer is it a simple movement from point A to point B, but rather a learning experience from which you emerge a better person. And where, you might ask, did I make this journey?

Once a year I do battle online to buy my fishing licence. Actually, I'm being a little unfair as they have removed most of the extraneous questions that you previously had to answer; it only takes a few clicks before you are parted with your money. But this time I lingered on the "Licence conditions" page and, for reasons I can't explain, followed the freshwater rod-fishing byelaws link instead of mindlessly hitting the *I Accept* button. It takes you to a whole new world.

To start with, freshwater anglers are covered by two sets of rules: national and local, or as they like to call them in Olde English, byelaws, the latter specific to the seven regions that cover England and Wales. It is remarkable what we can or cannot do or use. Take the national tackle, line and bait clause that states, "The use of a gaff, tailer, firearm, otter lath, wire or snare, crossline, setline, spear, stroke-haul, snatch or light is prohibited." I know, or can take an educated guess, as to what most of these are but "otter lath"? I had no idea. It is, apparently, a lead-weighted wooden board measuring 12in x 8in that acts like an in-river kite to float lures into the midst of a fast current. Stroke-hauling is a method used by poachers to snag fish with a hook-laden line.

I won't even try to summarise the keepnet and keepsack regulations; they are quantum-physics complicated. And rods? The distance between the butts of rods should not exceed 3m. It is also illegal to leave your rod(s) unattended when a hook is in the water.

As for the actual fish, the national regulations are relatively straightforward: all salmon before June 16

must be released unharmed. Your daily take-home limit is one pike (under 65cm), two grayling (between 30cm-38cm) and 15(!) coarse fish under 20cm. Trout are dealt with by region *ie* byelaws with little consistency. The minimum size varies from 18cm-35cm for non-migratory trout and 18cm-38cm for migratory trout. Quite why you'd even want to keep a trout of 7in is beyond me, but it seems in plenty of places you can. There is, by the way, no mention I can find of any daily limit on the number of trout that may be taken, which seems, in its own way, quite incredible.

As for season dates, I'll not even go there. Suffice to say the local variants are enough to fill six sides of A4 and such are the anomalies that if you live in east Basingstoke you may catch brown trout from April 1 but your long-suffering neighbour in the west of the town will have to wait until April 3.

And so it goes on. Hook size. Number of hooks. The gape of aforesaid hooks. Floats — the non-use of in specified places. Fishing near weirs; mostly not allowed. Gorge baits. Eels. Did I mention eels? There are dozens of paragraphs on eels.

I tell you all this not in any facetious sense but rather because these are clearly, despite some apparent contradictions and complexity, important to the locality in which we fish and as such we anglers have a duty to know the rules to care better for both rivers and fish.

Check out your area at gov.uk/environment/freshwater-fisheries ■

*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*.*