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Simon Cooper points a finger at everyday poisons



I WAS ENJOYING A RATHER LOVELY lunch beside the River Test on the last day before the June weed-cut began. Our impending sojourn led our conversation to fishing adventures elsewhere and, inevitably, salmon. When asked where, one of our party opined that he would be fishing ABS. ABS? You might well know where this is but none around this particular table did. Anywhere But Scotland.

Oh, how we laughed until the uncomfortable truth sank in. After chalkstream Mayfly, Royal Ascot, maybe a dash of Henley and the Wimbledon tennis, the summer Scottish salmon fishing house party used to be a seasonal staple. Today, such is the parlous state of salmon north of the border, you would be best to rely on the party as the highlight of such a trip.

Back in the less bucolic surroundings of the Fishing Breaks office the following day, a missive arrived from the Environment Agency (EA) in the form of the Itchen Salmon Delivery Plan that sadly proved Scotland was not alone in its misery; English chalkstream salmon for the River Itchen are, to quote the report, “in crisis and at risk of extinction”. This is not new news, an almost identical report, with almost identical recommendations, was published back in 1998 when the annual run was falling below a thousand on a regular basis.

A thousand fish? Itchen salmon anglers today would think themselves in seventh heaven. The number of fish that ran into the River Itchen in 2022 (remember this is the run, not the catch) was 133 fish. Since the number of fish required to sustain the population is 900, a number last reached in 2015, you can see why the EA statement is so bleak.

The Delivery Plan sensibly focuses on the short to medium term and on local issues, with 27 recommended actions to maximise the survival of spawning adults and maximise the production and survival of wild smolts in the river and estuary. Some of it is pretty woolly; I’m

not sure putting up signs “to increase awareness and education of Itchen salmon population status through dedicated signage in public areas” is going to move the needle. However, the emphasis on spawning bed improvements and easier fish passage are positive actions, if, perhaps, a last gasp.

However, the one recommendation that leapt out at me, absent in the 1998 report, was the “collection of estuarine water quality monitoring within the Itchen estuary”. This is interesting because there is a growing school of thought that the ills that ail not just salmon, but our rivers in general, are caused by invisible agents of destruction. Our rivers, and by consequence estuaries, are being seeded by an ever more complex and potent soup of chemicals. In the home, we are exhorted to keep fatal cleaning products away from small children; if they will kill a human, goodness knows what they do to a tiny fish egg. Our pets are monthly treated for fleas, toxins that evade sewage treatment and head straight to the rivers, where they may be as bad for insect life as organophosphates were for otters and raptors 50 years ago. In the fields, farmers, with the understandable desire to maximise yields, are using pesticides in industrial quantities. In gardening, they say a weed is only an unwanted flower. In fishing, we should say a pest is only an unwanted insect.

The EA does not have a great record in testing of late, setting the bar as high or low as suits its purpose. So, let us hope that in the Itchen Salmon Delivery Plan the EA might become that honest broker that tells all when it comes to those invisible agents of destruction. ■

Simon Cooper is managing director of Fishing Breaks, the leading chalkstream fishing specialists. He is author of Life of a Chalkstream and The Otters' Tale. Follow his fortnightly blog on saving our rivers at fishingbreaks.co.uk