

AFA AGM Chairman's Report 2024

Introduction and Thanks

Good evening everyone and welcome to The Old School Centre and to our annual General Meeting. May I also thank Ian Thompson for coming this evening to be our guest speaker. 2023 has been an eventful year, as the President mentioned in his introduction last year we lost a great servant of the Association Paul Kenyon. A man who gave an immense amount of his time to fly fishing and to the Chair of this association. He will be sorely missed by all who knew him. I am sad to say that two stalwarts of the committee will also be leaving this year: Patrick Bromley our treasurer who has kept the association on the financial straight and narrow for years. Many thanks Patrick, it has been a pleasure and a privilege to work with you and best wishes for the future. Our riparian landowner liaison officer Mike Cooper will also be standing down this year due to poor health and we wish him well in the coming months. A reminder then to younger members of the Association that the future of the AFA is in your hands and that it is time to consider who will lead the Association in the coming decades.

Catch Returns for 2023 season

The catches on the Avon are much in line with what is happening generally in the South West, with one or two exceptions. That is a decline in both salmon and sea trout caught which has been quite marked in the last two years. Brown trout numbers are still fairly buoyant and illustrate the old maxim that he who fishes a lot catches a lot. The same cannot be said for salmon where a small coterie of salmon anglers fished very hard in October/November with poor results. The same may be said about sea trout, but the figures suggest a drop in the days fished for sea trout which may have impacted the data. What is more worrying is the number of larger sea trout landed as a proportion of the catch; this too is echoed in a large number of South West rivers. The causes of this are many; it is my belief that the major culprits are: climate change, pollution and factors occurring at sea all of which have increased hugely over the years. There are other factors but the blame, in my opinion, lies firmly with the big three mentioned above. It is very disheartening for anglers to see that, besides their best efforts, salmon numbers continue to decline. Since 2017 42 salmon have been caught and 41 released, yet the decline continues. The EA have decided that to help combat the situation there will be compulsory catch and release for salmon in the South West that will come into force this year or next (I await clarification of that). The evidence from the Avon suggests that this will not, of itself, be enough. If the sea trout situation continues, I suspect similar proposals may be enforced as well.

The number of fish caught were:

Salmon 2 (100% returned)

Sea Trout 17 (86% returned)

Brown Trout 1740 (100% returned)

Catches 2004 to 2023

Year	Salmon	% Released	Sea Trout	% Re-	Brown	% Re-
2023	2	100	17	86	1740	100
2022	6	100	21	86	2083	99.9
2021	4	75	32	82	712	99
2020	14	100	34	85	487	99.8
2019	6	100	28	86	485	99.6
2018	2	100	25	92	757	99
2017	8	100	21	81	470	100
2016	11	72	47	78	727	99.8
2015	7	70	34	88	886	99.9
2014	8	100	90	74	653	99
2013	10	70	229	83	768	100
2012	22	77	73	72	853	99
2011	39	84	56	72	1037	99
2010	52	78	62	56	855	99
2009	16	75	86	60	616	98
2008	19	68	40	75	779	99
2007	15	80	17	35	1007	99
2006	45	66	46	34	359	97
2005	29		96		436	
2004	31		78		446	
Total	341		1117		11596	
Average	(18)	88	59	73	720	99.3

Brown Trout: 1740 fish were caught this year.

Sea Trout: 17 fish were caught this year.

Salmon: 2 fish were caught on Association water.

Prizes

The Cedric Potter Trophy for the largest salmon goes to Tom Pakes with a fish of 30 inches.

The Jim Coombes Trophy for the largest sea trout goes to Steven Lowe with a fish of 22" (Est 6 lbs

The Presidents Prize (Donated by Sir William Peek) Goes to Tom Pakes with 1233brown trout caught

The Bob Sadler trophy for the largest brown goes to Ollie Yeoward with a fish of 17.5 inches.

The Silveridge Conservation award goes to Tom Pakes who returned 100% of fish caught

The Fishing Year

Once again hot, dry weather dominated the early summer and many anglers declined to fish during the very hot months, indeed many members did not fish at all this year due to work commitment, illness and a host of other factors. I had reports of salmon being seen in the river as early as June but sea trout were slow to come to the fly. Trout fishing was best either early in the morning or in the evening usually to very small dry flies or dry fly and nymph teams.

Email Addresses: I am pleased to see that Paul Woodham can now contact all members by email. If you have not yet given Paul your email address please do so.

Catch Returns: Catch returns are now recorded on line. There are two ways to do this: At the end of the season you will receive an email asking you to do so. Attached will be a link to the website where you will see a blank return form to fill in or you can go directly to the Association website, choose Catch Returns from the menu and the website link is there at the top of the page. The return takes about one minute to complete. Please complete your forms as soon as possible after the end of the season. The data they provide is key to an efficient and accurate appreciation of river fishing and membership renewal all of which have to be collated by early January in preparation for the AGM.

Website The website has now been running in its new form for well over a year and seems to be operating quite well. Unfortunately I have no idea as to how many hits it has had. There is much on there which will be of use to you, so my advice is use it first for any queries you may have, if the site does not answer them contact the relevant committee member.

Facebook. The association as a Facebook page please use it to convey any point of interest. Be careful about putting up photos of fish caught. If you do then make sure the fish is photographed in the water and in the net.

Ticket Sales

Ticket sales via the WRT and AFA resumed this year. Sales of AFA tickets were negligible, one ticket sold! Sales from the WRT Angling Passport Scheme were reasonable adding up to £221 received.

Social Events

An excellent annual dinner was had by all at Heron Valley and I must thank Chris Peach for organising it so well. It was a little disappointing to see so few members there on the evening. The annual dinner should be a time to meet members and landowners alike and chat over everything Angling. We are highly reliant on the good will of riparian owners and the dinner is an opportunity to cement good relations.

River Maintenance 2023. More and more of our bank maintenance is carried out by Michael Lock. I am looking to hire him again this year and even to extend the scope of his work to include Kerry Downs as well as the Rake beat and Lower water. There maybe calls on individual members at times, in which case you will be emailed in good time.

SWRA Meetings. I continue to attend these meetings at Lifton primarily for the oversight it offers on fishing throughout the South West and the impact of local and national events on our rivers. Our donation is well spent, the SWRA has a keen chair and active committee. They also provide a platform in which we may question the decisions and policies of the EA. The lectures given by the EA and WRT are hugely informative and worthwhile. The main areas of concern this year have been decreases in Salmon and Sea Trout, compulsory catch and release and pollution.

Electrofishing by the EA and WRT. A troubling year. The WRT electrofished the river in late summer, this was unfortunate as it coincided with high water which affected the results. The EA electrofished earlier and their results were rather disappointing showing a drop in the number of salmon fry at tested sites. It was suggested to me that the drought of 2022 might be to blame but I expect there will be there were others factors which I mentioned earlier in my report. I shall be presenting a paper to the committee on this subject sometime in the Spring and I shall put it on to the website for general viewing.

Gravel replacement. The gravel replacement on the upper Avon overseen by the WRT will continue. It is hoped that this may increase the future spawning effort of trout and, especially, salmon. Early indications suggest it is having a positive impact.

Riverfly. I am still conducting river fly sampling on the Avon. It was curtailed in 2020/21 but restarted again in 2022 and 2023 in a limited way. I would like to continue it in 2024 but would look to younger members to continue it into the future.

Aune Conservation Association/Devon Avon Champions. For those of you who remember the ACA was chaired by Stuart Watts. It has now merged with a new organisation-Devon Avon Champions headed by Louise Wainwright. We are keeping in close contact with the new organisation and Chris Peach and I will attend events if and when we can. They are one of several new groups who are keen to safeguard local rivers. The Friends of the Dart monitor pollution in that river and I know that DAC are keen to carry out invertebrate monitoring and citizen science sampling. I will keep you informed of progress this year

Summary. It has to be said that certain aspects of our sport look discouraging especially salmon and sea trout. It also has to be said that local and national government, the water companies and the EA have much to do to improve the quality of the water in our rivers and to battle the effects of climate change and fishing in our seas and estuaries. And while it is easy to look on the situation as hopeless that will not improve, one jot, the situation we find ourselves in. No, we must continue to do the best that we can and be good guardians of this lovely river which still has so much to commend it.

John Roberts (Chair AFA)