WildFish.

Our aims:

Providing what wild fish need

Introduction

For nearly 125 years, we have been campaigning for healthy aquatic environments capable of supporting abundant, biodiverse populations of native fish species.

Today, our rivers are under threat from increasingly complex sources of pollution, including agricultural and sewage runoff and road runoff. Meanwhile, water demand continues to rise, resulting in rivers running dry and invasive species are spreading– all at a time of accelerating climate change.

Yet there is little evidence of effective action to tackle pollution or prevent the over-exploitation of these vital ecosystems at a national scale. As a result, the natural balance of our rivers and streams is increasingly out of sync.

Rivers that once supported migratory species travelling miles to spawn are now obstructed by barriers and, in some cases, reduced to dry riverbeds.

Anadromous salmonids that once migrated through healthy coastal and loch habitats are now forced to swim through clouds of parasites and chemicals from salmon farms. Whilst their genetic variability and future resilience are being eroded by escapes from the farms.

Globally important chalk streams are drying up due to over-abstraction.

Rivers and streams should be rich with healthy plant life, abundant invertebrates, and thriving fish populations. Instead, they are under severe stress. As a consequence, wild fish populations—particularly iconic species such as salmon, trout and eel—face an increasing and urgent threat.

Our aims

Our aims as an organisation are not complicated. We want to see an improvement in the condition of aquatic habitats and positive population trends for the species they support.

Healthy wild fish populations are genetically intact, naturally reproducing, and ecologically supported within a connected and functioning river system. Wild fish populations require rivers that allow them access to food, shelter, spawning habitat and safe passage throughout their lifecycle. A river capable of supporting abundant wild fish populations rests on three key ecological pillars: healthy water, abundant water and connected water. Coupled with enforcement, better protection and monitoring.

1. Healthy water
2. Abundant water
3. Connectivity
4. Enforcement
5. Better protection
6. Monitoring

1. Healthy water

We want to end the use of rivers and streams as dumping grounds for pollutants.

- Ending the discharge of untreated or poorly treated sewage into rivers
- The review of all permits to reach higher standards for treatment, with sufficient technical detail to ensure environmental protection
- Proper inspection of sewage treatment works and full transparency for all data on water quality and treatment
- Proper regulation and enforcement of existing legislation governing agricultural fertiliser spreading and waste management to end the use of rivers and streams as waste-ditches
- Appropriate regulation and mitigation of harmful chemicals, including pesticides and veterinary medicines to stop them from entering rivers
- Complete transparency of data for pollutants that may enter river systems, including pesticide use
- Monitoring and regulation to account for the 'cocktail effect' of multiple different chemicals below their maximum thresholds
- Proper regulation and enforcement of existing legislation governing agricultural and aquaculture pollution of rivers,streams and coastal waters

2. Abundant water

We must put an end to the unsustainable exploitation of water resources. Water use should remain within sustainable limits, avoiding further pressure on already stressed or degraded water bodies.

- Flows should be managed to reflect the seasonal needs of fish by mimicking natural river patterns throughout the year, and all rivers have protective minimum flows
- An ecologically informed catchment water supply planning framework- where abstraction becomes conditional on ecological status and actual available water
- Urgent investment and delivery of water infrastructure projects, such as water cycling and reservoirs. Long-term supply security should be supported through sustained investment in infrastructure that balances demand with reliable water availability.
- The review of all its existing licences to ensure they are sufficiently stringent to protect the ecology of receiving water bodies, considering cumulative impacts in catchments.
- Water companies should not rely on drought orders and permits
- Water companies must improve system efficiency and reduce leakage
- All monitoring and measuring of water use should be completely transparent with data readily available and published in real-time

3. Connectivity

We must reconnect our fragmented rivers.

- The restoration of rivers to their natural flow regime and flood plains, where possible
- Advocate for a change to the law to require removal of obsolete barriers
- Improve fish passage where fish barrier-removal is not possible, ensure fish passes are suitable for all species and life stages which need to traverse barriers

4. Enforcement

We need regulators who protect the environment.

- An environmental regulator whose sole remit and focus is to protect the environment and is not required to weigh up economic growth agendas in decisions
- Regulators who require 100% compliance with the law
- Regulators with the power to enforce meaningful penalties on polluters. Where the polluter pays principle is applied and the system of charging reflects the environmental costs, as well as the monitoring and enforcement activities

5. Better protection

We need better connectivity of freshwater systems, which requires catchment-level thinking.

We already have sufficient legislation to allow better protection of our rivers. But we need better use of the existing frameworks to protect fish and their habitats.

- The proper regulation and management of existing protected sites, that hold important aquatic species, such as special areas of conservation (SACs), sites of special scientific interest (SSSI) and Ramsar sites
- The designation of sensitive sites that are currently unprotected, including all nationally rare chalk streams
- The reviews of permits and all pre-existing activities in protected sites including abstraction and the discharge of sewage and chemicals with proper regulation and enforcement

6. Monitoring

Good ecological data underpins all effective environmental protection. By investing in accurate, long-term, and collaborative data collection, we can make informed decisions that better protect ecosystems and ensure sustainability for the future.

Maintaining the resolution of historical monitoring datasets allows the accurate assessment of changes over time and reduces our vulnerability to shifting baseline syndrome and lower targets for ecological health.

- Regulators are sufficiently and consistently funded and skilled to undertake regular, comprehensive, nationwide monitoring
- Monitoring includes biological, hydrological and chemical monitoring of rivers, streams and lakes on a regular and routine basis
- Quality-controlled citizen science, such as SmartRivers, is fully utilised and integrated into decision-making
- Abolishing all operator self-monitoring

A modest thought

We are realistic, not idealistic. We understand that our precious habitats of rivers, streams, lakes and coastal waters have been under pressure from various sources for many years. We understand that aquatic environments need to be managed and that they are often exploited as a necessity. But what we see is less regulation and less enforcement. That means that our aquatic environment is not protected.

But we also remain optimistic that with some small changes to existing legislation and the proper enforcement of the law, could help stop the decline of our precious fish species and lead to the regeneration of the aquatic environment.