

WildFish.

Driving Change Through Evidence:

Our Strategy over the next five years for
Restoring Waters for Wild Fish



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Our vision

Thriving, sustainable wild fish populations sustained by healthy waters.

Our mission

We protect wild fish and their habitats with a focus on Atlantic salmon – if our rivers and seas are fit for salmon, they are fit for all.

Our method

We tackle the pressures that threaten fish through focused campaigning using science, evidence and the law. We are independent and a trusted force in wild fish conservation.

A Note from Our CEO

WildFish is a charity whose sole purpose is to provide thriving, sustainable wild fish populations. We have a particular focus on endangered and vulnerable species such as Atlantic salmon.

We have been protecting wild fish from a multitude of threats for nearly 125 years. Their needs remain unchanged and can be summarised three-fold: healthy, abundant and connected waters.

But the threats to wild fish have evolved and broadened from mostly industrial and urban pollution in the era of our inception to embrace intensive farming on land and in the seas around our coasts, chemicals of all descriptions, abstraction and global warming.

Our collective failure to invest in the environment is accelerating biodiversity decline. And it is most rapid in water. Underinvestment across the spectrum and especially in fish and their habitats is wreaking havoc. We must all strive to stem the rot and both care and pay for the environment we want.

Our challenge is to focus our science, data, policy and legal skills to make an impact. We are realists not idealists. We are pragmatic, choosing those issues where we can potentially make a difference. Our focus over the next five years is on abstraction, chemicals, barriers, sediment and salmon farming – all recognised threats with big payoffs if we can drive action.

Your support will help us drive improvements for wild fish over the coming years and move us towards our long-term goal of sustainable wild fish populations, benefitting us all.

Nick Mansham

CEO, WildFish

Why Protect Wild Fish?

Wild fish shape freshwater and coastal ecosystems, moving nutrients from the sea into rivers and onto the land beyond. They are a barometer for the health of our precious waters on which we all depend. We pay particular attention to the Atlantic salmon, sea trout and trout, because if our waters are fit for salmonids, they are fit for anything, including us.

What Wild Fish Need

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**:

1
**Healthy
Water**

2
**Abundant
Water**

3
**Connected
Waters**

1. Healthy Water

Clean, unpolluted water is essential for healthy wild fish populations. Fish rely on dissolved oxygen in water to breathe, and pollution can reduce oxygen levels, making survival difficult. Toxic substances such as pesticides, heavy metals, and industrial chemicals can accumulate in fish, causing long-term (sub-lethal) effects, including weakened immune systems, poor growth, and reduced reproductive success. Fine sediments washed into rivers can also smother fish eggs, lowering hatching rates.

Polluted water not only affects fish directly; it also harms insects, plants, plankton, and microorganisms that form the base of the aquatic food web. When these organisms decline, fish lose essential food sources, and the natural balance of the ecosystem is disrupted. Without clean water, fish populations decline, and the entire aquatic ecosystem suffers.

Wild fish will thrive when our rivers are free of pollution. When pollution data is real-time, transparent and accessible, and the impacts are clearly understood, then regulators will be able to properly enforce the necessary regulations to keep our waters well oxygenated, cool and healthy.

2. Abundant Water

Fish rely on water to meet their basic survival needs. An abundance of water gives them space to swim, find food, avoid predators, and migrate to breeding areas. Water also provides the dissolved oxygen they breathe, keeps temperatures stable, and dilutes harmful wastes and pollutants. When water is removed, habitats shrink, oxygen drops, temperatures rise more quickly, toxins become concentrated, and migration routes can be blocked. Without sufficient water, the river can no longer support the conditions fish need to live, grow, and reproduce.

Wild fish will thrive when there are natural flow regimes and abundant water in our rivers. Rivers must be allowed to reach high flows and never artificially depleted under conditions that would affect biodiversity, particularly our rare and sensitive chalk streams. When we have adequate infrastructure to ensure a consistent supply of water without needing to abstract from vulnerable rivers, as rivers rise and fall fish populations will be free to follow their natural seasonal cues. Under increasing pressure from climate change, this has never been more crucial.

3. Connected Waters

Connected water is vital for fish because all species need to move along rivers at different stages of their life cycle to spawn, find food, grow, and seek shelter. It allows adults to reach breeding grounds, juveniles to access nursery habitats, and fish of all ages to escape poor conditions like pollution or low oxygen. Movement also helps maintain healthy populations by supporting genetic mixing and allowing fish to recolonise areas after disturbances. When barriers block these routes, fish can become trapped, breeding success declines, and populations weaken or disappear.

Wild fish thrive when they can freely travel the length of our rivers from their spawning grounds in the headwaters to our coasts and sea and back again. We must accurately map and understand the extent of freshwater habitat disconnectedness, such that we can remove all obsolete and unnecessary barriers and install fish passes to aid movement wherever barriers cannot be removed. When waters are well connected and fish are free to move according to their needs, their populations will thrive.

Our Pillars In Practice

The threats facing wild fish rarely occur in isolation. They are a toxic cocktail, and the impacts are often cumulative. Pollution is exacerbated by low flows, and barriers become harder to navigate. Most of our work exists at a confluence of these challenges. These pillars are not intended to oversimplify this complex and dynamic environment but instead allow us to remain focused on the ecological principles in prioritising our work. It helps us identify the root causes of decline, prioritise interventions with the highest impact, and communicate clearly with partners, regulators and funders about what is necessary to restore wild fish populations across the UK.

Our Guiding Principles

WildFish's work is shaped by a clear set of decision-making principles that ensure our actions remain strategic and grounded in evidence. We focus our efforts where we are uniquely well placed to create the most meaningful change for wild fish.

1. Led by Scientific Evidence

We collect and create solid evidence to inform our actions.

We assess current scientific evidence and ecological data, including that collected through our SmartRivers program, to guide our understanding of the pressures driving fish declines.

2. Policy, Governance and Legal Insight

We understand the regulatory landscape and how existing protections should work.

Much of the legislation needed to protect rivers already exists. The failure of current and past regulatory frameworks to deliver ecological outcomes often stems from weak implementation and poor enforcement. We target the points where pressure is most likely to prevent harm and lead to systemic change, whether at national, devolved, or local levels.

3. Independence and Integrity

We do not accept funding that could compromise our values or our work and only collaborate where values and priorities genuinely align.

WildFish acts solely in the interest of wild fish and the ecosystems they depend on. Our independence allows us to speak plainly, challenge powerful industries, hold regulators accountable and maintain trust with our supporters, partners and communities.

Our Principles in Practice

We find the opportunities, often at the intersection of science and the law, where evidence supports action, where our expertise makes us uniquely well-placed to do the work, and where we can apply pressure to create the biggest possible wins for wild fish.

We use diverse methods, from public campaigns to targeted legal interventions and commissioning timely research. We work across areas as diverse as planning law reform, campaigning for chefs to remove farmed salmon from their menus, and scrutinising pesticide regulations.

We chose our projects carefully. Though these opportunities may emerge in surprising places, each of these interventions has been carefully selected because it addresses a deeper systemic pressure on freshwater ecosystems and wild fish.

Small, Agile, and Driven By Impact

WildFish delivers through its people. As a small, agile organisation, we respond fast to evidence, focus where it matters most, and adapt as conditions change for wild fish and their habitats. We are realistic, not idealistic.

We foster a culture where ideas are welcomed, challenge is encouraged, and every voice helps shape what we do. Listening makes us faster, sharper, and more effective.

Protecting wild fish is urgent and multi-faceted. Staying small and agile keeps us close to evidence, quick to act, and able to turn insight into impact for wild fish.



Our Priorities for the Next Five Years (2026-2031)

The next five years will be crucial in the fight to protect our wild fish populations. The UK is one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world, and freshwater biodiversity is experiencing a rapid global decline. The UK's freshwater ecosystems are in crisis and our rivers are dying. There are seven species of British freshwater fish currently classified by the IUCN as threatened with regional extinction, and several species have already been lost.

But momentum is building. In the last five years we have seen a growing public awareness of the threats to our rivers. This now must be converted into action.

The problems are complex, and the solutions will not be easy, but we know what needs to be done to save our fish.

Below, we outline the steps we will take to achieve this goal.



Strengthen our voice and drive effective policy change for wild fish and rivers

We are an active and influential voice in efforts to protect rivers and wild fish. Through robust scientific evidence, legal expertise, reports and research, and programmes such as SmartRivers, we build and share a strong evidence base on the pressures facing fish populations. We use this to shape policy discussions, media narratives, and wider public debate.

We expose gaps in monitoring and enforcement, advocate for greater transparency, and raise awareness of pollution, abstraction, and barriers. Alongside this, we contribute to consultations and pursue legal action where necessary to hold decision-makers to account.

What we're doing next

We will strengthen our role in policy discussions and public debate, positioning ourselves as a trusted and authoritative source on wild fish conservation. By continuing to build and coordinate the evidence base, we will present a clear and compelling case for change. Over the next five years, we will push for comprehensive monitoring and full transparency around pollutants entering waterways, advocate for the end of harmful abstraction, and work to remove unnecessary barriers while ensuring effective fish passage where barriers remain. Driving meaningful enforcement will remain central— ensuring that environmental regulations deliver real, measurable improvements for wild fish and their habitats.

Deepen our engagement with communities to protect wild fish and rivers

We work with local communities and supporters to raise awareness of the threats facing rivers and wild fish. Through our campaigns and communications, we help people understand the impacts of pollution, abstraction, and habitat fragmentation on their local environments.

What we're doing next

We will expand our presence within communities, building stronger relationships and supporting more people to take action for their rivers. Our ambition is to empower communities with the knowledge, tools, and confidence to advocate for change locally, while connecting their voices to wider campaigns. By strengthening this grassroots engagement, we will ensure that the protection of wild fish is driven not only by policy, but by informed and active communities across the UK.

Grow SmartRivers to continue building this vital evidence base, supporting community networks and building policy influence

SmartRivers provides the highest standard of citizen science invertebrate data, which can be used to inform and evaluate interventions to improve rivers. Through SmartRivers, any community group can access regulator standard data designed for their specific local priorities, supported by professional scientists. Our support goes beyond scientific expertise. Groups receive bespoke reporting, ongoing training workshops, and practical resources covering fundraising, media engagement, and stakeholder advocacy, building long-term capacity in the communities on the front lines.

What we're doing next

We will explore integrating SmartRivers data with the regulators. Both the Environment Agency and Scottish Environmental Protection Agency have expressed interest in using SmartRivers data. We will also explore new forms of data collection, such as eDNA, to help contextualise our existing ecological data, and provide a more robust benchmark of river quality. We will significantly expand the coverage of our network across the UK and adapt our methodology to new freshwater habitats, such as winterbournes, reflecting the diverse challenges that face fish and rivers.

Lead salmon farming reform in Scotland through Off The Table (OTT), using economic pressure to curb industry expansion and raise public awareness

Through our Off The Table campaign, we are reducing demand for farmed salmon by encouraging chefs and restaurants to remove it from their menus. This targeted approach positions WildFish as a UK leader in challenging the sustainability of open-net salmon farming, while contributing to a growing international movement questioning the industry.

What we're doing next

We will expand Off The Table by strengthening engagement with chefs, restaurants, and key stakeholders, while increasing public awareness of the environmental harms of farmed salmon. By scaling this campaign, we will intensify economic pressure on the industry and help prevent further expansion of open-net salmon farming.

Monitoring and Responding to Emerging Ecological Pressures

Through our existing monitoring programmes and networks, we maintain extensive coverage of rivers and catchments. This provides early detection of emerging threats and identifies opportunities for timely intervention to protect wild fish populations.

What we're doing next

Over the next five years, we will systematically assess emerging ecological pressures and develop new campaigns where evidence indicates significant risk to wild fish, and where WildFish's capabilities - science, law, advocacy, and community mobilisation - can deliver meaningful impact.