



Save our Sea Trout

'Save our Sea Trout' is unashamedly stolen from a delegate at the IFM Sea trout symposium on this amazing species. Listening to the presentations and the questions and points raised by the delegates it does appear to be in need of saving and it is certainly "our" species, tied to the history and culture of the British Isles. A fish that bears no less than 8 common names in the UK must be important. Throughout the 2 days in Cardiff, we heard evidence of concerning declines in some river catchments although in other catchments the sea trout seems to be doing well.

Although the plight of the salmon is well known the problems for the sea trout are less well documented, hence the Sea Trout Symposium and in his opening address Chris Mills talked about the complexities of the lifecycle of sea trout and how it is so different to the Salmon and likely to require specific actions to manage, monitor and protect this species. In a passionate opening Chris called for a programme of projects created by a coalition of the willing to provide practical actions. Cefin Campbell then welcomed the delegates to Wales as he is the Species Champion for the Sea Trout in the Welsh Senedd and left us all wishing that every parliament had species champions. A seafishing fisherman from an early age Cefin also called for urgent and transformative action.

Ken Wheelan and Steve Ormerod then set the tone for the conference with thought-provoking presentations calling for the conservation value of this species to be at the forefront, rather than just the economic value. This was backed all the way by Steve with interesting discussions on slippery rocks and how these were used to highlight how sea trout can play a vital and far-reaching role in the ecosystems they inhabit, from the obvious predator, prey and competition to the less obvious bioengineering and nutrient flux and even onto symbiosis with other species.

The next session was all about what is known about sea trout with Nigel Milner and Graeme Peirson setting the scene. It is fascinating to try and get to grips with the *Salmo trutta* and what makes it "decide" to become migratory or stay at home, with suggestions that the permutations of strategies could be as many as 17! But it was also pointed out that we do know a lot about this species and our learning suggests as a species they are very adaptable. This session was finished with a fascinating summary of genetics work carried out at Exeter Uni by Andrew King and Charlie Ellis(?). Their evidence showed that "straying" may be far more important than is perceived, suggesting that individual rivers aren't the genetic subpopulations and that any management should consider regional genetics and regional groups. The question session at the end of the morning set the scene for the symposia with many and varied questions really showing the interest and engagement of the audience.

After lunch Simon Toms and Ben Wilson walked the audience through some of the work carried out by the Environment Agency and National Resources Wales respectively. These talks gave a flavour of the amount of work that has been done over recent decades but also the fears that are apparent about the decline and ongoing threats to sea trout across their range. The formal sessions finished with Pat O'Reilly subtitled his work "Mr Crabtree, his part in my downfall" and giving a passionate plea to involve anglers in any continued work to Save our Sea Trout.

Again, the question session proved lively and led nicely into the roundtable discussion on “Where are the gaps in our knowledge and what we need to do to improve management of sea trout?”. It was clear from these discussions that we do know a lot already, but communication was a word that came up more than any other. The ecosystem role of sea trout was also discussed again and it was clear that we are talking about the conservation of a keystone species.

Day two held the attention with a series of presentations centred around current management practices across the British Isles and a summary of threats. John Armstrong, Andy Thomas and Robert Rosell took us through various regions of the British Isles and their management practices and a few thoughts jumped out of these presentations. The term “It’s complicated” is probably a key message, beautifully exemplified by a change in stocking strategy in recent decades to only allow triploid fish to be stocked to protect native stocks. Now there are sea run triploid fish turning up in south coast rivers, what impact are these sterile competitors having? Another key point from this session is that sea trout don’t have a legal identity and this could be very important in the future. This point was picked up in the next session where Richard Noble talked about freshwater threats. If brown trout and sea trout are the same, then across their range they are classified as “least concern”. It is obvious that brown trout are common across the British Isles, but what about sea trout. Richard’s summary of threats picked out the usual suspects of barriers and fragmentation, habitat and environmental degradation and exploitation whilst always highlighting the hot and sweaty elephant in the room of climate change. Ken Whelan picked up the baton of summarising marine threats. This area is much more difficult as, obviously, there is much less information. It is clear though that estuaries are likely to be important. Willie Roche concluded the presentations by looking at marine exploitation and again it is very clear that exploitation is a key concern, whether as a targeted catch or by catch, but possibly little understood.

The symposia ended with a facilitated workshop asking what are the critical gaps in knowledge about this species and where we go from here. This was an active and engaging discussion and it is clear that there is already a coalition of the willing.

The Institute of Fisheries Management organised and facilitated this symposia and will be carrying this initiative forward to a workshop of invited guests in Fishmongers Hall in November. This workshop will provide the forum to provide practical actions for the coalition of the willing.

Watch this space for more detailed reports and this guide to practical actions.