

News



Salmon Numbers Rebounding in UK

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by Robin McKie

Salmon numbers leap to reverse two decades of decline in UK rivers

Conservationists say counts are up everywhere except in waters around commercial fish farms. But they don't know why and warn that last year's increase may be a one-off

Against all expectations, salmon numbers are leaping again in British rivers. Conservation scientists have discovered that the fish is staging a comeback in many native streams and waterways.

The return of the salmon is good news for fly fishermen – and for conservationists who have worked hard to restore numbers after the fish's disastrous decline two decades ago.

However, experts warn that the current increase – revealed in statistics for salmon tagged and counted in 2010 and from observations from river banks this year – may only be temporary.

"We still don't know why this is happening. It may just be a one-off or it could be a general trend to a return to healthy salmon numbers in our rivers," said Dr Anton Ibbotson, of the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust.

Some of the most detailed figures on salmon numbers have come from the river Frome in Dorset. Conservation experts have been able to monitor fish more easily and in greater detail on this modestly sized waterway than on the nation's great salmon rivers such as the Tweed and Tay, and at East Stoke they have introduced a system that can accurately count salmon in the river.

"We used to get more than 2,000 salmon coming back to the river every year," said Ibbotson, head of the trust's salmon and trout centre. "Then, in the early 1990s, that figure plunged to under 500 and it has never recovered – until this year."

This decline affected other rivers, leading to bans on the sale of fresh river salmon caught using rods and restrictions on the use of nets. In the process, wild salmon from rivers like the Wye and Usk disappeared from shops.

As to the cause, experts remain mystified. The life of the salmon is highly complex. Salmon eggs are laid in freshwater streams. The eggs hatch and the young fish live for six months to three years in their home river systems before their body chemistry changes to adapt to salt water. The salmon then migrate to the open ocean where they mature sexually. The adult salmon later return to their native streams to spawn.

Scientists say changes in environmental conditions at any stage in their life cycles, at sea or in their home rivers, could have affected numbers of salmon returning to their home rivers. "There are a host of possible reasons why numbers dropped," said Andrew Flitcroft, editor of Trout and Salmon magazine. "It could have involved alterations in conditions at sea – or in fresh water."

Changes in ocean temperatures and currents, the availability of food in the open seas and the over-exploitation of ocean fisheries have all been suggested as factors. In addition, young salmon may have left their home rivers in a weakened or undernourished condition and were unable to survive the open sea. "Whatever the cause, the impact was considerable," said Mark Lloyd, of the Angling Trust. "About 30% of young salmon used to make it back to their native rivers. By the end of the 20th century, that had dropped to about 0.3%."

However, over the past 12 months this trend has been reversed and salmon numbers – although not reaching the peaks of the 1970s and 80s – have risen remarkably. "There has been a very welcome return in numbers of salmon," said Flitcroft. "In addition, they seem to be coming back in a strong, healthy state."

The comeback is still patchy, Lloyd added. "Most of the east and north of Scotland have done well, as have the Tyne and Wear rivers," he said. "However, the Wye and Usk are still quite badly off – partly because river levels there are quite low, thanks to the recent dry springs and over-abstraction of their waters. It is then easy for cormorants and other birds to pick off salmon in the clear, shallow water."

The major exception to the salmon's successful return is the west of Scotland, a trend blamed by the Rivers and Fisheries Trusts of Scotland on the prevalence of fish farms, which provide jobs for thousands of workers in the Highlands. Wild salmon catches there have continued to decline while they have risen on the east coast, where there are no salmon farms, says the trust. It blames sea lice infestations from farmed salmon cages for infecting migrating wild salmon.

"We can see a clear trend of declining wild salmon catches in areas where the Scottish salmon farming industry operates, in comparison with the east coast," said Dr Alan Wells, policy and planning director of the Association of Salmon Fishery Boards. "There is a clear need to direct research and funding into initiatives that will give greater protection to our wild salmon and sea trout."