

Is poaching rife in Wales?

Mike Handyside interviews retired fisheries inspector Emyr Lewis and uncovers the frustrating truth about a new breed of poachers being allowed to damage dwindling salmon stocks

THE JOB'S GONE to a shambles" were some of the first words that Emyr Lewis, former senior fisheries inspector, said to me – and they came as no surprise. What disturbed me is increasing evidence of an appalling level of environmental crime in Wales and the blatant behaviour of perpetrators.

These people parade repulsive pictures of their "trophies" – huge gravid fish, scarred by gaffs and snatches – on social media, as though they are above the law, or as though the law didn't exist, undoing and negating the valiant voluntary release of fish by anglers.

"If no-one is enforcing fisheries legislation, then surely there is no law?" I asked Emyr, hypothetically.

"Yes, that's the problem in a nutshell," he said. And Emyr is qualified to answer that question, having started work as a water bailiff with the Gwynedd River Authority in 1967 as UDN broke out, before retiring after an outstanding 40-year record of apprehending



Retired fisheries inspector Emyr Lewis.

organised poaching gangs in Wales.

I wanted to know what was actually taking place on rivers such as the Mawddach and Dovey and in the upper catchments of the Severn and Wye.

"Fisheries crime is taking place in every catchment, unseen and unchecked by the authorities, who have an appallingly low level of staff numbers," he said. "Because there has been no enforcement work, to speak of, on the upper Severn and Wye for four years, they see it as a reason to not bother doing any in the future. On Facebook there are photos of salmon taken off the spawning beds of the Vyrnwy [main tributary of the Severn], while I get reports of people spinning for salmon after the season has ended, under the guise of pike fishing. The [NRA's] new way of working is to wait until sufficient intelligence comes in, indicating a problem area. But you have to go out and see what that problem is, and not wait for Jo Public to phone in. You have to do your homework."

Emyr explained that things started to go downhill with the introduction of BRITE (Better Regulation in the Environment), which aimed to restructure the regulatory authority, ensuring departments worked in a similar way throughout the country. Waste enforcement was lumped in with fisheries, resulting in officers becoming too thin on the ground, with some not having the specialised knowledge to deal with offences on the rivers.

I mooted the idea that the authorities were demonstrating the opposite attitude to zero tolerance.

"Yes, offenders are running wild," answered the former enforcement officer, now aged 73, but still with his finger on the pulse, as many anglers continue to report intelligence to him.

Facebook pictures reveal that the new breed of salmon poacher will spend cold winter nights on the riverbank wearing only tracksuit bottoms and hooded tops.

"A lot are on the dole, sleeping all day and then coming out at night," said Emyr. "The police don't seem to be able to do anything with them."

This despite a briefing in 2014 to all chief constables in England and Wales from Dyfed-Powys Chief Constable Simon Prince, head of wildlife crime for the Association of Chief Police Officers, which called for greater vigilance on the riverbanks to halt the spate of poaching. The document was cascaded down to call handlers and officers throughout the country. Prince wrote "There needs to be greater awareness within police forces that laws exist to combat the problem. When such incidents occur and if reported to the police, it is then our responsibility to deal with them."

I asked Emyr what would have happened to the poachers 15 years ago.

"They would have been easy to catch because they are so blatant and ill-disciplined. We would have put them before the courts – there is no question of that," he said. Emyr was in charge of a special fisheries anti-poaching taskforce, which operated throughout Wales, on the Dee estuary, Towy and Usk, but mainly on the Wye, where poaching escalated out of control in the 1980s.

"It was my job to handpick a team of 12 men, who would spend weeks covertly staying in caravans and tents in civvies and using hired cars. There were three teams of four, with one in each electing to drive and staying in the vehicle. The three remaining men would drift down river during the dead of night in a dingy with a drag line. When a net was found, the boat crew would sit on it, hidden on



Mike Handyside reports on environmental fisheries matters and keeps six beats of the River Dane in Cheshire



Four illegally caught sea-trout.

the bankside, in touch with the car driver at all times.

"The Wye poachers were very successful, catching up to 300 lb of salmon in one go, but so were we. The gangs would go before the courts."

After completing his first 30 years of service, Emyr was congratulated by Environment Agency Wales, now Natural Resources Wales (NRW): "His dedication and professionalism is a lesson to us all and has ensured he has made a huge contribution to the protection of our fisheries."

And it wasn't just the authority that praised him, as he earned tremendous respect from anglers, clubs and fishery owners. On his days off, the former Welsh International Fly Fishing Team captain was often casting a fly himself. The late Moc Morgan described Emyr as a well-respected captain and skilful fly-fisher, particularly when casting to rising trout.

Emyr was one of 79 full-time water bailiffs in Wales at one time. I asked him how many poaching court cases on rivers, excluding rod licence offences and beach nets, would he be involved with each year?

"I would say 25 to 30," he said. "Special court days were held when just poaching cases would be heard. In the 1970s we would catch a gang in the morning and then we might catch the same people elsewhere on the river in the afternoon!" Emyr told me there are now seven full-time bailiffs in north Wales and a similar number in the south. Perhaps two more elsewhere. Excluding people without rod licences and coastal nets, there are only half a dozen court cases a year.

Over the last few years in my conversations with anglers, the name of one Welsh town keeps cropping up in

dark tales from the riverbank. Dolgellau nestles within Snowdonia National Park close to the confluence of the Mawddach and Wnion. At night I've been told it becomes a Town Called Malice with environmental crime rife on both rivers.

On one night two sea-trout anglers came across two men with lamps and scoop nets in a pool on the Wnion. They said they were only after otters! On another night I was told a searchlamp was shone on an angler fishing for sea-trout. He spotted a huge treble in the light, challenged them, and was told to: "... off – this is our pool now!" And recently an angler was confronted by a poacher who said to him: "It might be the last day of your season [October 17], but ours is only just starting!"

Emyr is aware of the problem. He said: "I hear from local fishing clubs that there are quite a number involved and they have no respect for the police. I imagine there are several gangs within the town, as nets are being found."

"But where are they getting rid of fish with no tags? That's what I would like to know. Whoever is taking them is running a massive risk. We used to have a campaign, Buyer Beware, visiting hotels, pubs and restaurants, warning of the trouble they might land themselves

"Which pubs are taking the fish? Catch the buyer and you can catch the perpetrators"

in if they were caught handling salmon and sea-trout that weren't tagged by commercial netmen.

"You see, it's about supply and demand. Which pubs are taking the fish? Or is there a smokehouse involved? Catch the buyer and you can catch the perpetrators at the same time. People in the area need to be asking questions and reporting intelligence."

I put it to Emyr that, just as the Wye was once regarded as the best salmon river in England and Wales but was decimated by systematic poaching between the 1970s and early 1990s, on a smaller scale poaching on Wales' small rivers could now have the same effect?

"Yes," came the simple answer.

Sea fisheries officers are also charged with protecting Welsh salmon and sea-trout stocks. Employed by the Welsh Assembly Government, they are responsible for onshore fisheries to six nautical miles out to sea. It is their job to enforce beach nets set in "green" areas, where NRW has no jurisdiction. "Hobby"

gill netters set their instruments to, supposedly, catch bass and mullet, but inevitably there is an indiscriminate bycatch of salmon and sea-trout. By law they are to throw dead migratory fish back, but how often does anyone find these dead fish on the beach? Emyr told me the officers didn't want to go out at night, when offences take place, but agreed that, as they are paid to protect fish, they should be doing so.

It is also my understanding that a big proportion of NRW bailiff resources in North Wales are being directed towards the cockle. Protecting this marine mollusc in the Dee estuary appears to be more important than saving the keystone Atlantic salmon, which some claim may shortly become endangered. Emyr said: "The cockle fishery is self-policing; licence holders can look after their own interests. However, salmon need protection, along with the tourism associated with the fish."

And talking about magnificent creatures, I asked Emyr about the time he spotted a lynx.

He seemed delighted I had brought this up: "Yes, that's right! I was on my own in the daytime on the River Lledr, dressed in camouflage gear and covert. Six mallard appeared with a lynx

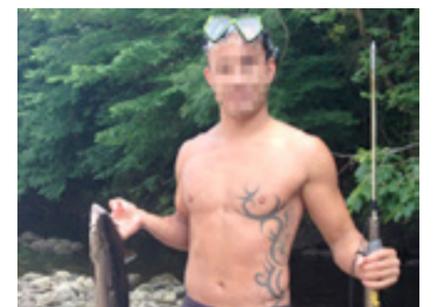
stalking them on the other side. I started to get the video camera out of my bag and at that moment I got an incoming phone call. I looked back and it was gone!"

It seemed to me the lynx was good at its job. I said to Emyr, "You saw a lot when you were working."

He said, "Yes, but I saw things change, also. Once, the car park at the main office had a few cars on it, then there were more and more, to the point you couldn't get a space when you visited. I kept asking my colleagues 'Where is the environment?' and then pointing outside, but they wouldn't listen."

Finally, I asked Emyr: "Who will take the last salmon?"

He replied: "It won't be a rod and line angler. It will be a poacher." **TS**



A poacher with speargun and fish in South Wales. He was successfully prosecuted.