



## News from the Monnow Catchment

### Introduction

Our annual Newsletter is one of the few times that some of you have confirmation of the continued existence of the MRA. We are still going and despite some troubling problems with our fish populations, we are working hard to continue to improve our river. You will read reports on successful control of both balsam and mink and, even more positively, on attempts to re-introduce ranunculus and crayfish and improve stocks of eels. There is news from the fish pass at Osbaston and also the 2018 electro-fishing results. Our annual accounts can be found on the last page.

We had another successful online auction in the spring and held a well-attended "Social". These two events produce the core of our funding for the year along with membership subscriptions and generous donations from several fisheries. We are very grateful for your continued support.

### Down the Monnow in 2018

We have often in the past, when promoting our river, rolled out the quote, published in the Field over a hundred years ago, that stated that "the Monnow was one of the finest trout streams in south Britain". There was further evidence of its historical productivity evidenced by the reported catches of the Reverend Eagles in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that apparently numbered in excess of 18,000 trout over a period of 20 years, with some days producing as many as 100 fish. These were of course all killed! I would contend that it would be a struggle these days to match those figures with electro-fishing kit – certainly over several years.

So the big questions are: what's gone wrong?; what's changed?; and what, if anything, can we do to reverse the decline?

It's always been a concern of mine that the river Monnow that I love dearly and I have loved fishing for many years has never really had a trout population that filled the capacity of its habitat, unlike some other rivers appeared to; for instance the Derbyshire Wye where every place you thought there might be a trout there was a trout – places in fact we now call 'Derbyshire lies'. The Monnow has always been relatively empty in my experience. I suppose then that it's really no surprise when it becomes seriously empty due to one or two things changing by not very much. If you live close to the edge of a cliff, you always run the risk of falling off.

There are of course the short-term declines like the results of the extraordinary summer we've just endured, although Nature has a remarkable way of compensating – March and April were among some of the wettest on record, which has meant that the side streams in our catchment have remained flowing throughout the season, which could only be good news for the trout fry, assuming that there had been any successful spawning. For the record, a tiny stream, joining the Honddu near Llanthony, that has always shown a reasonable population of trout fry, monitored regularly by a keen local enthusiast, was, for the first time in living memory, devoid of any when we looked earlier this year!

The threats that face us are numerous: 1. siltation, a problem for a long time but recently exacerbated by overgrazing and increase in arable land close to the river, has clogged the gravels, so important for both invertebrate life and trout spawning; 2. pollution by insecticides, further reducing our invertebrate numbers; 3. pollution by phosphates and nitrates, often from slurry input, increasing eutrophication of our water, leading to unhealthy growth of algae, blanket weed and filamentous weeds; 4. pollution by raw sewage, leaking from old and over-used systems; 5. over-abstraction, often only regulated by over-generous and irrevocable consents granted many years ago; 6. higher, faster and more destructive spates caused by improvements in land drainage, leading to increased erosion and therefore more siltation in an over-widened river channel – this in turn produces slower flows, less able to clear the silted river bed, and warmer temperatures, with shallower water; 7. the preponderance of fish-eating birds, cormorants and goosanders, not known only half a century ago but now a common sight – we controlled the mink only to be faced with an even more voracious set of predators. Otters, a more common sight since the removal of the mink, could also have had an impact.

So what are we doing about these problems and are we making any progress?

Well, we've just about got the Himalayan balsam under control, in fact virtually eradicated it, in the whole catchment. That's quite a big battle won, but it is only a battle and it will require ongoing vigilance to ensure no re-infestation from outside sources.

Staff from the Wye Foundation have visited a large number of farmers in our catchment, giving them advice on better ways of managing their soil, clean and dirty water separation in their farmyards, less destructive grazing regimes and other measures to ensure that their activities are not undertaken at an unaffordable cost to the environment. And, of course, there's a good chance that Brexit will, once we cease to be bound by the current CAP funding regulations, give us a chance to reward landowners for responsible stewardship of the countryside.

Another thing that has changed from those glory days of a hundred years ago is the practice of stocking farm-reared trout, which has happened almost throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, often in quite large numbers. Those were fertile trout, capable of spawning and adding their 'farm genes' to the Monnow pool. So, maybe that was a part of the problem - possibly those genes, not evolved for survival in the wild, have over the decades affected the productivity of our apparently wild Monnow trout. We've done something about that too. We've legislated that only infertile triploid trout can now be stocked, ensuring no further diminution of the survival genes. Additionally most anglers have rebelled against the artificiality of the put-and-take mentality.

We have requested, and recently received, reports from both the NRW on the Welsh side and the EA on the English side as to the state of the catchment according to Water Framework Directive monitoring protocols. Although these reports don't show very good numbers either of fish or invertebrates, they are apparently enough; however they do not show data from long enough ago to illustrate clearly the decline that is so evident to anglers.

We are in the process of arranging what we are grandly calling a 'Council of War' with representatives from both of those agencies and the Wye Foundation to sit around a table, review all the available data and try to thrash out at least what we identify as some of the potential causes of the perceived decline and maybe even, hopefully, some solutions so that we can make a start putting things right.

This river is a shadow of the one I started to fish some 30 years ago and, talking to those who have fished it twice as long as me (!), apparently even in my early days it was a shadow of what it offered in 'The good old days'. Can it get better again? Well, it did briefly, I believe, from about 2005 to 2010, when we coined the term JAFfa (Just Another Fish) to describe the trout of 10"-12" that were so numerous. We even suggested to the members of one club that they might take the odd fish home if they wanted to - a harvestable resource, no less! Hardly coincidental perhaps that we'd just spent over a million pounds delivering the Monnow Project. If that's the price of maintaining a decent population of trout we obviously can't afford it. We must find other ways to deliver what we want.

We will continue to endeavour to identify the root causes of the apparently reducing adult trout population and do our utmost to make possible any remedies but ultimately I think we will mainly have to rely on the fact that Nature always finds a way! Well, oh boy, we'd better pray she can this time; she's certainly got a big task ahead of her.

Patrick Lloyd

### **An HB Sketch**

For 11 years we have battled the scourge of Himalayan balsam on our river banks and wider catchment. 90 miles of previously infected riparian habitat are almost free of the dreadful weed, as are nearly all of the off-lying outbreaks. The average angler or walker would be hard pushed to find a single plant. Indeed, only a very few remain - long lengths of river bank are completely free. We are almost there! Eradication is within touching distance.

The danger is that we forget what it was like on many beats before we started and what it would now be like if, God forbid, we had done nothing. Many lengths of river bank were practically impenetrable from June onwards; native plants were almost absent and bare banks in winter bled silt into our river for 5 months of the year. What a joy it is to see our native late-summer plants return. The pink umbels of Hemp Agrimony, Purple Loosestrife, and Giant Bellflower, amongst many others, are welcome returnees.

If we don't stick to the task and find the last plant and then remain forever vigilant it will return and we and future generations will regret our moment of hesitation for evermore. The support and funding from anglers, clubs and owners has been immense. We have received considerable donations and grant funding, from the EA, NRW and latterly from Greggs. Granted funding has now almost completely dried up so the final push will have to come from our supporters. The good news is that the job is nearing its end and annual costs are reducing rapidly.

Robert Denny

### **Migratory Fish**

At the time of writing (mid November) there had been just six fish >50cms (presumed salmon) counted up the fish pass at Osbaston with only ONE in the peak period of October/November. Five of these fish came up in late May and June so were quite possibly not in fact salmon. It has been a hard season for salmon and salmon anglers on the Wye - this poor run of fish does not bode well for future seasons. The usual upstream migration of trout, presumed by some to be sea-trout, in the summer appeared to be about the same as usual with 132 fish between 10" and 16" ascending the pass in 2018.

## **The Menace of Mink**

I would like to think that we all know how and why American mink were introduced in this country, but, in case you are new to Monnow Rivers Association activities, I will try to wrap up over a century of mink history in a few sentences.

The American mink was originally introduced in the UK in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century along with other Invasive Non-Native Species (INNS) such as Himalayan balsam, Japanese knotweed and the ubiquitous grey squirrel. As far as records can show, there were no native mink in the UK before this introduction; there is a continental European mink, but that species is now threatened with extinction. The mink was farmed for its superbly smooth fur until the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when mink farms were shut down by law following protests about the cruelty of fur farming. Many mink escaped from these farms over the previous decades and it is believed that the current wild population descends mainly from these escapees as opposed to the thousands released by fur protestors. In its native North America, the mink's preferred prey is the ubiquitous and highly prolific muskrat. In the UK, the nearest similar prey was our old friend, the water vole. The UK water vole population has had the biggest reduction of all UK mammals due partly to degradation and loss of habitat, but mainly due to mink predation. Similarly, where there are mink present, they will prey on all water life from small frogs to moorhens and other birdlife including the beautiful kingfisher. The female mink is small enough to enter the kingfisher bank burrows where it will, of course, kill all the occupants.



Hopefully, this explains why the MRA has continued its mink eradication efforts following the original project led by the GWCT.

A review of my records shows that, whilst we have lost a number of volunteers due to various reasons, mainly difficulty in accessing the river bank, we have gained a number of new volunteers who have brought great enthusiasm to their task. My own catch records for the period between August 2017 and early November 2018 show that only 1 mink has been caught.

It may be of note that I have set a total of 7 traps over this period: one on the Dulas brook, four on the Monnow and two on the Dore. I often ask myself why our catch rate is relatively poor compared to traps set. I believe that the answer is complex and probably mainly due to the large territory that a mink establishes. In other words, if you don't set a trap very soon after a mink leaves its print on the monitoring clay, then it will probably have moved on and you have missed the chance. Secondly, the native polecat has a very

similar print to the mink and is part of the same mustelidae family. Are they more trap averse than the mink? - I don't know. I do give myself a crumb of comfort from a statement on the GWCT website: "It's not the number of mink you remove that matters, but how much of the time the river is free of mink"

Nick Longman

## **Native Crayfish – A Glimmer of Hope**

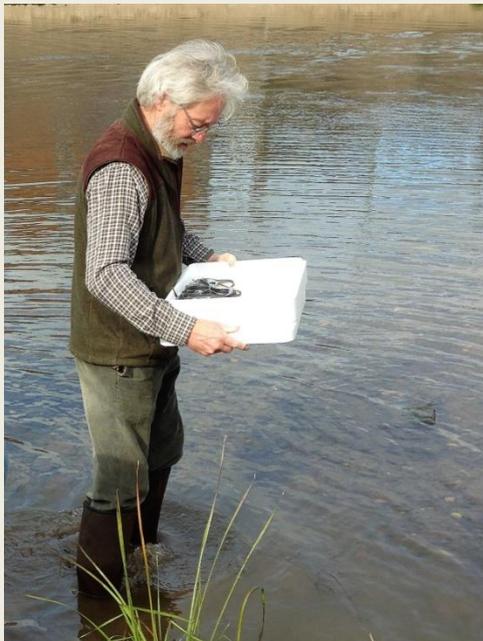
It is not widely known that the Monnow catchment was, until relatively recently, a stronghold of our small but perfectly formed native White-clawed crayfish. Despite agricultural pollution, upper tributaries like the Dore, Dulas and Escley had thriving populations. Tragically their decline and loss on long lengths of these streams and indeed total loss on the Dulas has been slow but sure since the illegal introductions of American Signal crayfish into our waters. Most Signals carry the crayfish plague, to which they are immune but ours aren't. Even if they don't carry the plague they are bigger and more competitive than our more petite White-claws. It is all very similar to the effect Grey squirrels had on our Reds and just as depressing.

The White-clawed population on the Escley has been so robust that the Environment Agency and now National Resources Wales have been harvesting mature, egg-carrying ("berried") females and growing the resulting young on in a ground-breaking trial so that they can be used to restock suitable rivers around Wales. This breakthrough is a valuable new tool in our fight to save the natives.

Over the last few years the MRA has been looking for suitable ark sights where they can be stocked on our rivers and I am delighted to report that last autumn around 500 juvenile native crayfish were stocked into an upper tributary of the Honddu and it is likely that more will be added this autumn. The success or otherwise of this project will take some years to assess but there is now a little more hope for our own White-clawed crayfish population.

Robert Denny

## The Reel Deel



A project to help a critically endangered species of fish is well under way in Herefordshire. The European eel is born in the Sargasso sea and can take 2 years to be carried by ocean currents to our shores. They appear in the spring as elvers which are fished for in the Severn estuary, many going to restock other rivers all over Europe. A few elvers have been 'grown on' by UK Glass Eels (they have also been marked with a chemical called Strontium Chloride) for about 6 months to become big enough to overcome the worst of the predators.

After lengthy discussions with the Environment Agency (the permitting body) and Natural England (the river Wye is a Special Area of Conservation) permission was granted to stock around 9000 eels into nearly 30 different sites along the rivers Wye, Monnow, Frome, Lugg and Arrow as well as numerous pools and lakes. Care had to be taken that non-native species were not inadvertently introduced and correct conservation stocking rates were adhered to.

These eels could well stay in the Herefordshire waters for as much as 20 years before finally returning to sea as fully grown silver eels to begin their long journey to the Sargasso.

The Herefordshire Eel group members comprise The Lugg and Arrow Fisheries Association, The Monnow Rivers Association, The Golden Valley River and Wildlife Association, The Wye and Usk Foundation, The Herefordshire Wildlife Trust and the Sustainable Eel Group.

With the Environment Agency, Natural England and Natural Resources Wales the group is working hard to help the eel by improving habitat and water quality as well as building 'eel passes' over the numerous weirs in the river Wye system.

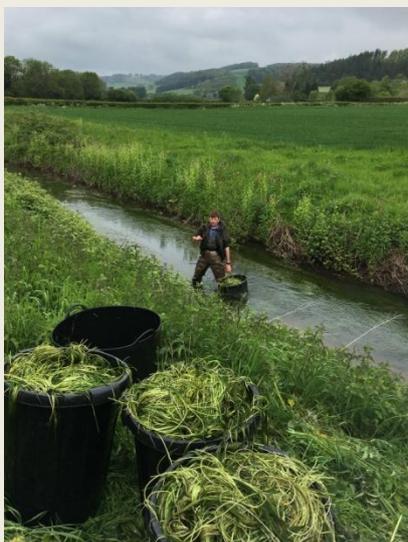
Tony Norman

## A Good Weed

*Ranunculus fluitans* is an enigmatic plant that likes fast flowing, clean, cold water, a gravelly substrate and lots and lots of sunlight. Reduce just one of those criteria and it sulks and dies away. Where it does well, swans and geese love it so much they will tear even large stands up by the roots in one sitting! This might explain why it is a bit of a rarity in the Monnow catchment unless you know where to look.

It is however an enormously important plant for aquatic insects, fish habitat and, in sufficient quantity, a good engineer of the river bed and flow. In short, we would like a lot more of it and so over the years we have tried to reintroduce it into some of the lower river beats. The word success could not yet readily be used to describe the outcome of our efforts, in fact the stuff seems to decide for itself where it wants to make its home and for brief periods the self-planted bits will flourish before the pesky birds discover it, whilst the carefully placed plants die off in a few months.

The upper middle Monnow and Dore are where it does best but there is rarely sufficient for us to harvest to reintroduce elsewhere. Over the last few years we have been quietly "gardening" the better stands to increase the quantity so a meaningful harvest can be taken – a slow process.



Then, this spring, we were visiting the area of the Dore that had dried up last autumn to see how the stream was faring. It came as a very pleasant surprise to find long lengths of the stream literally choked with *Ranunculus*.

As I have said, it is an enigmatic plant!

This discovery enabled us to harvest around twenty 80L bins to restock all areas of the catchment from the top of each tributary to the bottom of the lowest beats on the main river. Given the quantities, the diverse, widespread area to be restocked and our previous experience of poor results from hand planting compared to 'self-planting' we literally chucked it in off every bridge we came to and let it wash down and settle where it might want to be. A case of quantity over quality.

This is an experiment which will be repeated over many years. Positive results, if any, will be a long time coming but we feel that if we can re-establish large amounts in the upper streams and river, where there are fewer geese and swans, then there is a chance it will be able to continually re-colonise the lower beats.

Robert Denny

## **A Bad Weed**



We discovered 4 Giant Hogweed plants on the main river this summer. Given its injurious nature and each plant's potential to produce 10,000 seeds, we are happy to report their destruction.

## **Electrofishing results**

The Wye and Usk Foundation undertook some electro-fishing surveys again this autumn. The surveys were not quantitative being just 10 minute sampling at each site.

A total of 23 sites were visited with 5 on the Honddu, 3 on the Olchon, 5 on the Upper Monnow, 4 on the Escley, 2 on the Dulas and 4 on the Dore. The lower Monnow sites could not be monitored this year because of high water.

When compared to the figures from 2016 (the only other data I can currently find!) they show a very promising increase in numbers of trout fry (T0+) and slightly smaller improvement in trout parr (T1+) numbers. Some hope for the future then!

This optimism needs some qualification however as in the early part of the winter in 2015/16, when the trout were laying their eggs, unseasonal warm weather prevailed. There is some speculation that the high water temperature during spawning and early egg incubation had a negative impact on egg survival and subsequent juvenile recruitment.

## **Your Chance to Support the MRA**

If you would like to make a donation to the MRA, we bank at Lloyds with a sort code of 30-00-03 and our account number is 02433069.

We are also always glad to receive offers of lots to sell in our spring fund-raising auction and are happy to hear from fellow Monnowphiles about other works we should consider. Please get in touch at [monnow@monnow.org](mailto:monnow@monnow.org)

# MONNOW RIVERS ASSOCIATION

## ACCOUNTS

for the year: 1 July 2017 - 30 June 2018

### INCOME & EXPENDITURE ACCOUNT

	2017/18	
	£	£
<b>INCOME</b>		
Subscriptions		725
Sponsorship		315
Owner Donations		2,500
"Unrestricted" Grants/Donations		2,000
Fundraising		
	Social 2018	5,521.00 gross
	Auction 2018	4,274.00
	<i>total fundraising</i>	<u>9,795</u>
	<b>TOTAL INCOME</b>	<u><u>15,335</u></u>
<b>LESS: EXPENSES</b>		
Admin	0.00	
Marketing & Comms	0.00	
Event Costs (inc Social)	1,770.75	
Materials & Equipment	0.00	
Membership & Licenses (insurance)	0.00	
Website	0.00	
Bank Charges	0.00	
		<u>1,771</u>
<b>Independent Project Works</b>		
<i>Going Native</i>		<u>8,934</u>
<b>Net surplus for the year</b>		<u><u>4,631</u></u>

### BALANCE SHEET

at 30 June 2018

	2017/18	
	£	£
<b>Current assets</b>		
Bank deposit accounts	5	
Bank current accounts	15,034	
		<u>15,039</u>
<b>Net current assets</b>		<u><u>15,039</u></u>
Represented by:		
<b>General Fund</b>		
At 1st July 2017	10,409	
Surplus for year	4,631	
At 30 June 2018		<u><u>15,039</u></u>