



Rossett and Gresford Flyfishers Club
Established 1906

President-Paul Leng

Chairman-Howard Stevens

Treasurer-Bob Haydock

Secretary-Mark Pierce

Letter to Mick Bates, Chairman, Sustainability Committee, WAG

Enquiry into access to inland water in Wales

Dear Mr. Bates, & Members Sustainability Committee, WAG

I am writing in reply to your invitation to express our views on the above matter.

I am the secretary of the Rossett & Gresford Flyfishers (established 1906) and write on behalf of the club. We are located on the River Alyn near Wrexham, with a membership of 130 many whom live outside of Wales. We understand that you are considering allowing free unrestricted access to Welsh Rivers. We would urge you to look very carefully at the economic and ecological damage this could do and to reconsider your views. Below are a few points that high light the importance of retaining restricted access. Obviously, we can only speak with authority on our river but the philosophy will apply to all clubs in Wales.

1. Unlimited access would be a disaster for the ecology of Welsh rivers with their vulnerable fauna and flora - like the now very rare freshwater pearl mussels. There is no parallel here with the much larger and deeper Scottish rivers. The smaller spate rivers of the NW Scottish highland (which do have similarities to many Welsh rivers) are much further away from major conurbations so do not suffer the mass influx of canoeists which would be the case in North Wales. Our Rivers are small by comparison to Scotland and other countries, and to allow multi usage would lead to massive conflict and environmental damage.
2. As a club we have spent the last 9 years improving both the in-stream and surrounding bank-side habitat. Members give freely of their time every Sunday morning. We have received a bursary from The Wild Trout Trust, grants from Keep Wales Tidy and financial assistance from the Environment Agency. All our hard work is showing dividends as we now have migratory fish entering the river; this is not advertised as we wish the fish to have a better chance of survival and reduce the decline of these important species. The shy and rare otter can now be seen and this year young have also been seen on the river, in addition the vibrant kingfisher also nests on the river.

There is potential for environmental damage via canoeing and the possible spread of parasites as well as direct effects on existing wildlife. The exponential increase in the volume of canoeing and rafting traffic is not conducive to encouraging riparian and aquatic wildlife.

It is anglers who fight campaigns on the river's behalf when necessary such as the recent cypermethrin (sheep dip) battle which we hope has arrested a great deal of damage to our river ecosystem. These episodes consume a great deal of time and effort, all from volunteers, and I do not think the canoeists / rafters even know it was going on, and they are blissfully unaware and do not care about the environmental concerns, issues and initiatives. Their only concern is access.

Do you really want to destroy all this hard work and damage this fragile ecosystem by allowing unrestricted and unlicensed access?

3. The Water Framework Directive (WFD) is currently out for consultation with all interested parties. WFD is a once in a lifetime opportunity to put in place management policies on our rivers at a catchment level that will ensure their future protection and enhancement, and so aid water dependent life and achieve good ecological status. This can only be achieved by careful control of the river with restricted access.

4. The existing law is quite clear: it is a trespass to paddle on someone's private water above the tide without prior agreement. Despite this, many of us have to suffer constant trespass by canoeists - such trespass should be condemned. As an angling club we are sure that our legal rights regarding angling are well defined, but not those regarding canoeing. Over the last hundred plus years we have rented or leased land and the rights to fish in the stretches of water under our control, accompanied by a negotiated right of access to parking areas and our waters. Our members come from all walks of life all ages from 6 to mid eighties both male and female forming our membership. Our oldest member in his eighties travels on two buses to have peace and quiet on our river, imagine his disappointment if after all this effort he was unable to fish due to an invasion of canoes, rafters or the public splashing about on the river. Our club has a large number of anglers who do not live in Wales. These anglers return with their families year after year to enjoy Wales and to fish for natural brown trout and grayling in our beautiful river. All anglers are licensed by the E.A and operate under EA rules and by-laws, these regulations dictate the season when fishing can take place, and how and where people can fish. Member's activities are also controlled by the club's rules. All these measures are to protect the fish, wildlife, environment and well being of our rivers. Rural communities along our rivers rely heavily on angling tourism. In fact in the last week or so we have been informed by the Environment Agency that money is available from Europe to help improve Welsh rivers so that more anglers will visit Wales so boosting tourism. If the Canoe / rafting lobby have their way these communities will lose a valuable income which will never be replaced by income from other activities on our rivers.

In general Canoeing / rafting (by way of its energetic nature) is an unregulated activity pursued in the main by young fit individuals, largely to the exclusion of the elderly, infirm, or unfit. Angling on the other hand is practiced and recommended as a therapeutic activity to these groups.

5. Notwithstanding the above, we recognise the need for some responsible increased access to rivers above the tide. Voluntary agreements between riparian owners/angling clubs and canoeing organisations have been shown to work well in the past - providing sensible limitations are in place. It is the WCA which has been withdrawing from these agreements and is now refusing to enter into new ones.

6. Riparian owners let out stretches of rivers to fishing clubs and others for various uses, especially angling. Rent is paid to riparian owners and subscriptions paid by members to clubs. Much of this money goes towards habitat improvement in the river. If canoeists were given unlimited access, this whole system would be devalued and both owners and tenants would justifiably want compensation. It was for just this sort of reason that golf courses were specifically excluded from the Countryside Rights of Way Act (CRoW Act). Would anyone be allowed to ride a bike, camp or picnic on a private golf course without fear of prosecution???


Does the farming community know that they could soon be the recipients of a whole new group of uninvited guests? Has your committee consulted them?

Should the canoeists / Rafters be successful in their bid for open access then anglers would expect at least the same. It would be impossible to justify the inequity of anglers paying both licence fees to the Environment Agency and rents to riparian owners if canoists were given free and unrestricted use of rivers.

Angling clubs are well-established organisations with a long history of trouble-free sport. We are accessible to anyone, we carry I.D cards and we police ourselves. We also work in partnership with other organisations such as Keep Wales Tidy, CCW and the Environment Agency on many projects, which benefit both the environment and community and wish to continue to be able to do so.

Game fishing in Wales is legendary and very much a part of Welsh Heritage. We are currently being asked to promote it through the Fishing Wales project and sell it as never before for the benefit of the National economy. Angling is currently worth approximately £130 million to the rural Welsh economy. (Environment Agency figures, not ours). It is also the largest participant sport in the UK, with 6 million active fishermen nationwide many of whom lives in, or visit Wales for its unique and world-renowned fishing and rivers. All this would be put at risk by unrestricted access by canoists and rafters, with the consequent disturbance and disruption to angling, and environmental damage to the rivers and their wildlife.

Taking all the above into consideration we would urge you to consider very carefully your decision on unrestricted access to rivers.

Yours Sincerely


Mark Pierce
For and on behalf of Rossett & Gresford Flyfishers.