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November 11, 2008

Angler's Mail

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THE INSIDE LINE...

LAST week we revealed how keen angler Mat Crocker has become the Environment Agency's newly appointed head of fisheries. Now we have a special interview with him.

THIS WEEK
MAT CROCKER

“ I think that less than 50p a week is pretty good value for the service we provide.”

What did you do before you became the new head of fisheries?

I was an EA area environment manager in the South West region, based in Bridgwater, which meant I had teams under me carrying out environmental protection work, responding to pollution incidents, pursuing people involved in illegal activities to do with water legislation or water pollution, monitoring the environment, carrying out fish rescues, electrofishing, organising angling participation events, and improving access to angling. I'm really looking forward to the new job because I know what it is like for our officers out there. It's a privilege to be in a position where I can influence policy.

What are you hoping to achieve?

Getting the absolute most out of every £1 we have to spend, by cutting out the bureaucracy if there is any, and focusing on what we want to achieve rather than just going through the motions of an activity. We have made great strides in improving efficiency, and I want to keep on with that. Also, I want to carry on my predecessor, Dafydd Evans', work with other organisations, such as the voluntary sector, non-governmental organisations and local authorities. I believe there are some great opportunities there to gain more for fisheries and the environment.

WHAT I LAST CAUGHT

A near double-figure pike (I don't carry scales) on a Storm lure shaped like a 2 in. pike, on one of the Somerset drains.



What are your priorities?

To make sure we deliver the new legislation under the Marine Bill, and to get the best out of the Water Framework Directive. It represents a tremendous opportunity to improve the environment. Billions will be spent on the aquatic environment because of this directive, and it's a fantastic opportunity to get the most for fisheries and fishing. I also want to get the most out of rod licence payers' money. As a customer of the EA as well as an employee, I want to know that my £25 is being spent on the right things.

Are there changes planned in dealing with illegal fishing?

As an area manager I was involved in the pilot of using more intelligence-led methods of enforcement. Rather than going out and hoping we might find something, we go out with information and have a clear idea of what we want to achieve. That's something we will be making far more use of throughout the EA.

Will anglers play a part in that?

We can't be everywhere, and it is anglers who are by the water and who know when things are wrong. Our hotline number (0800 807060) is available 24 hours a day. If people see illegal activity or damage to the environment they can call that number. We have people on standby able to respond. Taking fish illegally is quite big at the moment in terms of people's concerns, but damage to our rivers and environment through discharges can have a bigger effect if a whole stretch is wiped out.

What about the spread of fish diseases?

The way in which we consent the movement of fish is going to be



EA head of fisheries Mat Crocker caught this 18 lb pike from day ticket venue Old Bury Hill Lake, near Dorking, Surrey, on a trout deadbait.

WHAT I LAST BOUGHT

A lovely, 9 ft, four-piece, 15-35 gr Greys travel/spinning rod, bought to take on holiday with the family around Europe.



changing. We are going to take a more risk-based approach, focusing more on high risk movements, such as where we know or suspect fish may have come from sources where fish may have had diseases or parasites; and also where they are going into vulnerable waters such as rivers, and anything that involves non-native species.

And crayfish?

The difficulty with non-native species is I can't think of an example where one has been eradicated once they have got a hold. Once the genie is out of the bottle it's too late.

What about rod licence checking?

We are continually looking at this to get the right level of enforcement. But every £1 we spend on checking a rod licence is £1 we are not spending on angling. However, we are a regulator, so enforcement will always be part of what we do.

Will you get a say in the price of the licence?

I'm sure I'll be involved in decisions over pricing of rod licences, but I'm not aware of any plans for increases at the moment. There's a balance to be struck between the price of a licence and what's affordable. If we dramatically increased the price, our income could go down if fewer people bought one. I think that less than 50p a week is pretty good value for the service we provide.

Are changes planned to the Close Season?

The new legislation in the Marine Bill, if passed, would mean we would be able to set bylaws quicker and would have greater flexibility for setting the Close Season in the future. But at the moment we believe in keeping it as it is. Fisheries legislation doesn't get updated very often, and it would be nice to have the power, if there is the need, to be able to vary the Close Season quicker to protect and improve fisheries. Personally, I am happy to trout fish or fish in the sea or on a stillwater when the Close Season comes round.

Do you get much chance to fish?

When I can it is either on the local Somerset drains, or trout fishing on the Bristol reservoirs, or occasionally in the sea, on boat trips for bass or cod.

What species do you fish for when you coarse fish?

At the moment it's pike. The biggest I've caught was 26 lb 10 oz from a gravel pit near Chichester. For me it's not the size but how hard it was to catch that provides the enjoyment. I started fishing when I was nine, when a friend from down the road invited me. I'm 39 now and married with two children, but have never stopped.

■ Mat Crocker was talking to Greg Meenehan