

## **Management of pike in designated wild brown trout fisheries**

In relation to the review of the management of pike within designated wild brown trout fisheries. We the individuals working within the western managed wild brown fisheries of Inland Fisheries Ireland wish to make the following submission based on our combined experiences and knowledge. In making this submission we are simply voicing our opinions and we will fully accept and abide by all policy that is laid down by IFI.

- Our mission as part of IFI is to protect, conserve, develop, manage and promote to enable our natural resources achieve their full potential
- We are the people operating on the lakes, rivers and streams on Corrib, Mask, Carra, Conn, Cullen and Arrow
- We know and fully understand our job, and are all committed to delivering top class salmon and brown trout fisheries
- We have in excess of 350 years of experience in fisheries management
- One of our many tasks in relation to our mission is stock management, which consists of gill netting, electro fishing, salvage and cropping operations as well as overseeing activities on hatcheries.
- It is not an objective in IFI policy to eradicate pike from the western lakes. Although measures must be kept in place to control pike numbers in order to maintain a healthy and sustainable salmon and trout fishery.

### **OUR EXPERIENCES AND WHAT WE KNOW**

- Brown trout are an indigenous fish species in Ireland.
- Ireland is the only country in Western Europe where lakes can support large stocks of wild brown trout.
- Stock management is required to provide a sustainable salmonid fishery.
- Pike are at the top of the food chain within the western lakes.
- Pike show a preference for feeding on salmonids even when other fish species are more abundant.
- There are many pike fishing locations throughout Ireland and Europe but locations where wild brown trout can be fished for are very rare.

Local records and reports indicate that the Moycullen lakes of Ballyquirke and Ross Lake held a good stock of trout and salmon prior to the suspected introduction of pike by the inhabitants of Ross House as a source of food in the early 1900's. Without any natural controls the pike became the dominate species on the connected lake systems. Today these lakes are devoid of any salmonid species.

There is a danger that the Owenriff river catchment, which was a major contributor of trout and salmon stock to Lough Corrib, could fall to the same fate following the introduction of Pike to the system prior to 2008. Observations were, that prior to the introduction of pike that large quantities of trout and salmon could be clearly seen feeding on fly during any time of the day. In the past 5 years no fish can be seen feeding on the surface. Spawning numbers of trout and salmon are falling annually. This example should stand as a stark warning of what will happen in a lake and river system without a sustained stock management programme.

Prior to 2001, limited stock management took place on the Robe River, Lough Mask. The main reason for this was that electrofishing equipment and vehicles were outdated and ineffective within the organisation. At that time trout numbers on this River were very low and generated little interest among anglers as a trout fishery. Post 2001, advances were made in stock management and IFI invested in new electro fishing equipment and vehicles changed from normal cars and vans to 4 wheel drive. Figures showed that in 2004 alone, 1000 pike were removed from the Robe River system. This number gradually reduced to an average of 300 per year up until 2013, when operations ceased because of limited operational policies in place. During those years trout numbers had recovered considerably and trout anglers from home and abroad were now coming to fish the area more frequently.

In 2016 a new operational policy document was introduced and electrofishing recommenced on the River. Figures showed that the numbers of pike captured remained the same, but the average size had increased significantly. Unfortunately trout numbers had also taken a noticeable drop during those 2 years. Stomach

contents also revealed that the Pikes preferred diet was Trout, even though there was an abundance of coarse fish in the River. The Reduction in Pike numbers between 2001 and 2013 coincided with a sizeable increase in trout numbers in this particular River. The drop in the trout numbers is clearly visible since the cessation of electrofishing operations, which is evident particularly in the spawning observations for the area.

Similar experiences and trends have been noted on other major tributaries of the western lakes such as the Cross River, Black River, Cornamona River, Deel River, Maam River, Owenriff and Drimneen. This is evident with the large numbers of juvenile trout and salmon congregating at the bottom and lower sections of nursery and spawning channels which were once the dominated by pike feeding on the migratory salmonids.

During operations on the Deel river, Lough Cullen in which 80 pike were captured, 50% had stomach contents of remains of either trout or salmon. This was despite the abundance of vast numbers of roach in the river, far exceeding those of salmonids.

The examples above highlight the need for continuing stock management on the lakes and tributaries for the health of our Trout and Salmon stocks. Where large nursery areas exist for trout and salmon, the effort of spawning and recruitment is negated with the presence of an uncontrolled level of predatory species.

### **PROPOSALS TO PROTECT THE NATURAL RESOURCE**

1. Maintain stock management as a key tool in the effective functioning of wild brown trout fisheries, which includes a combination of gill netting and electro fishing. Both tools need to be employed as electrofishing targets the juvenile fish and gill netting targets the adult pike. Stock management operations are more effective using a combination of both at strategic locations/times.
2. Transfer pike to designated areas/lakes where suitable and release pike over 100cm at source.
3. Review existing national pike byelaws to localised byelaws to reflect waterbody management:
  - a. We would recommend as part of the byelaws a bag limit to mirror that of existing trout regulations on the western lakes, i.e. 4 fish up to 85cm of which 1 can include a specimen weight pike, exceeding 30lbs for lake and 20lbs for river, per day.
4. Wild Irish brown trout should be listed on the habitats directive and effective protective measures put in place to protect this rare indigenous Irish species.

Pike are offered more protection nationally through very restrictive byelaws than brown trout. Designating waterbodies within Ireland could assist IFI in managing relevant species to each lake or river.

IFI can never get to a stage to be able to remove all the pike from the lakes, but a sustained effort is required to make the most of a valuable natural resource to enable it achieve its full potential for the benefit of everyone.

Are we losing the battle to save the indigenous fish species of Ireland such as sea trout, atlantic salmon, artic charr?

Will brown trout be next?

We make this submission in good faith, we believe our knowledge and experience in managing the wild brown trout fisheries to be of value. Our aim with this proposal is to assist in making what we believe to be the right decision for benefit of the waterways we manage and we will operate to our fullest ability with whatever policy decision is made.

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