Angling clubs come together to give the Kennet a fishing future

On Friday (February 16th) DEFRA Minister Richard Benyon officially opened a groundbreaking new coarse fish hatchery which local anglers hope will help to replenish stocks of coarse fish in the river Kennet whose recruitment has been severely impacted by siltation of spawning grounds from the re-opening of the Kennet and Avon Canal and the vast numbers of non-native signal crayfish which now inhabit this once famous chalk stream. The American signal crayfish was first introduced to the U.K. for commercial farming purposes in 1976, against the advice of fishery scientists, and have spread to many river catchments wiping out the native white-clawed crayfish and devouring invertebrates and fish spawn.

The Berkshire hatchery, situated close to the river on land donated by the Englefield Estate, is a collaborative project led by the Reading and District Angling Association, (RDAA) with support from the angling clubs and fisheries along the Kennet Valley including Newbury AA, Civil Service AS, Red Spinners AS, CALPAC and Action for the River Kennet.

The hatchery, which will be run as a not-for-profit enterprise with a project group chaired by longtime Kennet angler, RDAA president and Angling Trust founder Martin Salter. It will managed by the Association's fisheries manager, Del Shackleford, with advice and support from experienced coarse fish specialist Viv Shears together the Environment Agency and the Institute of Fisheries Management. Local volunteers will assist with the day to day running.

Brood fish will be temporarily removed from the river at the point of spawning and their eggs harvested and mixed with milt from the males, with the resulting fry nurtured in the hatchery until they are big enough to survive in the wild, when around 70% will be reintroduced to the river. The remaining 30% will be kept at the hatchery for longer, to be released later, as mature fish.The hatchery will begin operating from March 2024 and will mimic the breeding cycles of coarse fish in the wild, starting with dace, followed by roach, chub and barbel. Only brood fish from the Kennet will be used.

The hatchery is the latest measure designed to increase the number of coarse fish in the river, which has been seriously affected by a growth in the number of predatory signal crayfish. They eat their way through fish spawn, prey on the invertebrates and burrow into the riverbanks, adding to the build-up of silt. In the past ten years a signal crayfish trapper, working for the RDAA, has removed an estimated 100 tonnes of crayfish from the river Kennet – or around 2.5million crayfish.

Angling clubs have worked with the Environment Agency, Action for the River Kennet (ARK) and other partners on a number of initiatives to improve the river quality, including the creation of juvenile fish shelters, adding gravel to the riverbed and installing woody debris. This has helped improve the quality to the point where the Kennet now supports a population of grayling, a delicate fish that only thrives in the best conditions.

Speaking at the opening Martin Salter said:

“Those anglers lucky enough to fish the River Kennet below Newbury in 1970s and 80s will remember a swift flowing, crystal clear chalk stream with abundant shoals of chub, barbel, roach and dace drifting over golden gravels between gently swaying beds of ranunculus. It was as close to a ‘fishing heaven as a river could be’. Whilst the Kennet still holds a much reduced population of bigger fish it is a far cry from the abundant fishery it once was. The re-opening of the canal in 1990 saw a dramatic rise in sediment loads leading to increased turbidity, the siltation of vital gravel spawning beds and a huge decline in ranunculus - an important habitat for invertebrates. Added to this has been the signal crayfish plague so it’s little wonder our hard pressed coarse fish need a helping hand to restore them to sustainable levels of recruitment.”

RDAA Fisheries Manager, Del Shackleford, who visited the EA’s Calverton facility to gain valuable insights into how the Kennet hatchery could operate effectively, said:

“The presence of mature grayling in the lower river gave us the confidence to believe that a coarse fish hatchery like this would be a viable project to help restore this wonderful river to something like its former glory. This is just one small part of a 15 year plus project to try and revive our beloved Kennet - a river that has suffered for many years from the effects of urban run-off, siltation and invasive species predation. Without our intervention to address such things as water quality, in-stream habitat and fish recruitment we fear, as the science tells us, that our river will continue to decline.”

Richard Benyon added:

“It was huge delight to press the button on this hatchery that will do so much to restore the Kennet to the kind of fish populations it should have. This is a real example of anglers taking the lead in river conservation.”

Among the invited guest was Angling Trust CEO Jamie Cook who was incredibly impressed with what he saw. Jamie, who grew up fishing the Kennet in the Reading area, said:

“It’s phenomenal to see proactive clubs coming together to invest in their local river and I hope that this initiative provides a blueprint for others to follow. I hope th project will provide impetus for more work, both locally and nationally, to fight for fish, fishing and the environment.”

Ends

Further information:

Del Shackleford - 07846 038889
Martin Salter - 07976 946033

Download the Hatchery Brochure, which includes details on how to donate, here -

https://www.rdaa.co.uk/_files/ugd/d64b93_64be8a813b3d4e53a08b4f6c049c2e2c.pdf

View the Hatchery Opening video here -

https://youtu.be/2cxEWUJq_4Y?si=n1AD1vbX5HOWZSEW

Photographs:

We have a large gallery of photos from the opening and I've attached the following but more are available on request.

- Richard Benyon and Del Shackleford
- Large group shot of the opening with Richard handing Del the 'ceremonial fish'!
- Tighter group shot of the above
- Heidi Stone (EA) and Jamie Cook (AT) inspecting the hatchery tanks

Notes:

Who will run and pay for the Hatchery?

The Hatchery is a not for profit, collaborative project, led by RDAA but with the involvement of local clubs and fisheries with the sole aim of improving fish stocks on the river downstream of Newbury. The facilities will be managed by Del Shackleford (RDAA fisheries manager) with input from local volunteers and guided by advice from the EA and IFM. A Project Group is being established and will involve major contributing clubs and fisheries who hold fishing rights between Reading and Newbury to provide local input, feedback and help with fundraising. The project group will also include representatives from Kennet Valley Fisheries Association (KVFA) and will include space for the EA, ARK and other environmental interests. It will be able to review progress on an annual basis and will maintain separate and transparent accounts. The Hatchery has been built and paid for by RDAA from its own funds and through a combination of donations and grants. However, with running costs expected to exceed £5k per annum the project will be heavily reliant on financial contributions from those clubs, fisheries and individual anglers who will either benefit from this work or who retain a long standing affection for this beautiful river.

The Kennet Hatchery Aims.

- To comply fully with all CEFAS requirements.
- Work closely with the Environment Agency Fisheries Catchment Officers.
- Maintain genetic integrity.
- To develop a dynamic, collaborative partnership with all fishery interests on the river below Newbury
- The first year we will work closely taking expert advice from Viv Shears (VS Fisheries) who has agreed to oversee all of our operations and develop our working practices to ensure our systems work in the way we expect. As such we will not be setting targets on fish production and will be proceeding slowly and cautiously in our first year.
- During our second year we will be expecting to produce -

Dace (5F/8M) - 30,000 eggs with a conversion rate of 85%+
Roach (5F/8M) – 45,000 eggs with a conversion rate of 85%+
Chub (2F/3M) – 60,000 eggs with a conversion rate of 85%+
Barbel (2F/3M) – 40,000 eggs with a conversion rate of 85%+

With a production and release rate such as the above, we hope to replicate the natural proportion of fish production in ideal conditions, within a natural environment.

- After each year end we will evaluate our working practices and results within the hatchery.
- We are looking to replace fish stocks lost to the river for the reasons outlined above rather than to artificially enhance stock levels to meet angler expectations.
- On the fifth year (2029) we will evaluate the results from anecdotal evidence, angler catch returns and EA survey results.

Our ultimate goal, is to overcome the many hurdles in the early life stages of our gravel spawning species. True success will be measured on the day we close the door on the hatchery and we once more have self-sustaining populations within our river.