



Safety in numbers

BASS member **Steve Pitts** gives an example of how anglers can work together to protect the species and their fishing

Bass are social animals - they subscribe to the school of thought that says there is safety in numbers.

Fry living in shallow water salt marshes and estuaries grow and form shoals of the same year-class. As they become larger they leave the safety of the nursery areas and take up a nomadic life along the shoreline, avoiding predators and hunting for prey in groups as a survival strategy.

When they reach maturity, at around 42cm in length, they form larger mixed age groups and begin their autumn migrations to the spawning grounds, in large pre-spawning aggregations. In years gone by, anglers and commercial fishermen would see them as huge shoals of bass on the surface, covering several acres, something rarely witnessed nowadays.

Anglers, on the other hand, can be solitary animals. Despite getting together to fish matches or chartering a boat, many prefer the solitude that angling can offer. Almost all anglers I have met go fishing for reasons that include getting away from the pressures of work, the family, television and above all, away from being told what they can and can't do.

Admittedly, even for anglers there are rules and regulations. Most are there to protect fish stocks, but what happens when the rules work against us in an unfair way, or if the protection offered by the rules is suddenly

removed without warning? How can a lone angler protest overturn a bonkers decision? It takes unified protests to be effective - just look at the climb-down by Rother District Council when it tried to ban angling along Bexhill seafront. Around 2,000 anglers signed a petition and it dropped the proposal like a hot potato. So there is safety in numbers for anglers too. We win when we work together

Making a difference

However, one angler can make a difference, especially when he has the support of others and, even more so, if numerous interest groups pull together. A good example was played out last summer in Cornwall. Quite by chance, BASS member and angling guide Austen Goldsmith discovered that during the changeover from Sea Fisheries Committees to Inshore Fisheries Conservation Authorities his local Fal and Helford estuaries were left exposed to commercial netting due to an oversight.

Austen runs a mostly catch-and-release guiding service for fly and lure anglers, the kind of sustainable use of fisheries resources that the IFCAs should be encouraging, you would think. In a nutshell, Section 6 of the Salmon and Freshwater Fisheries Act 1975 prohibits the setting of fixed nets in estuaries in order to protect salmon and other migratory fish. In some areas, bylaws allow the setting of fixed

nets, but not in Cornwall.

With the introduction of the Marine Act 2009, Section 6 of SAFF was repealed with effect from January 1, 2011. The intention was to have bylaws in place beforehand to maintain the existing level of protection, which would then transfer to the new IFCA on April 1, 2011.

News broke in July that this never happened, meaning that the setting of fixed nets in the Cornish estuaries for sea fish would now be allowed, as long as they conformed to minimum mesh sizes and were not set in a way likely to take migratory fish...a far harder set of rules to enforce than a blanket prohibition. It was bad news for bass, mullet and other sea fish which frequent the estuaries.

Austen was on the phone and emailing everyone he knew in the angling world, calling for support to get the Cornwall IFCA to close this loophole. Groups like The National Mullet Club, The Cornish Federation of Sea Anglers, BASS, The Salmon & Trout Association and The Angling Trust all got on the case and lobbied the relevant authorities.

It transpired the Environment Agency had made the relevant bylaw in October 2010, but had failed to communicate it to the local IFCA. The upshot was the Cornwall IFCA ratified the bylaw within a couple of weeks, rather than the couple of years that these things often take.

So through their combined actions, a victory for common sense was won. A fine example of safety in numbers. **SA**

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Bass find safety in numbers and so do anglers

