

# OPERATION STERLING

## Every Fish Counts

### An enforcer's guide to tackling the poaching of migratory fish

#### Operation Sterling

The demand for wild salmon in the UK and international markets is greater than it has ever been before.

'A bar of silver' is the phrase most often used by anglers to describe a salmon or sea trout in prime condition, a reference to the almost metallic silver sheen of a pristine fish. If we take into consideration that each additional rod caught salmon can provide more than £4,000 for the local economy this comparison becomes increasingly accurate. Operation Sterling is an Environment Agency campaign as part of the joint initiative of Rural Net, a partnership of organisations working to tackle poaching and wildlife crime. Operation Sterling is aimed at protecting migratory fish, one of our most valuable natural resources, from illegal exploitation.

This will become an awareness campaign directed at both police forces and anglers. The aim will be to provide information and advice that will help us and our partners to combat salmon poaching using the best intelligence available.



The professional gang responsible for taking these fish took approximately £7000 worth of salmon from the River Tyne in four months

#### The offenders

The migratory cycle of salmon and sea trout is such that they are born in the headwaters of our famous rivers such as the Tyne, Eden, Usk, Tamar and Test. Their early years are spent in the river until they leave and head for the rich feeding grounds around Greenland and the Arctic Circle. They remain there until the urge to breed comes upon them when they need to return to the river of their birth. It is during this return migration that these great fish are of most interest to the legitimate fisherman and poacher alike. Forget the romantic image you may have of the poacher, he is no longer the rustic local character, wise in the ways of the countryside after 'one for the pot'. He is frequently little more than a travelling criminal, intent on making as much money as he can by whatever means available to him. Whilst salmon that will sell for £3-£5 per lb on the black market may prove an attractive proposition he will not refuse any opportunity that comes his way.. Poachers are prepared to travel considerable distances to carry out their crime and round trip journeys in excess of 100 miles are not uncommon. Many poachers also have links to organised crime and gangs.

#### Who regulates this?

The Environment Agency is responsible for the enforcement of fisheries legislation in relation to salmon, trout, freshwater fish and eels. Cefas has a responsibility for all enforcement matters relating to fish health. Both organisations have substantial powers and duties to protect these fish and many of their officers are specialists in tackling environmental crime.

#### When does this happen?



Salmon poaching can occur throughout the year although generally it will become more profitable from around June through to early December.

#### What are the signs of illegal poaching activity?

- Reports from the public of men acting suspiciously on or near to river banks in remote locations could indicate an illegal netting operation.
- Strange lights. A popular means of taking migratory fish during the autumn and winter months is by way of lamp and gaff, here the reports may include reference to lights shining onto the river or burn.
- Equipment. On patrol you may have cause to stop a suspicious vehicle travelling late at night or in the early hours of the morning. On speaking to the occupants to determine the reason for their journey their answer may well be "we've been fishing". A check of the vehicle could reveal a number of large fish and fishing equipment. It may be immediately obvious the fish have been poached with the tools of the trade in plain view alongside the fish. Items to consider as suspicious would be gaffs or spears, nets, wet/dry suits, inflatable dinghies or large quantities of dirty wet clothing. The fact they may have fishing rods as part of the equipment does not always ensure the fish have been caught by legitimate means, as another popular method of poaching fish is called snatching. Here the fish are deliberately foul hooked with a rod and line. Unfortunately after the event this can usually only be identified through forensic examination of the fish. Some fish may have obvious wounds and marks on the body that would indicate they had been speared, gaffed, netted or snared.
- Where you discover several migratory fish you may wish to further your line of enquiry by asking the occupants where they had been fishing and how they caught so many fish. They should be able to produce EA rod licences authorising them to fish for salmon and sea trout and generally a club membership card or other authorisation to fish at the location they claim to have been at. Your normal PNC check might also reveal a history of previous poaching offences that may lead you to question the truth of any explanation they give.

#### What to do if you suspect evidence of illegal activity?

The Environment Agency operates a 24hr emergency hot line to report incidents such as these. The telephone number is 0800 807060 from where you will be connected to an operator who will take details of the incident. You will be contacted by an officer involved in fisheries enforcement who will identify what further action you could take and tell you what the Environment Agency's level of response will be. Environment Agency enforcement officers are fully trained in the investigation of illegal incidents and will take responsibility for all fisheries related matters.

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### Fighting Wildlife Crime

## A guide to control of migratory fish poaching for anglers and angling clubs

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### How can you help?

Salmon poaching can occur throughout the year, although generally it will become more profitable from around June through to early December. As an angler or member of the public with concern for our environment what can you do if you suspect poaching has taken or is taking place? In common with most modern

enforcement agencies the Environment Agency develops strategies to deal with illegal activity based around prevention, intelligence and enforcement. With your assistance we can improve our levels of intelligence to ensure we are the best we can be at detecting and dealing with illegal fishing activity. Everyone can be a valuable source of information, providing the link in a chain of evidence that ensures effective enforcement. However, to be of value the information needs to follow certain rules and obviously the sooner the information is passed on to the appropriate person the more chance we have of dealing with the problem. So what are the important facts that ensure the information you provide can assist a prosecution?



**WHAT** - What exactly do you suspect them of doing? (Netting, gaffing, using poison, snatching?)

**WHO** - Who is it carrying out the activity? Are they known to you? Can you get a description that would help identify them later? Is there a vehicle involved and can you get the registration, make and model without putting your self in danger?

**HOW** - How are they doing it? Acting alone or is there a lookout?

**WHERE** - We don't necessarily need grid references; you can refer to easily recognisable points such as bridges, or buildings, give approximate distances up or downstream from these locations. To identify which bank you are referring to imagine you are looking downstream and use left and right hand **WHEN** - We need to know when it happened: now, this morning, yesterday evening? It is better for us that we get the information as soon as possible so we can make a decision on the appropriate level of response. Poaching by its very nature is dynamic and there is rarely any evidence left that will allow us to identify culprits once they have left. However that does not mean they will not come back later for another go.

**The Environment Agency does not recommend you attempt to tackle anyone you suspect of carrying out illegal fishing activity, These people are frequently prepared to resort to violence to make their escape.**

### What to do if you suspect evidence of illegal activity?

Bearing in mind the unpredictable and possibly violent nature of some of the individuals involved then your first telephone call should be to the police control room requesting local police attendance. The Environment Agency operates a 24hr emergency hot line to report incidents such as these. The telephone number is 0800 807060 from where you will be connected to an operator who will take details of the incident. You do not need to leave your name or any contact details; although a contact number would be helpful to allow for any follow up questions for further clarification. You will be contacted by an officer involved in fisheries enforcement who will identify what, if any, further action you could take and advise you what the Environment Agency's level of response will be. Environment Agency enforcement officers are fully trained in the investigation of illegal fisheries incidents and will take responsibility for all fisheries related matters. If you are unable to contact the Environment Agency please contact your local police and pass on your information.

### Expected response

As is common with many enforcement agencies we (the EA) do not have people actively in the field 24hrs a day we rely on intelligence to enable us to plan and deploy our resources where they are most effective. Any information you provide is logged on a database that allows officers involved in fisheries enforcement to evaluate and plan for efficient patrols and operations. This may mean a report will not initiate an immediate physical attendance. Equally, that does not mean it has been dismissed, just that resources are either deployed elsewhere or not available at the time. The information will be reviewed and appropriate action taken.

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