

## CEFAS AND ILLEGAL IMPORTS OF LIVE FISH

### **CEFAS needs your help!**

The question of illegal imports of live freshwater fish seems to stimulate more interest, more comment and more hypocrisy than just about any other facet of angling. Everyone has something to say on the subject. Some sensibly view it as an activity which is potentially dangerous and should be stopped. Others feel that foreign fish should be allowed onto secure enclosed licensed sites. A section of the fisheries and angling fraternities feel that *all* movements of live fish should be de-regulated and fisheries given free reign to introduce whatever they like. After all, aren't the smugglers only exercising their entrepreneurial skills to satisfy an obvious demand, and aren't the fishery owners only catering for an existing and thriving angling market? I'm sure we've all heard the comments:

*'They cope well enough on the continent without worrying too much about regulating fish movements don't they?'*

*'There's no such thing as a British carp.'*

*'It's too late to do anything about it now.'*

*'Why don't they just de-regulate the whole industry and let everyone get on with it!'*

An alternative view might be that as so very little is known about the long-term ecological and environmental impact of foreign fish, perhaps it would be sensible for all interested parties to work together to stop them coming in before irreversible damage is caused. We know that SVC (spring viraemia of carp) and exotic varieties of parasites have been found in illegally imported fish, and it is reasonable to conclude that many of our indigenous fish have died as a result of this trade. What else has been brought in? What are the long-term implications? Nobody knows.

The agency responsible for preventing illegal imports of live fish is CEFAS (Centre for Environment, Fisheries & Aquaculture Science), but CEFAS needs the help and support of the public in its attempts to stamp out this illegal trade. Our indigenous fish stocks are a valuable and essential part of our environment and of our heritage. It is in the interests of everyone involved, from anglers, fishery owners and traders, to the general public to help prevent illegal imports.

### **What is CEFAS?**

The Centre for Environment Fisheries and Aquaculture Science is an agency of the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs and is responsible for the prevention of serious fish disease in England and Wales. Its head office is located at Lowestoft and it has other laboratories in Burnham, Weymouth and Whitehaven. The Weymouth laboratory is the European Union national reference laboratory for fish diseases in England and Wales. It is home to the Fish Health Inspectorate, a team of fourteen fish health inspectors, including eight field

inspectors and four administrative staff. The inspectorate is responsible for carrying out routine inspections of all fish farms in England and Wales, and for licensing and monitoring all legal imports and exports of live fish and shellfish from the EU and third countries.

### **When are live fish imports illegal?**

All imports of live fish into Great Britain must be accompanied by a movement document/health certificate attesting that the fish are healthy and free from disease. The documents must be issued and signed by the veterinary authorities in the country of origin. Prior notice must also be sent to CEFAS. Imports which fail to meet these criteria are illegal.

Throughout the European Union there are 'approved' farms and zones (EC directive 91/67). These are EC-designated areas which have been tested for and shown to be free of certain of the most serious fish diseases. Great Britain is currently an approved zone for VHS and IHN. Live fish may be legally transferred between areas of equivalent status or when the supplying zone is of a higher health status, provided the above procedure is complied with. Imports which fail to comply contravene the provisions of the Fish Health Regulations 1997. There are also specific additional regulations to further protect UK fish stocks against other serious diseases, such as Spring Viraemia of Carp, which are prevalent on the continent.

### **How real is the threat of disease and environmental damage?**

The dangers to indigenous fish of introducing diseased foreign imports may be evidenced by the increasing number of unexplained diseases and mortalities in our waters. Tests on fish found in previous interceptions of illegal consignments have established that they carried a variety of diseases including SVC. Illegally imported fish pose a very real problem which must be addressed if we are to reduce the risk of spreading disease, and the possible demise of many of our waters. But it is as much a question of what we *don't* know about their long term impact, as the obvious known risks.

The ecological effect of naturalised fish on native aquatic communities was summarised by Taylor et al (1984) as follows:

Habitat alterations (e.g. through consumption or uprooting vegetation)

Introduction of parasites, pathogens and diseases

Trophic alteration (e.g. by competition for food or predation)

Genetic degradation (e.g. through hybridisation)

Spatial alterations

Environmental effects

### **What are the motives for illegally importing fish?**

There are large profits to be made by smugglers who steal fish, or purchase them cheaply from non-approved sites on the continent and sell them to fisheries in the UK. Similar profits can be made by fishery owners who impose high charges on anglers who are prepared to pay to catch larger or different species of fish than may otherwise be available.

### **What fish are we talking about?**

Although carp, wels catfish, sturgeon and zander are the obvious species, recent interceptions of illegal imports have included roach, bream and various species of ornamental fish. France, Belgium and Holland have been the traditional source countries for many large coarse fish in the past. However, it is understood that fish have been smuggled into the country recently from Eastern Europe where carp are not only plentiful, but in less demand and therefore cheap.

### **Who's doing it?**

It is believed only a relatively small number of individuals or groups are involved on a regular basis in organising and arranging illegal imports. However, it is unlikely that they involve themselves personally in the physical act of smuggling because they are known to employ others to do it for them. These friends or associates, are known to use hired vans or borrowed vehicles, seldom using their own transport for obvious reasons. It is likely that a significant number of the fishing public know or suspect the identities of many of the individuals who are regularly involved in organising illegal imports, and the names of those waters which are prepared to introduce illegally imported foreign fish.

### **Why aren't the smugglers caught more often?**

The main reason people are not caught more often is because it is a relatively simple matter to smuggle fish in from the continent. The introduction of the European free-trade legislation in 1993 made the practice significantly easier and we have to accept that, at present live fish imports are unfortunately not a high priority for either HM Customs or the police.

Historically, there has also been a failure on the part of the authorities to acknowledge the potential for greater inter-agency co-operation and coordination. This situation has since been largely addressed.

In addition, there are the conflicting attitudes of anglers who, whilst they would not wilfully do anything to harm indigenous fish stocks or the environment, effectively do so by demanding to fish for large carp of dubious origin etc (without questioning their origin). The controversy surrounding illegally imported fish is such that there appears to be no consensus within the fisheries and angling communities over the question of illegal imports. A united and determined approach by the industry and the authorities would have a major impact on smuggling.

CEFAS has limited resources and illegal imports are only one of its many responsibilities. There is no doubt that these resources could be deployed to better effect if more detailed information was available on the activities of the smugglers.

### **What is CEFAS doing about it?**

CEFAS is attempting to combine a more robust and imaginative approach to the problem of illegal imports with a more measured long-term gathering of information and evidence, aimed at targeting those people whose offending represents the greatest threat to our indigenous fish and to the environment. Fish smuggling, fish thefts and illegal fish movements are often closely linked and for this reason we are seeking to improve the levels of co-operation and co-ordination between all of the relevant agencies. *Our aim is not necessarily to prosecute more offenders, but with the help of other agencies and the public we aim to target and prosecute those people whose activities are likely to have the greatest detrimental impact on fish health and the environment.*

The CEFAS approach therefore includes the following measures:

- Working closely with HM Customs, the Environment Agency, police forces, State Veterinary Service and others to identify offenders.
- Targeted operations against suspected offenders.
- Attempt to establish the nature, extent and patterns of offending.
- Routine monitoring and inspections of imported fish from EU and third countries.
- Working closely with other EU authorities to combat fish thefts and illegal movements.

A more structured approach to the problems surrounding illegal imports and fish-movements generally. The introduction of the new Live Fish Movements Database is an example of this approach. The system was developed by CEFAS, the Environment Agency, the National Assembly for Wales Agriculture Department (NAWAD) and the Department for Environment Fisheries and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and provides for all legitimate movements of fish to be recorded. Such a facility would be of immense importance in the event of a major disease outbreak.

Seeking the views of the fishing public and those involved in fish farming and fisheries management.

An open policy with the press and media to make the public more aware of CEFAS's aims and objectives. CEFAS endeavours to explain problem areas such as illegal imports, and seek the assistance of the press in informing the public of the potential dangers and threats involved, in an attempt to reduce the market for smuggled foreign fish.

Confidential hot line number to encourage the public to contact us with information.

Adoption of a more consistent common approach to all enforcement issues.

Introduction of the *efishbusiness* internet site which sets out details of the relevant legislation, the various procedures involved and other items of helpful information.

**What assistance can the public provide?**

A top priority for CEFAS is to gather detailed, reliable information on illegal importers for the purpose of intercepting such consignments and preventing further offences. Members of the public are invited to pass any information they may have concerning the smuggling of live fish into the UK to CEFAS via CrimeStoppers.

You can help in the fight against illegal imports and illegal introductions by calling Crimestoppers with any information you have.

# 0800 555 111

Website [www.crimestoppers-uk.org](http://www.crimestoppers-uk.org)

Website – [www.efishbusiness.com](http://www.efishbusiness.com) [www.cefascos.co.uk](http://www.cefascos.co.uk)