

## **An Angle on Angling:**

In addition to the regular documented species of salmon, shads and common eels that migrate upstream, the mud-discoloured waters of the Severn Estuary also contain a further two dozen species that are sought by recreational sea anglers.

Writings in the mid-18<sup>th</sup>.century mention hauls of sprats, cod, bass, whiting, even hake taken out both in shore and deeper water netting, cartloads being hauled to nearby markets but rod and line fishing only developed during the late forties, with the object more towards food than sport.

Much of the recreational fishing took place along the English Channel, but in 1952, anglers in Weston-super-Mare formed a club to explore their local waters and were surprised at the results which yielded bass, conger, flatfish, whiting and cod over the year. More clubs soon followed within Somerset and Bristol as the popularity spread around the British Isles.

With several boats now being devoted to angling at Porlock, Minehead, and Weston, 1961 saw the formation of the Bristol Channel Federation of Sea Anglers, a body which is now represented by around 30 clubs, mainly on the English side, while from Wales there is the Welsh Federation(South). A government census in 2003 realised around 1.5 million sea anglers and an expenditure on the sport in England and Wales of £538 million.

Such numbers along a vast improvement in the quality of tackle, alas mainly from overseas manufacturers, resulted in much new information and habitats of the fish. This was carefully absorbed by the BCFSA whose recorder Keith Reed over nearly 40 years had assembled copious material relating to seasonal variations, numbers, weights and species. An annual Federation handbook is published giving all these details along with tidetables, a boon for visiting anglers. Fishing the Severn Estuary from either boat or shore has its dangers to the unwary with fierce currents resulting from the region's second highest rise and fall of tides in the world.

Some 53 different species of fish, and their respective top weights have been recorded by the BCFSA in waters upstream from North Devon. Many such as mackerel, shark, bream, pollack and garfish do not venture into the murky waters, but fish such as bass (14 lb.), cod (42 lb.), dab, dogfish, flounder, gurnard, haddock (6 lb.), ling, monkfish, mullet, plaice, pouting, blonde ray, thornback ray, sting ray, smoothhound, sole (4 lb.), spurdogfish, and whiting have been taken.

While many fish quite rightly finish on the table, there is now a very strong policy of conservation among sea anglers to return all unwanted fish alive. There is a strict ruling on size limits, quite a number in excess of DEFRA's ruling of landing by the commercial fleets. A noticeable decline in many

species in recent years has been attributed to the massive nettings of immature fishes as by-catches.

Boat competitions within the Federation do not even see a fish brought out of the sea. The catch surfaces whereby the skipper identifies, awards points and then unhooks carefully for immediate release. Shore matches which once necessitated all takes being brought to the scales now see a new concept of measurement instead. The fish is gently unhooked, measured and released within seconds, results being recorded and winners judged on the aggregate length of their catches.

*Don Metcalfe – Bristol Channel Federation of Sea Anglers*

