



*Are We Feeding Our Barbel To Death? By Phil Buckingham*

# Are We Feeding Our



## Barbel to DEATH?

I have experienced three things this year which have led me to put pen to paper, but I'll come back to those later. The question 'why are barbel suddenly getting bigger?' has been raised a good few times over the years but I make no apology for raising the issue again because it is relevant.

I, like many anglers of my vintage with over 50 years on the clock can remember the days not so long ago when a double figure Barbel was worthy of a mention to the weeklies and a good photo of such a fish might win you a prize.

In the late 1980's and early 90's a 13lb barbel was still a monster and the old

Yes a slightly alarming title to begin an article, but hopefully it got your attention!

record fish ( 3 of them ) had stood at 14lbs 6 ounces for over 40 years.

We were still targeting Barbel with maggots /hemp/ corn/luncheon meat /cheese as Barbel Anglers had done for decades before. We had a long established status quo, barbel populations were benefiting from anglers' baits but seemed to maintain healthy stock levels in most rivers where they were present ,with fish of varying sizes ,a few doubles and the occasional fish that came near to the old record .

Then a few things started to change, barbel fishing became more popular, they were stocked in rivers where they had not previously been present, and the fish no doubt benefited from the increased food supply caused by increased angling interest. But I don't believe this alone caused the fish to suddenly get bigger, and in the scheme of things it was sudden. First consider this:

The Royalty Fishery and the Lea at Kings Weir don't appear to have much in common at first glance,

except over a similar period in barbel angling history these two fisheries were the most heavily fished barbel venues in the country with tons of bait going into them over the course of a season. Why did these fisheries not throw up a record breaking barbel long before the Medway or the Ouse? Logically with the amounts of cheese and luncheon meat being thrown in they should have done.

The change was set in motion in the early 90's, a few anglers began to

*Barbel Fisher Page 23*



## ***Are We Feeding Our Barbel To Death? By Phil Buckingham***

introduce boilies and HNV paste to the equation, a few were in on the Fred Wilton special baits circle of anglers and were reputed to be doing well on Fred's concoctions.

The first break through was Dave Williams memorable fortnight holiday which began with him breaking the 14lbs 6oz record with a fish from the Medway, an ounce or two over the old bench mark which he quickly followed up with the two similar size fish from the middle Avon. Three fish in two weeks all over the old record, fantastic! But it was by a very small amount. But these were two stretches that were heavily fished and where the boilie was already well established as bait...

The rest as they say is history. Pete Woodhouse's fish over 16lbs was the big news of the time, but it was a known fish that had got steadily bigger. Now, not to knock Pete or anyone else who has fished the stretch of the Medway at Fordcombe, you can only deal with what's available, but the stretch in question is pretty short, has a few deep bends and a few shallows and a limited population of barbel. The few swims that produced the barbel were occupied almost fulltime and received a constant supply of bait, mostly boilies. Is it any wonder they got bigger and bigger?

We have seen the same sequence of events occur on the Wensum to a lesser extent and now the dominant big barbel fishery at Adams Mill.

Of course it would be easy to dismiss this phenomenon with a few common denominators - small narrow rivers, smallish barbel population, constant presence of anglers and lots of nutritional bait such as boilies and the now ubiquitous pellet - which is where I want to go to next with this article.

Over the past decade or so, pellets in all their shapes and sizes have become the number one bait of choice for the majority of barbel anglers and 'why not?' you may ask.

They are cheap, easy to use, work almost everywhere with no wastage at the end of a session and fish love them. All very convenient...

But have we stopped to

So why is this happening so suddenly? Well, there are more barbel anglers than ever, so more anglers, more bait targeted at barbel, this increases the barbel's growth potential but hang on, didn't this go on for decades on the Royalty and the Lea? Yet the old record remained unchallenged.

So it would seem the big factor is not the quantity of

those humans who don't partake in any physical effort and eat food that is designed to be addictive, junk food, are we turning these big barbel into couch potatoes? Are we making them obese? If we are, as I suspect, are we leaving them open to the same obesity related health problems experienced by humans? Furring of arteries, heart disease, liver failure

---

**“They are working less hard for their food, it rains down on them for free every day in the same spot and they don't even have to use any real energy to find it. Rather like those humans who don't partake in any physical effort and eat food that is designed to be addictive, junk food”**

---

think what these pellets might be doing to our fish. One thing seems pretty certain, it's making them bigger. Well you'd expect that wouldn't you?

Most of the pellets we use or the base mixes that are used to make them are derivatives of pellets formulated for the commercial fish rearing industry. An industry that exist for one reason, profit and not the fish's long term welfare. They use a feed designed to give maximum growth with minimum waste at the least cost, enter the pellet.

So to repeat the article heading but slightly amended - are pellets killing our barbel?

Well, as said above it's making them bigger that's for sure. We have gone in a relatively short space of time, a nanosecond in ecological terms, from having a barbel record of 14 lbs 6 ounces for over 40 years to a situation where a fish of this size barely gets a mention in the weeklies anymore.

We now have around 20 rivers producing Barbel in excess of the old record of 14 lbs 6 ounces, some of these were not even recognised barbel rivers 20 years ago.

bait but the type and quality.

Boilies and Paste set the wheels in motion, but I would say without a doubt the pellet revolution is the biggest contributor. A food source specifically designed to promote rapid growth of fish.

Now let's consider what we mean by big. What we really mean is weight of the fish and not necessarily the external dimensions. Yes some people measure length and girth but we never assess the size of our fish in any record tables on this basis, it's all about weight.

And, here's the concern: these big fish are not suddenly growing larger skeletal frames, they are a still maxing out around the 32 inch mark for length from snout to fork of tail. There may be a few longer fish but I have not heard of any reliable claims for a fish of 36 inches long, nature's not like that it, it takes generations for such a change to evolve.

It's all in the girth, they are getting fatter. They are working less hard for their food, it rains down on them for free every day in the same spot and they don't even have to use any real energy to find it. Rather like

and strokes - the list is familiar to us all.

So let's repeat the question - are pellets killing our barbel?

Now I am no scientist or statistician, I have deliberately avoided any reference to specific dates so far, I prefer to look at the trend and any attempt at pseudo science would be a waste of time. I am just asking the question as a result of the three events which have happened over the past few months.

Back in May this year we had very hot spell, not unheard of for the time of year, and of course river levels were not at their highest. As often follows a hot spell we had a thunderstorm in the Lea valley with a deluge of rain, most of which either finds its way straight off the concrete expanses of the valley into the river or into the overworked sewerage works along the river. This deluge was different though. The river still went into a spring flood, the same sort of flood the river would get whatever the time of year following a heavy period of rain. It caused a fish kill.

Around 40 barbel were found dead below Kings



Weir and down through Fishers Green, with some big doubles amongst them. There were also a few other species affected but not in vast numbers, but this did not include the trout of which there are more than a few in the stretch of the river – Trout Farm escapees for the most part, but still a pretty good indicator of water quality and usually the first to go in any water quality situation.

The EA still don't seem to know the real cause, they put it down possibly to a sudden influx of rainwater which caused a drop in water quality, due to chemicals off the road or possibly from the sewerage treatment works upstream. Well I don't buy the road theory, it happens every time we have a flood in the valley and hasn't killed the fish before, probably because of the high dilution caused by the floodwater. I don't go with the sewerage works theory either. If it was that there would have been a broader fish kill in the valley, the nearest treatment works to Kings Weir is Rye Meads, about 4 miles upstream. There were no fish kills mentioned above Kings Weir so if Rye Meads was the culprit (or the roads come to that) why weren't the large Chub in Dobbs Weir and Carthagen Weir affected?

It would seem to me that the barbel that died were in the midst of their spawning ritual, the spawning beds are mostly on the Fishers Green section where most of the dead fish were found. Interestingly at this point it's worth mentioning none were reported in the flood relief channel immediately below Fishers Green. Now would you not think if the cause was a sudden drop in water quality the fish would die equally quickly and be washed far downstream on the rising river and into the relief channel? It didn't happen that way or if it did and lots of dead fish were in

the Flood Channel it's the best kept secret in the Lea Valley for a century, as you can imagine the rumour mill was working overtime.

So we have fish stressed from spawning, nothing unusual here a few fish die from this in most rivers over the spawning period but not 40 or more in one go, equally you would not expect fit healthy barbel to die even under the stress of spawning just because the river rose after rain, if you disregard the drop in water quality / pollution theory which I believe is discredited by the lack of fish mortality in the rest of the valley.

I believe we have a population of unfit barbel in the Lea, the water flows in the river are minimal most of the year so the fish are lacking the stimulus for exercise, they don't have to move far to find their daily feed of pellets. They are obese! They are susceptible to an untimely death when put under unusual stress; spawning plus fast flood water would equal extreme stress if you're very unfit.

Think of it in human terms, an extremely overweight bloke who never has to exert himself physically in his daily life, enjoying a leisurely spawning session with his neighbours wife gets caught mid coitus and is chased by the husband for few miles. If he gets caught he will probably get a good hiding, but he keeps on running, a bit like our unfit barbel in the sudden strong current, he is very likely to keel over.

Are pellets the prime cause of this obesity? Well it's more than coincidence that the Barbel in the Lea have jumped from a maximum of around 13lbs, to fish pushing 16lbs in the past 5 years, exactly the period that pellets have become the most used bait on the river. Every day it's possible to see anglers launch salvos of pellets into

the top swims on Fishers Green, some of them using more bait in a day that Trefor West would use in several weeks of fishing and Trefor fishes 5 days a week.

Okay the above is full of conjecture and I might be talking rubbish but it's a theory and no less a theory than the line put out by the EA.

Now try this one for size and it does have little science backing it.

Nathan and I recently had a weeks Cat fishing on the Ebro in Spain.

The huge Ebro Catfish are a major attraction to anglers from all over Europe and a major source of income to the largely rural communities in the Ebro Valley. The Spanish authorities therefore strictly enforce the fishing rules; the Police do this, not an underpaid part-time bailiff as in England. They impose on the spot fines for rule breaking and will confiscate

tackle in extreme cases.

From time to time the odd large (100 lbs plus) Catfish will be found dead and this is of grave concern to the Spanish Fisheries dept who realise the economic importance of these fish to local communities supplementing their incomes from the Angling Tourist.

Some of these large Cats have been given full autopsies to determine what is killing them.. What is coming to light is that these Cats are dying from obesity related problems, major organ failure etc, etc. The prime suspect is the Pellet!

Fishery rules restrict the amount of groundbaiting allowed on the Ebro but this doesn't prevent anglers introducing pellets in vast quantities. Our fishing guide would introduce several large buckets of pellets into a swim during a day's fishing, the two of us getting through 50 kilos of 20mm halibut pellets in 6 days fishing .





## ***Are We Feeding Our Barbel To Death? By Phil Buckingham***

These pellets purchased by the guiding company by the truck load came direct from the supplier and were so oily you needed to dry your hands after handling them, the same Company supplies commercial fish farms all around Europe.

promptly eat most of the eggs, by most definitions they are happy, healthy fish thriving in a fairly ideal environment.

Five years ago I purchased 2 six inch barbel from the local garden centre which I suspect originated

September I found one of these barbel floating dead in the pond .On inspection there were no signs of disease or physical damage, so safe to assume there was something wrong internally perhaps.

When I eventually netted

type of food it was getting? The amount of food it was getting? Or the sedentary lifestyle it was living? Or a combination of all three?

Whatever it was this fish didn't seem right for a barbel, not a good advert for stillwater barbel or eating pellets.

Is this what's happening to the barbel in some of our rivers?

I'll now retreat to my bunker and wait for the flak, but please remember before you start firing at me this is only based on my experiences and what they suggest to me. But, if it makes us realise that we might unintentionally be damaging our barbel stocks just from using a type of bait then I might have achieved something and will happily take the flak.

And yes, I do use pellets from time to time in modest quantities, but it's not my number one choice for barbel.

---

**“Our guide, who was seriously concerned that pellets might be totally banned on the Ebro, estimated that several hundred kilos, maybe over a 1000 kilos of pellets, went into the 2 mile stretch of the Ebro around Mequinenza every week during the season”**

---

Our guide, who was seriously concerned that pellets might be totally banned on the Ebro, estimated that several hundred kilos, maybe over a 1000 kilos of pellets, went into the 2 mile stretch of the Ebro around Mequinenza every week during the season. He personally had witnessed large cats spew up a couple of bucket loads of pellets when on the bank.

He did reconcile himself that in reality a ban was probably unlikely as without the pellets the fish would lose weight, angling numbers would decline and the local economy suffer. The economic lobby would probably overrule the ecological one.

The third event this year happened very recently and happened very close to home, in my Koi pond to be exact.

I have kept Koi for many years. I have a decent size pond with good filtration and fast turnover of water which returns to the pond via a small waterfall which in effect creates a modest current in the pond. I have Koi that have grown from a few inches to pushing 20 pounds over the past 15 years and some large Orfe which have grown from fingerlings to fish pushing 4lbs in about 7 years . These fish spawn most years and

from Calverton . Now I'm dead against barbel in still water but thought, okay! Let's give it try, drop them in the pond and see what happens.

Well not a lot happened, they did a disappearing trick for over two years only to reappear when about 12 Inches long when they could be seen dashing about the pond picking up morsel the other fish had missed.

Now the fish in my pond don't get overfed , a few carp pellets each day, floaters and a few sinking ones for the barbel's benefit, the occasional worm, maggots when I have some left over, a bit of corn and even the odd halibut pellet if I don't have the other pellets to hand .

Now, these barbel which are probably around 7 years old now, allowing a couple of years for them to get to 6 inches long when I purchased them, have lived through a few hot summers in the pond , but have never been removed from the pond nor been stressed in the angling sense of the word . They have steadily grown and if you had asked me their size back in July I would have said they were 20 inches long and might weigh 4 to 5lbs, pretty much what you would expect for a barbel of this age.

In the first week of

the corpse out I was staggered by the dimensions of this fish, 24.50 Inches long, 18 inches in Girth ( it was not blown up from decomposition ) and it weighed 9lbs 10 ounces, 6 ounces short of a double. This fish was assuming the proportions of a Carp, for a barbel it looked obese . Now what made it obese? The