



# Thoughts from the President



I recently had a long chat with my good friend and excellent angler John Everard. One of his great concerns has long been the decline of barbel in his local stretches of the upper River Thames.

One issue became dominant and that was the current programme of otter introductions in his neck of the woods.

I was already aware of one or two cases of barbel losses but really had no idea just how serious the problem was becoming. In one particular tributary of the Thames the population appears to have been wiped out and eye witness accounts leave no doubt whatsoever that the cause was Otters.

It appears that the Otter Trust is unwilling to divulge the exact whereabouts of new introductions because of the risk to the animals' security and a vague guide on a county basis is all that is offered.

After a quick chat with Steve Pope and others it was considered an important enough threat to start taking steps towards making every angler aware. We must co-ordinate some kind of campaign aimed initially at building the big picture. To this end Steve has put a bit on the internet in the hope that barbel anglers everywhere will investigate their own areas to gain a greater understanding which should at least give us an idea as to what action we can take.

My initial feelings are to look at previous programmes aimed at or resulting in augmenting and re-organising our fauna. In doing so it becomes clear that many regrets have

arisen due to a failure to apply sufficient thought. When things have gone wrong the blame must lie entirely at the feet of those groups of people who selfishly chase their own particular dreams without truly considering the wishes or concerns of the majority. Introducing alien species or attempting to re-instate once resident creatures that have disappeared as part of a slow natural decline are activities that on the face of it may appear inconsequential but actually great caution should

film but they are in fact highly efficient killers and for that reason were eventually persecuted as generally undesirable. We have no duty to restore lost species just because 'they were there once.'

I am aware that suggestions have been rumoured of plans to bring wolves and bears into the Scottish highlands just because they were there once. It only needs a minor consideration of the threat to the established wild mammals let alone the risk

widening and the accompanying loss of depth. That's all we need with forever declining rainfall.

To many people the only detrimental effect attributable to the grey squirrel was the loss of our much-loved red variety. If only that were true! A much greater impact is often not appreciated. They raid many birds' nests stealing eggs and young. They destroy huge numbers of young trees and plants as well as eating an inestimable amount of natural seeds and fruits that

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be exercised.

Let us not forget lessons of the past. Coypu, zander, grey squirrel, mink, signal crayfish and Canada geese are but a few of the animals either introduced intentionally or established in the wild by escaping from captivity. They all either cause huge environmental damage or are highly predatory and in many cases both. Their impact on both habitat and natural fauna has been devastating and wouldn't everybody love to turn back the clock and reverse the decisions that bought them to our land?

Otters are seen by many to be cuddly, playful things as portrayed in book and

to humans to see that idea as ludicrous.

To introduce or re-introduce non-predatory species i.e. butterflies may appear risk free and if they merge into the environmental infrastructure and thrive maybe no great damage would be done. I say maybe for I doubt if anybody foresaw one of the greatest areas of destruction resulting from the importation of the signal crayfish. Where they now thrive in huge numbers bank erosion is becoming a really serious problem. As they ceaselessly dig out new burrows these repulsive vermin damage our soft riverbanks to the point of collapse. This causes river

would otherwise have helped to support many more wild birds. Their seemingly insatiable appetite and breeding success impacts on all other wildlife! My local wood has more squirrels than it has birds. They are colloquially known as tree rats and as far as I am concerned that describes them perfectly.

Otters do not simply take a fish now and again to satisfy their dietary needs. Once they have young they spend weeks teaching them how to hunt food and in doing so kill many more fish than they can eat, hence the regular discovery of large, part eaten fish on many riverbanks. Their natural



## Thoughts From The President By Fred Crouch

instinct is to hunt close to the riverbed because one of their favoured prey is the eel. It is a fact that eels are fast becoming an endangered species so more predation is the last thing they need. The otter likes to hunt close to the riverbed and it is precisely because of this that barbel are so at risk.

The public can often be fooled when given only information and facts that the informers wish them to hear. The picture painted by those who would support a wide distribution of these animals is of a comical, harmless and charming creature that does nothing other than enhance the environment and give pleasure to anybody lucky enough to observe them. It's a nice thought but far from realistic. They are ruthless killers that include in their diet frogs, toads and newts as well as fish. They will also kill water voles, a fact that seems to clash directly with the aspirations of those who would support the present programme of vole re-establishment. I hope they have factored in plans to prevent both from being introduced into the same areas!

I learned recently that otters are doing us all a favour by attacking mink but that simply means mink will be driven from the otters' favoured sites into other areas. Whichever way you look at it the pressure on fish and voles will be drastically increased.

As far as I am concerned no sound or sensible case can be made for this poorly thought out experiment. When otters populated our river systems they were the only serious predator of large fish. Herons and kingfishers live mainly on smaller individuals and are an asset to healthy waters in as much as they cull fish populations in a beneficial way by taking ailing fish or thinning out over crowding by some fish

species.

It is a sad fact that cormorants and mink are highly mobile and coldly efficient killers that can ravage fish stocks with frightening speed. They are now harvesting the food that once sustained the otter and our inland waters just won't support an upsurge in otter

initially put in selected sites but like all other animals they have the ability to spread to wherever food supplies can be found. I live on the edge of a wood that once held a couple of natural deer species but since muntjac appeared on the scene they are now the only species.

gambles that may all end in tears. When otters were thriving their food was not under threat from neither mink nor cormorant. Before we even consider the re-establishment of a nationwide population of them we must first remove mink and cormorant from the equation.

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numbers. Those who believe that is untrue should commit themselves publicly to producing irrefutable evidence that fish stocks are not being depleted as a result of them satisfying their personal desires.

As true guardians of the environment we should prepare ourselves to gather all available fact-based evidence to support the case for stopping the 'bring back the otter' campaign before it becomes too late to prevent an environmental catastrophe. I am not getting hysterical in using such terms. Let's not forget the widespread destruction around the Norfolk Broads area caused by the coypu.

Adding otters back onto the list of predators brings a guaranteed and unnecessary impact on many other species that are just about surviving at the moment. The harmless vole that itself is a vital source of food to some birds of prey e.g. marsh harrier, kestrel and barn owl. Then there are kingfishers, herons among others. Much cost, time and effort has and still is being spent in an effort to restore the dwindling number of bitterns around our waterways. The otter will surely conflict with that aim.

We shouldn't allow ourselves to be persuaded by the claim that only carefully selected sites will be used. Muntjac deer were only ever

It is a little unfortunate but many species of animal do, for varying reasons become extinct. That shouldn't be the signal to resurrect them for old time's sake. Evolution has determined what sort of animal community can live in a sustainable way even though it may not always be harmonious. We interfere at our own risk and I am not in the habit of taking massive

I will suggest one other option. The groups that favour going down the otter road must continuously and at their own expense stock our waterways with ever larger numbers of fish to feed the ever increasing numbers of mouths that will inevitably result from their actions. I favour prevention rather than cure but we have to be firm and we have to start acting now.