

(Member of South West Rivers Association)

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ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 19th OCTOBER, 2021

Hartnoll Hotel, Bolham at 1830hrs.

MINUTES

1. Welcome and apologies for absence: The Chairman welcomed the 50 or so members and guests to the AGM and reminded those present that it was over two years since our last AGM. He announced 18 apologies for absence (names recorded by the secretary) and he explained the guests were from ENPA, EA, FWAG, Exeter Univ and WRT. The Chairman made a statement about the criticism received from two members over the fall in the rod catch of salmon from the Exe. He explained that he had met the two members and had listened to their concerns. He had rejected their critical remarks about the committee, he accepted that there was a great deal of work to do to try to restore a more healthy population of salmon but he could not accept their complaints about the Mires Project nor their misunderstandings over Trews Weir. He pointed out that these topics would be covered later in the agenda.

2. Minutes of the AGM held on 15th March 2019 were approved and signed by the Chairman. No AGM had been held in 2020 because of the Covid pandemic.

3. Election of Officers and Committee:

Elections covering 2020:- Iain Stewart Hunter, Tom Arthur and Godfrey Davis were re-elected unopposed. For 2021 the Chairman explained that the posts of Treasurer and Secretary were elected annually. Iain Stewart Hunter and Mark Thomasin-Foster were duly elected to these two post respectively. Roger Furniss, Alistair Langford and William Heathcoat Amory were re-elected unopposed. New members Toby Diggins and Bruce Pearson having been duly nominated and seconded were elected to the committee. The Chairman stood down but having been nominated and seconded was re-elected to the chair.

4. Committee's Activities: Henry Llewellyn resumed the Chair and gave his report thanking the committee and in particular the two retiring members, Tom Le Quesne and Adrian Howell. He thanked Lance Nicholson (Pat Veale and team) for the Fish the Exe scheme, The Hartnoll Hotel for the evening's venue, Tom Arthur for his website management and members for their support and the excellent turn out of members present at the AGM. He announced that RETA had 266 members which was the highest number of members ever. He mentioned the disappointing catch returns expected for the season, but said Roger Furniss would say more shortly. David Rice was thanked for the successful on-line auction held last May which raised £4,785. The Chairman made a point of thanking the donors to the auction. He reminded members the 2022 AGM will be held on 18th March 2022 when there will be an auction again in support of the river.

5. Finances and approval of accounts: The Treasurer made a statement saying that he took personally the allegations from the two members (mentioned above by the Chairman) that there was financial impropriety within the committee. He pointed out this was completely without any grounds or substantiation and that the two members had just recently fully withdrawn their potentially libellous allegations. He continued by apologising to the meeting for some years ago whilst emailing out newsletters he had inadvertently allowed a partial list of members email addresses to creep into his email circular. He assured members that he fully obeys GDPR requirements and that a RETA member had recently wrongly used this out of date and partial list for his own interests. The Treasurer then turned to the accounts for 2019 and 2020. He drew attention to monies received from SWW through the EMG scheme and the payment for work on coppicing and gravel washing by DAA. He explained the monies held in the various funds (see the account papers) and that WRT being a charity enabled tax rebates on donations. With no questions the accounts were approved.

6. RETA's and SWRA's Work Programme: Roger Furniss said he had now retired as the South West Rivers Association Chairman and William Entwisle had taken over. RETA is represented by Godfrey Davis being a

council member of SWRA. Roger Furniss mentioned SWRA's work on beavers (11 SW rivers now have beavers and with the national (Defra) consultation ending in November), National Stock Assessments, the Cornwall IFCA, the regional hatchery (not currently used by RETA but climate change might provoke a rethink), access, canoeing and wild swimming (thanking Phil Carey of the Lyn Association) and water quality issues where 48% of rivers in Poor Ecological Status is due to agricultural pollution and 2% due to sewage outfalls.

He then turned to RETA matters explaining the Exe remains in the "At Risk" category of failing salmon conservation limits (recent average total rod catch being under 200 pa) and this is in common with 2/3rd of the SW rivers with 1/3rd "Probably at Risk". Mention was made of migration problems in the Exe, The Wimbleball mitigation monies from SWW where additional compensation was now achieved, and funding enabling the secondment from WRT of Phil Turnbull as RETA's Officer for the Exe. He explained the water bank and the ongoing negotiation for a possible increase held in Wimbleball Reservoir for use to enable fish migration. He continued with points on the annual juvenile fish surveys, the river fly/invertebrate surveys and issues of agricultural pollution. Further explanations of RETA's work, much led by Alistair Langford, included gravel cleaning, coppicing, salmon redd surveys and the use of Phil Turnbull's excellent technical report on the proposed Tiverton Hydro Scheme to secure over 100 objections. He finished by referring to the work of Headwaters of the Exe Project and the Exmoor Rivers and Streams Group's involvement with ENPA. Finally he stressed the desperate need for more volunteers in all these practical schemes to benefit the river. Questions from members were asked about Trews Weir fish counter and Thorveton gauging station and gravel build up. Phil Turnbull then introduced himself and outlined work on the GIS system being developed for the Exe, bringing together data on riverfly, juvenile survey, coppicing, gravel cleaning, redds, water quality etc. This GIS system leads the way in the SW and will become a very valuable tool in future management. He mentioned Trews Weir, (owned by Exeter City Council) but deemed unsafe to allow work on the baulk pass on the face of the weir. Because of the collapse of St James Weir the water level at the foot of Trews had lowered rendering the baulk pass difficult for salmonids other than at very high flows. The extended Larinier pass was functioning properly and observation indicated that most fish use the pass but a significant number do still achieve migration by the weir/baulk pass. However RETA will continue to monitor the situation knowing that the EA and Exeter City Council are discussing the future of the weir and its renovation.

Phil Turnbull then turned to the Mires Project. He explained that data on river flows was still not robust but that it was expected that the mires re-wetting was making very little difference to river flows and that base flows were improved as was water quality. RETA will continue to monitor and seek clarifications from Professor Allot at Manchester University. He finished by mentioning that he was involved with Dulverton Weir to ensure the necessary fish pass was central to the scheme. Questions followed, the first asking about Trews larinier and camera monitoring. The cost of monitoring being £30K per year and RETA was trying to secure the EA to carry this cost in 2022. A further question was asked about the reduction of river flows because of the mires work quoting Exeter Univ's 2014 calculations along with the fact that pollution might be worse because of reduced flows. Phil Turnbull said that data on both points is inconclusive, more data being needed but in fact the overall result of the mires work might well be positive for the river. It was pointed out that the mires ditch blocking work had affected about 11% of the peatland/mires area and of the total Exe catchment in the National Park only about 1%. Another questioner asked about the cost of the Trews larinier extension at £400k and the age of Trews Weir. It was pointed out that the larinier is over engineered and will have a longer expected life and that Dr Solomon's research on the Exe had found that less than 50% of returning fish never achieved reaching freshwater. Therefore the collapse of St James and the Trews larinier is definitely positive for fish migration into the river. Godfrey Davis added that Trews weir is deemed insecure and it was fortunate that the EA addressed the installation of the larinier and its extension as quickly as they did albeit the cost appeared high. Decisions and solutions to the weir are awaited. A last question was about there being a proveable possible link between river flow and salmon numbers.

7. Fish-the-Exe Project: Pat Veale said the scheme was very much in being with interest in Grayling fishing. Currently Stuckeridge, Cove and Wonham beat are available at times through the season but more beats are needed. People making use of the scheme are asked to become RETA members. Pat Veale was able to hand over a cheque for £915 to the Exe Project. He was very much thanked by the Chairman who repeated the request for more beats however short a time to be made available to the Pat Veale for the scheme.

8. Robin Bailey Award and Tuition Day: The Chairman asked Fred Leach to report. The Covid pandemic had delayed the tuition days but it was expected 2022 would provide renewed opportunity. The Chairman in thanking Fred Leach mentioned that he also plays the lead role with Richard Horrocks over the Riverfly survey on the 100 sites visited within the Exe system.

The Chairmen then announced that Julian Capps of the DAA had been chosen as the well deserved recipient of the Robin Bailey Award. Julian Capps duly accepted the award.

9. Strategic Exe Weirs: Godfrey Davis (GD) introduced the Project by outlining the national decline in salmon numbers especially in the South West rivers and the many factors involved with this decline including climate change. He explained that climate change will bring further challenges not only over rainfall and seasonal river flows but damaging increases in water temperatures. He pointed out that RETA's objective is to try to influence and be involved in those issues that can be tackled by the Association. The obvious practical first steps must be weirs. Barriers within the river are very disruptive to both upstream and downstream migration, indeed looking at the Exe weirs it is estimated that only 50% of smolts make it to sea and equally in upstream migration many potential spawners are lost with perhaps 10% exhausted at each serious barrier. High barriers trap fish often in warmer more polluted water especially at in lower parts of the river system where for smolts in particular predation is more significant. RETA has lobbied NE for licences to control both Cormorant and Goosander with the latter denied. GD explained that electrofishing showed the Barle with goodly numbers but elsewhere poor. He reported that Exe Mitigation Group (SWW) had agreed RETA's proposal that monies might be well spent on areas beyond just the Haddeo to improve overall spawning. EMG compensatory monies now are £27k pa for the next four years added to the original c£18k pa. FishTek had undertaken the barrier survey beginning in 2017 and now with the survey complete it was a matter of action, first on the most essential weirs. He concluded his remarks by saying the RETA committee had started the fund raising effort with significant donations to the SEW and that WRT will hold the funds in order to collect tax through gift aid. The fund raising target is £200K. He urged members to make donations drawing attention to the forms being circulated.

Phil Turnbull (PT) began his presentation with a snapshot of salmon biology and the inadequate design of weirs for fish migration. He highlighted the shorter migration windows when the lack of high flow prevents migration over the higher more challenging weirs. Often smaller fish can succeed in shallower weir face flow whilst the more valuable and productive larger salmon fail. So we find salmon populations are often predominately grilse. He continued looking at downstream migration and the impounded reaches which do not provide smolts with a useable flow direction leading to stress, disease, crowding and predation. He pointed out that smolts need to get to sea quickly and in strong form. Ideally smolts need weir removal or at least strong flows through weir re-design by increasing flows, for example the flow over Bolham Weir which is wide is far too shallow. PT said that 85% of the Exe weirs need to provide easy passage. His action list for weir work is to identify owners, gather constraints, attempt design, achieve regulation/planning, construction, monitoring and return the renovated weir to its original owners. Question began by Andrew Maund who leads on Cormorant control asking for volunteers to help with the work on avian predators. PT was asked about the schedule of weir renovation. PT said 3 sites would be ready for construction in 2022. It was said that Bickleigh Weir was often blocked with debris. It was mentioned that fallen woody debris was useful in that it provided a degree of protection from predation in the slower flowing parts

The Chairman thanked both GD and PT for their excellent, full and detailed presentations. He urged members to give generously to the SEW Project.

A comment from the floor thanked the committee for all their work and congratulated them on the extent and detail being devoted to the river. The members present applauded.

10. Any Other Business: There was none..

End of AGM.

8.30 pm

Members and Guests enjoyed a complimentary buffet supper.