

Where have all the salmon gone?

If the decline in numbers continues, salmon could soon be an endangered species. Robbie Douglas Miller, chairman of the Atlantic Salmon Trust, explains why a new tracking initiative is vital to their survival

SINCE joining the Atlantic Salmon Trust (AST) two years ago, I have been asked the same question again and again: “What is happening to our salmon populations?”

Unquestionably, the answer is a combination of the known and the unknown – getting to the bottom of the “unknown” bit is the challenge. The AST exists to pick up this challenge and our latest and most ambitious project aims to do this – with your help.

We all know that every year wild salmon start one of the planet’s greatest natural migrations, travelling thousands of miles out to sea to return to their natal river to spawn. It’s a journey this incredible species has been making for more than 60 million years. But these remarkable fish are now dying somewhere en route in huge numbers. This year, for every 100 salmon smolts that leave our rivers for the sea only four or five will return – a decline of nearly 70% in just 25 years.

In my lifetime (I’m only 53!), wild Atlantic salmon numbers around the world have more than halved. The total population in the Atlantic has fallen from eight to 10 million fish in the early 1970s to three to four million today. Seemingly, no-one knows where the bulk of this mortality is occurring; how many are dying at sea or failing, even, to make it that far?

The warning is stark. If this trend continues, salmon will be an endangered species by the time my children hit 50.

“We need to heighten awareness of the critical plight of one of our nation’s most iconic species”

The race is on for scientists and fisheries managers to solve the mystery of the missing salmon before it’s too late. Collectively, we must take action on an unprecedented scale to identify what is happening and determine how to halt this decline. Put simply, if we can find out what is happening on the salmon’s journey, we can take steps to help increase survival. The task at hand is momentous but the action needed is perfectly clear. We urgently need to know: what are the migration pathways our smolts use? How do we quantify the major impacts on their mortality during this journey? How do we improve their survival rate so more fish return?



Wild speculation on the causes of decline is no good – we need evidence. A fully integrated scientific study to find out what’s happening to wild salmon on their journey down our river systems and out to sea is needed. Only then can we make evidence-based recommendations to inform policy and enable management solutions.

For this reason, the AST, has launched The Missing Salmon Project. Some of our most forward-thinking fishery boards and trusts in Britain have been running Acoustic Tracking projects on individual rivers for some years now – they are building up valuable information. Now the AST wants to go further. We want to raise £1 million by the end of 2018 to implement the largest

many salmon smolts are being lost; implementing urgent management solutions to ensure that more young salmon make it to the feeding grounds

The scale of this project is critical to its success – it creates the dynamics to measure impacts on a UK population level. More than 1,000 smolts will be trapped (see above), tagged and tracked from the headwaters of five major river systems up to 90km out to sea, enabling us to understand more about their migration behaviour and where mortality occurs.

It’s vital that we raise the funds needed to carry out The Missing Salmon Project so that we can heighten awareness of the critical plight of one of our nation’s most iconic species, research reasons why wild salmon are going missing and recommend steps that need to be taken to improve their chances of survival. To do that we need support, from organisations that are willing to sponsor elements of the project; from retailers who will donate a percentage of sales to the campaign or offer discounts to those donors who support the project.

The situation is simple. Now is the time to get to the bottom of the mystery of wild salmon’s declining numbers and to save more wild salmon smolts. Now is the time to come together and raise funds to enable The Missing Salmon Project to discover why wild salmon numbers are falling so dramatically and determine tangible actions that can be taken to protect the species. ■

To donate, visit: www.crowdfunder.co.uk/themissingalmonproject