

From Warren Slaney of the Haddon Estate in Derbyshire.

The Wild Trout Trust asked for some words describing our change from stock trout to wild rivers.

Today is the last day of the 2015 trout season.

Haddon Estate is a four thousand acre parcel of land in the south east corner of the Peak District, Derbyshire. The river fisheries here comprise twenty miles of three different rivers together with a fourth recently brought back in hand.

For a hundred years outdoor ponds had grown trout from local brood-stock to be introduced as classic stock trout, but in June 2003 we stocked our last trout and sold all the trout remaining in the fish farms. Many said we were mad. Two local voices said I would be out of work. You see, this isn't a place where the owner subsidises any financial mistakes. We are a business, relying upon seasonal revenue to support one part-time and two full time river keepers. Cosy syndicates may have softened the transition, with those long termers willing to ride out any downturns in fishing but we are day ticket. Wading with nymphs could have scraped any relics from the depths, but we are dry fly only, from the bank. Two of our rivers were so modified to accommodate the stock fish that they were incapable of supporting the earlier stages of life and much of the food and cover necessary for a wild population to exist.

The first thing we did was to learn what trout wanted, at all stages of their lives and then give it to them. Most importantly, they don't want to be killed, so we imposed a catch & release policy and collected licences to protect them from non-native (to Derbyshire) fish eating birds. The trout then received bespoke areas of clean limestone chatter, from our own quarry, hundreds of tons of it. Below were shallow reedy shelves for the fry to sit and take their first food and territories. The weirs were removed of course to promote weed and allow vertical falls to be translated into current for the inject-breathing trout and oxygen loving insects. The adult fish gained cover from above, trailing in the flow and from the bed.

The rivers were transformed for the trout and all the other inhabitants of the river. We gained osprey, barn owls, otters, kingfishers and quickly adopted a mantra of benevolence towards natives, however much they take, but with a fierce intolerance of invasives, be they plant, animal, insect or bird. We also gained friends who approved of the changes we made, all of them wanting to be a part of it.

Our only regret is that we didn't do all this sooner. Look seriously at a change to a stock free river, with all the advantages it will bring. You will become much more of an observer than a manager and with an understanding of life on a natural river you will appreciate the river far more. Twelve years on we are seeing very large trout snatching smaller trout before the net as natural balancing occurs and we are expecting New Zealand size trophy trout to follow. It's great to still be here, heading a thriving business and to see what the river will bring next season. Nature is in charge here simply because Nature knows best!

If you want to see what we have done, with a view to doing it yourself, please get in touch.  
W. G. M Slaney  
07801 457 225