

The Great Outdoor Escape: popularity for fishing here to stay as public desire long-term connection with nature

New research reveals people have formed long-term plans to reconnect with nature through a surge in popularity for new hobbies such as fishing, gardening and birdwatching.

Post-lockdown attitudes have shown a newfound appreciation for incorporating nature into lifestyles and long-term hobbies with the average person planning to spend 14 hours outdoors during a typical week over the summer.

Coinciding with the soaring popularity for a long-term connection to nature, the Environment Agency has launched a campaign calling on all potential and seasoned anglers to see their licences as more than just a legal entitlement to fish. The campaign highlights that fishing is a licence to connect with nature, see friends, provide alternative entertainment to electronic devices and more.

Fishing gains appeal among women since the pandemic

40% of women questioned believe it gives them the opportunity to reconnect with nature, 31% want to learn how to catch a fish as a new skill and 38% saying they would fish for relaxation, meditation or mindfulness.

As part of a new campaign, the Environment Agency has created a short documentary film interviewing a group of women who have taken up fishing and explores how the activity has given them a licence to do more than fish. The EA hopes this will highlight some of the unique stories of how fishing can be a beneficial activity for coping with the stresses of the last year, socialising and improving mental health.

Fishing boom delivers environmental benefits

Last year, the Environment Agency sold 1,019,723 individual freshwater rod licences to adults living in England, compared to 882,989 in the previous year 2019/20, an increase of 16%. This boom in sales has allowed the Environment Agency to fund even more vital restoration work to protect fish stocks, increase biodiversity, create and restore over 3,000 hectares of wildlife habitat, and sustain a healthier water environment. Thanks to rod licence income, the Environment Agency and its partners improved over 1,700km of rivers between in 2019/20.

Almost 3 in 10 people who have found fishing more appealing since the pandemic say it is because they have learnt about the environmental benefits that can be delivered as a result of purchasing a licence.

A year on from the first lockdown, the public are looking to explore nature in a more immersive and mindful way, with 38% reporting feeling happier and enjoying better wellbeing overall when spending time in green spaces. Of those planning on trying fishing this year, 40% people said they were looking for new ways to reconnect with nature locally going forward, with a further third (31%) stating the desire to pick up a new hobby.

Heidi Stone, Fisheries Partnerships Manager at the Environment Agency said:

Fishing has benefitted the mental health of hundreds of thousands of people in the past year and is a great option for people who are looking for a long-term connection with nature.

We want people to see a fishing licence as more than just your right to fish. It is a licence to have fun, de-stress and spend time with family and friends. With every additional licence, we can also reinvest even more into protecting our fisheries to ensure the public can continue to reap the benefits of being immersed in nature long into the future.

Clive Copeland, Head of Participation at the Angling Trust said:

It's great to see the surging popularity of fishing and other outdoor pursuits continuing as we head into summer with people becoming much more engaged with nature and the benefits that participating in new activities provides.

We're hearing reports that people are becoming more mindful of the environmental impact of outdoor activities and this, coupled with a willingness to try new experiences, is reflected in the types of sustainable activities that are becoming more popular. In fact, the Angling Trust is promoting hundreds of our free have-a-go fishing lessons this summer on our website.

This is fantastic news for angling. We're passionate about promoting the positive mental health benefits of fishing, and newcomers tell us that immersing themselves in going fishing is a great way to reconnect with nature.

Fishing influencer Beverly Clifford said:

Angling has seen a huge boost since the pandemic with people returning to fishing, and also coming into the sport for the first time. We've seen a lot of women coming into the sport during this time and enjoying the many benefits of angling, such as reconnecting with nature, positive affect on mental health, as well as being a low impact form of exercise and a great way to make new friends.

For me I can enjoy going fishing on my own as a way to escape a busy hectic life and have time to relax and reflect. I also enjoy fishing with others, it a great way to catch up with friends while enjoying time outside, and trying to catch a carp or two.

GO Outdoors, the UK's largest outdoors retailer, was considered an 'essential retailer' during lockdown and has seen ongoing public appetite and increased demand for camping, cycling and fishing equipment throughout 2020 and into 2021.

Jim McNamara, GO Outdoors Buying Director, said:

We've seen increased demand both in-store and online for fishing, camping and cycling equipment since the pandemic and it's a trend we're expecting to continue.

Our customer footfall remained high, with GO Outdoors' in-store activity experts attributing the increased public appetite to customers wanting advice around trying something new, as well as a desire to view the equipment before purchasing.

Despite a general belief that fishing is a male dominant activity, it was also great that almost one in five (17%) of our customers over 2019 and 2020 were female. We hope to see female participation continue to rise, given the relaxing nature of the activity and how it allows us to really enjoy the freedom the outdoors brings.

The mental health and wellbeing benefits of pursuits such as fishing, have been shown to help in people's post-pandemic recovery by offering an escape from lockdown stresses and busy urban environments. The ongoing changes in social habits are backed up by new data. 26% of the public were recorded feeling an increased sense of freedom when in nature and almost half of people surveyed are enjoying more time outside for mental and physical health benefits.

Over half of respondents to the Angling Trust's survey who have newly taken up fishing and other outdoor hobbies, say they got started as a Covid-safe way of socialising with friends and family, with the research suggesting the new love of the great outdoors is here to stay.