



## WRT 2020 Electrofishing

Bruce Stockley 14<sup>th</sup> May 2020,  
amended 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2020

### Context

Westcountry Rivers Trust carries out over 300 electrofishing site surveys per year across Devon and Cornwall. The following catchments are fished every year: Camel, Fowey, Tamar, Teign, Dart, Avon, and Exe. The Taw and Torridge are fished less frequently. Occasional electro fishing, including fish rescues are also carried out on other catchments as required. Most electrofishing is timed semi-quantitatively, and approximately 20 sites per year are fished with a three (+) catch depletion methodology.

### Timeline

**Initial COVID-19 lock down response.** The UK is now using a five-stage COVID-19 alert level framework. During the recent initial lockdown, the UK was operating a 'level 4' alert. During level 4 COVID-19 alerts, WRT cannot carry out any electrofishing surveys.

**Current COVID-19 response.** The UK is currently moving from a level 4 alert level, to a level 3 alert level. The guidance for outdoor working which is most relevant to electrofishing surveys can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-COVID-19/construction-and-other-outdoor-work>

The electrofishing assessment outlined below should be read in conjunction with the above linked document.

**Future COVID-19 response.** As the government advice changes the assessment below will be subject to change.

### Assessment

**Health and Safety assessment.** We have assessed the likelihood that we can carry out electrofishing with a two-metre social distance applied. Based upon our usual river catchments that we fish we have concluded that this is not viable for almost all of our sites due to their narrow and constrained river morphology.

We have considered the possibility of mitigation measures to allow our staff to carry out electrofishing without following the two-metre social distance rule. The conclusions from this assessment are:

- 1) Staff who are in an 'at risk' health category for COVID-19 should not carry out activities that breach the two-metre social distancing rule.
- 2) Staff who are COVID-19 shielding other vulnerable people should not carry out activities that breach the two-metre social distancing rule.
- 3) Risk could be reduced by supplying PPE such as gloves, masks, and cleaning products of otherwise healthy staff members, however aerosolised droplet virus spread is still a real risk when people are forced into close proximity to one another.
- 4) Risk could be reduced by maintaining the same members of staff on an

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electrofishing team

- 5) Risk could be reduced by ensuring volunteers do not engage with electrofishing.

Government guidelines state that in cases where social distancing cannot be maintained '*businesses should consider whether that activity needs to continue for the business to operate*'. It is our assessment that our business and charitable work can continue in 2020 without electrofishing. Therefore, we interpret the government guidance to indicate we should not carry out this activity. Additionally, given our own Health and Safety responsibilities to our staff members and their families, we regard the risks of asking staff to carry out electrofishing in the current COVID-19 alert level unacceptably high.

**Cost: benefit assessment:** WRT has no statutory right to electrofish rivers. As well as seeking permission from the Environment Agency, we must also get landowner permission to fish a site. Currently, we have had a mixed response from landowners, and our best current estimate is that we would be able to obtain permission to fish approximately half the sites on our list. This would severely reduce the value of the data collected and reduces the benefit of carrying out electrofishing in 2020.

The costs of carrying out electrofishing in 2020 would also be increased by the following factors:

- 1) increased time seeking statutory, and non-statutory permissions.
- 2) increased travel costs as staff members would need to travel separately to site.
- 3) increased costs to fish each site due to decontamination routines, and use of disposable PPE, which may be costly and difficult to source.

Losing the opportunity to carry out 'before intervention' baseline electrofishing surveys would be a significant consideration; however, none are planned for 2020.

The result of the situation described above is that costs of electrofishing will *increase*, and benefits of electrofishing will *decrease*.

### Other WRT outdoor work

WRT can carry out a number of other outdoor activities in compliance with government guidance, the two-meter social distancing rule, and our own health and safety assessment.

We are able to carry out:

- Habitat walkover surveys
- Weir assessments
- Tree works, habitat improvement
- Redd counting and other outdoor activities.

Where we are not able to carry out electrofishing, we will be taking the opportunity to replace this activity with other activities, including those listed above and will seek support from our partners and clients to do so.

### Conclusion

Our assessment is that in the current COVID-19 alert situation WRT should not be carrying out electrofishing surveys. This is because it causes risk to our staff members and their families and it is not in line with current government guidance. Additionally, the costs of electrofishing have gone up, and the benefits have gone down. We will continue to monitor the COVID-19 situation, and government guidance. It is our assessment that only significant changes to the government advice, or significant medical and testing advances would make it possible for us to change this position.

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## Amendment August 2020

Following the partial easing of lockdown restrictions during the summer of 2020, WRT has decided to continue its policy of not carrying out catchment-scale electrofishing across the Westcountry for the reasons given above. However, we have now amended this policy to allow the carrying out of an extremely small number of priority survey sites during 2020. This equates to *approximately 5% of our typical annual electrofishing coverage* and will be carried out using a modified electro fishing protocol. This will be subject to constant review and may be updated or cancelled at any time, as new information arises regarding covid-risk.

- Surveys will be carried out using a *Covid-modified* semi-quantitative methodology. This means that where sites cannot be fished with staff members 2m apart (which is frequently the case) fishing will be carried out by a single team member with the second electro-fisher acting as banksman, fish welfare, and health and safety support.
- Surveys will be limited to essential sites. Essential sites are:
  - Those which have had recent WRT fish pass or habitat work carried out at the site
  - The work is at a site that is considered an important reference site
  - Sites that have previous electrofishing carried out in order to establish before and after intervention

We have reviewed our electrofishing programme and currently 16 sites meet these criteria. 8 Sites are on the Tamar and are related to assessing the impact of the Roadford Mitigation Programme, and 8 Sites are on the rivers Camel and Fowey and related to assessing the impact of the Water for Growth project.

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