

Two men given suspended prison sentences after social media posts brag about illegal salmon and sea trout fishing

Two men have been prosecuted at South Tyneside Magistrates Court today (Tuesday 16th August) after photographs and videos found both on a mobile and posted to a social media account highlighted illegal fishing activity

Connor Bell (30), of Bexhill Road, Sunderland appeared at South Tyneside Magistrates Court Magistrates' Court on Tuesday 26th July, where he pleaded guilty to using unlicensed gill nets to catch salmon and sea trout on the River Wear, including at a location near Fatfield, in the county of Tyne and Wear. At a hearing on Tuesday 16th August, he was sentenced to 5 months imprisonment, suspended for 18 months, and ordered to do 200 hours of unpaid work.

In addition, Mr Bell was ordered to pay £1,000 costs and a victim surcharge of £128.

Michael Hutchinson (39) of Cranberry Road, Sunderland also appeared for similar offences and one other offence of handling the illegally caught fish. Hutchinson was sentenced to 2 months imprisonment, suspended for 18 months, and ordered to undertake 200 hours of unpaid work. Mr Hutchinson was also ordered to pay £1,000 costs and a victim surcharge of £128.

Gill nets are designed to catch fish by their gills and are rarely licensed in rivers, due to their ability to catch large numbers of migratory fish in a short period of time, as well as their potential for catching and killing fish indiscriminately. Gill nets are also capable of causing injury or indeed killing sea birds and mammals.

Representing the Environment Agency, lawyer Matthew Treece told the court that files on Bell's mobile phone and Hutchinson's social media pages had highlighted multiple weekends of illegal netting during the summers of 2020 and 2021, along with photographs of both men posing with catches of up to 14 fish at a time. Images from Hutchinson's Facebook profile also showed a relative, with the captured fish, along with comments from Hutchinson encouraging them to become a "fine young poacher."

On sentencing, District Judge Garland told the defendants: "You don't know how lucky you are to avoid going on a trip to Durham this morning. I view and the law views the things you were up to as extremely serious. These weren't boyish pranks. You were out there putting a large net across a confined space of river where it was highly likely you were going to catch fish of one sort or another. And you did. If you hadn't gone around bragging on Facebook about what fish you were catching, you wouldn't have been in as much trouble as you

are.”

Following the case David Shears, Senior Fisheries Enforcement Officer for the Environment Agency in the North East, said:

With salmon stocks reaching crisis in many of England’s rivers, this level of illegal activity could have a serious impact on the sustainability of future stocks in the River Wear. That’s why we take reports of suspected poaching seriously and work closely with the police to take action where appropriate.

We’re committed to tackling illegal fishing of all kinds whether online or off and as this case clearly demonstrates, we will take action, especially where potentially damaging methods are used.

PC Peter Baker, Wildlife Officer at Northumbria Police, said:

We are really pleased to have been able to deliver effective justice and show the impact of illegal fishing and poaching. We are privileged to see a varied amount of marine wildlife around our area, and we should all play a part in protecting and supporting the environment. As a Force, we take all reports of this nature seriously and are committed to taking appropriate and robust action against the minority found to have been involved in such offences in the region’s waterways.

Through our co-ordinated efforts with partners, we will continue to educate the public to prevent further offences from taking place.

The latest stock assessment report, from the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science, the Environment Agency and Natural Resources Wales, shows that 37 of the 42 salmon rivers (88%) in England now categorised as being ‘at risk’ or ‘probably at risk’. In 2020, 20 salmon rivers (48%) were thought to be ‘at risk’ – meaning salmon stock are no longer at sustainable levels – but in the latest report this has now risen to 31 (74%) with rivers in the South West, North West and Wales considered to be the most affected.

A licensed, strictly regulated and managed sea trout fishery operates off the North East coast and local byelaws apply to ensure sea trout may only be taken by a limited number of licenced netsmen, during the approved season (26th March to 31st May). It is also illegal to use nets to catch salmon in the North East.

Those who operate unlicensed nets risk prosecution, with unlimited fines and possible prison sentences available to the courts, and Environment Agency officers can seize equipment and vehicles.

Information about illegal fishing can be reported to the Environment Agency’s

24-hour incident hotline on 0800 80 70 60.