



MAHSEER TRUST POSITION STATEMENT

THE ANGLING BAN IN UTTARAKHAND, INDIA

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The Mahseer Trust has become aware of a decision by the State Forest Department of Uttarakhand to ban angling activities within forest areas across the state under Section 11 of the 1960 Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act. While we laud the desire to secure a better future for fishes, we have grave concerns regarding likely ramifications of the angling ban. We believe the angling ban will have the opposite effect to that which is intended and could threaten the continued survival of endangered fishes and thereby the ecosystems and local communities that depend on them.

The suggestion that catch and release activities cause pain and suffering to fish is an anthropomorphic (the attribution of human traits, emotions, or intentions to other species) characterization. Researchers specializing in this area of study do not agree on whether fish are physiologically capable of experiencing pain in any form and scientific evidence on this subject is currently leaning away from such a human-oriented interpretation of suffering. In mahseer specifically, research has shown that blue finned mahseer (*Tor khudree*) and golden mahseer (*Tor putitora*) are robust to common catch and release practices and typically demonstrate little to no reflex impairment (a measurement of stress) whatsoever after an angling event. To assert that catch and release fishing is cruel in that it causes pain and suffering when the activity has been found to cause neither is misguided.

It would be similarly misguided to ignore the important contributions angling activities can make in support of aquatic conservation. Angling activities contribute greatly to conservation efforts in India and could play an even stronger role in supporting local economies and opportunities for alternate or additional forms of livelihood. Indeed, several Uttarakhand-based fishing operators contribute greatly to local economies through providing community members with training, employment opportunities and profit-sharing. The loss of these operations to those communities will be staggering.

Anglers themselves contribute to local economies through their spending, and Indian anglers have demonstrated a high willingness to spend money on hotels, meals, guides and other services for the chance to spend time on the water with friends and family. Additionally, anglers often act as eyes and ears on the water, contributing their knowledge to monitoring river and fish conditions, helping researchers gather data through citizen science, and serving as witnesses to illegal activities such as dynamiting and gravel and sand mining. The loss of anglers on the water would thus represent a loss to conservation efforts. Many communities self-police fish stocks to safeguard economic returns from recreational angling activities, a powerful incentive to deter destructive fishing methods that otherwise impose cruelty directly on target fishes and also destroy the whole ecosystems in which they live. Banning angling as an activity will consequently be likely to lead to an increase in the



prevalence of illegal activities on the water such as illegal fishing methods and sand mining as was seen in the state of Karnataka after angling activities were banned in parts of the Cauvery River. In combination, these changes could lead to far more harm to flora and fauna, as well as the livelihoods of local communities, than those mistakenly attributed to angling activities.

We respectfully ask: which of these scenarios – responsible angling or the unintended consequences of ceasing angling activities – sounds cruel and more likely to induce suffering?

There is much that anglers who participate in catch and release can do to ensure consistent use of best practices, such that the fish they catch and release return to the water in optimum condition. By using proper equipment, keeping fish in the water at all times, and reducing handling, anglers can minimize stress resulting from angling activity. Similarly, there is much that outfitters can do to ensure business practices do not negatively impact mahseer populations. The Mahseer Trust would like to offer its expertise and assistance in working towards a resolution to this issue, to supporting outfitters in developing or maintaining conservation-oriented business practices, and to providing training for anglers across India in using these recommended practices. We believe that we can work with government officials, outfitters, angler and fisher communities to support sustainable fish populations and fisheries. Specifically, we propose to:

- Work together to carry out scientific research to identify recommended practices to promote sustainability and conservation in recreational fishing;
- Continually adjust and improve our practices to reflect these recommended practices and to share benefits with local communities;
- Ensure that we lead by example and share our knowledge of responsible angling practices with others;
- Prioritize the health and welfare of mahseer (and other fishes) above our personal or professional gain.