

NESS DISTRICT SALMON FISHERY BOARD

Annual Public Meeting Minutes

Time: 19:30

Date: 16th January 2020

Location: Press and Journal Suite, Inverness Caledonian Thistle Football Club

1. ATTENDANCE

The public meeting was attended by 33 individuals including local anglers from across the district, representatives from Inverness Angling Club, Beaully Angling Club, Ness Side Estate, Glenmoriston Estate, Tomdoun Estate, University of Highlands and Islands, River Naver, River Oich and Atlantic salmon Trust.

2. PRESENTATIONS

1. Introduction

Michael Martin – Chairman, Ness District Salmon Fishery Board (Ness DSFB)

Michael will give a brief welcome and introduction to the 2019 Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 15th May 2019.

2. "2019 - A Year in Review"

Chris Conroy – Director, Ness DSFB

Chris will provide an overview of the key activities carried out by the Board over the last year, together with those planned for the forthcoming year.

3. "The Moray Firth Smolt Tracking Project"

Mark Bilsby – Chief Executive Officer for the Atlantic Salmon Trust

Mark will give an eagerly anticipated update on The Moray Firth Tracking Project, the largest acoustic tracking project for salmon in Europe.

4. Question and Answer Session

Questions will be invited at the end of the presentations.

3. QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Questions were invited after the presentations. Topics discussed included:

General questions to the board

- **There is a worry with regard to predators throughout the system and it was felt that not enough focus was put on predator control especially with regard to Fish eating birds and the current seal issue. It was suggested that the Board should put more time and effort into bird counts as it was felt this was more important than some of the Boards other duties.**

Chris Conroy - It was agreed that predation is an issue throughout the system and the Ness DSFB would be using information from recent and future smolt tracking studies. This will hopefully tell us where fish are being lost and allow us to better focus our management activities.

It was also suggested that fish eating birds were not the only issue as pike, trout and mammalian predators within freshwater are a concern (along with an increasing bass population at sea). Lochs are difficult to monitor, especially large water bodies such as Loch Ness, which make it difficult to obtain an accurate bird count.

It was noted that the SNH licensing team visited the catchment in 2019 to witness the difficulties encountered regarding bird counts. The board are also looking to increase the number of counts carried out each year. This will hopefully give a more detailed picture of the status of bird populations.

Meetings have been held within Scottish Parliament and predation was discussed and this is something that will hopefully be addressed at a National level.

- **It was suggested by the floor that current issue with the seal in the River Ness was a disgrace.**

Chris Conroy – Agreed, but as the animal is protected, there is very little that the board can do other than continuing to monitor and inform in the hope that future management can be obtained.

- **With regard to main stem electrofishing results, how is this obtained as it was felt that the densities were wrong as hardly any parr or fry are seen by anglers.**

Chris Conroy - Explained that the board follow SFCC protocols and that the nature of the main stem Ness (size and flow prevents the use of 'stop nets') means that we are probably undercounting rather than over estimating numbers. Fry densities have dropped in the mainstem Ness, but would still classed as excellent according to the classification system. Parr densities have been increasing.

Questions concerning the Moray Firth Smolt Tracking Study

- **Was it possible to ascertain which side of Loch Oich the smolts used?**

Mark Bilsby - Receivers were placed only in certain strategic positions therefore we can't answer that. However, now we know that fish are going missing we can focus in on certain areas to answer that question.

- **Water flows around the Oich/Canal differ greatly due to Hydro operations. Could these smolt movements through the canal be a result of Hydro operations?**

Chris Conroy – Flows in the Garry and Oich are heavily influenced by SSE hydro generation and freshets. However, the canal also takes in water and key reason for entry of smolts into the canal is free passage, i.e. no screening to keep them out. Fish were seen to move between the river and canal and we hope to increase the number of receivers this year to learn more about these movements.

- **It was suggested by the floor that smolts have historically always been seen in the canal. Eric Verspoor suggested that migrations through still waters, especially large lochs like Loch Ness may be impacted by wind directions and it may be worth looking at How smolts migrate. In addition, could the Foyers pump storage facility be an issue?**

Mark Bilsby - We need to deploy more receivers in order to answer these questions, this is something the project will be doing in future years as it seems that the Ness is unique compared to other systems with large still waters being an obvious factor along with the canal.

- **Can Fish be stopped from entering the canal?**

Chris Conroy - Yes, non-physical barriers such as bubble screens may be an option, these create a curtain of bubbles which may deter fish from entering the canal. With regard to the Red John pump storage scheme, a smolt tracking study has been written into the agreement, this will enable us to track a sample of 100 smolts.

- **Is it possible to Trap and Truck Smolts?**

Mark Bilsby - This is already being done in some catchments.

Eric Verspoor - Smolts migrate in order to reach the sea when they are physiologically adapted so timing would be crucial as there could be an increase in mortality due to osmoregulation problems.

Chris Conroy – Yes, it is possible, but great care would be needed and more information on timing/adaptability would be required.

- **As last year was a relatively wet year, is it possible that smolt mortality could be worse in drier years?**

Chris Conroy - At the time of last year's smolt run, river levels were actually relatively low. However, the canal was closed due to maintenance works, so fewer fish may have entered than during a normal year.

Questions concerning hatcheries

- **Is there any chance that the River Ness can have its own Hatchery?**

Mark Bilsby - There is a need to find out where and why losses occur before a hatchery should be considered. It's believed that bird predation is the main cause because we see them but that may not be the case, it could be a water quality issue for example.

Eric Verspoor - Stocking isn't the answer in order to improve stocks. There are many questions that would need to be answered, such as finding out what stocking would actually do, where and why losses occur, these are all hard to predict or ascertain and there would be a need to evidence the need for a hatchery.

- **If we can clarify where smolts are lost i.e. within lochs or canal, would this give us justification for ranching or hatcheries?**

Chris Conroy - Scottish Government will not permit ranching in any way.

Michael Martin - Wanted to clarify that board is not against hatcheries, but there was a need for evidence to ascertain a need.

- **Legally what is to stop the angling club from buying land and building a hatchery?**

Chris Conroy - There is nothing to stop anyone from building a hatchery, but it's just a building, it is the operation of rearing and stocking fish that is regulated and makes it a hatchery.

- **So legally could we take fish and strip them for stocking?**

Chris Conroy - You would need a consent from the Scottish Government to catch and keep salmon during the close season and also a consent to stock out their progeny.

Other Questions

- **Is it time for mandatory catch and release nationally?**

Mark Bilsby - The key is informing people, voluntary catch and release is far better when it works. If this doesn't work then mandatory catch and release may be an option but this would require enforcement.

- **So, is the message getting across?**

Mark Bilsby - It's hard to argue against catch and release. There is a NASCO paper available which shows where stocks are sustainable. There is nowhere in the UK where stocks are sustainable and salmon are at risk in the majority of countries worldwide, it's not just a local or even national issue. It is time for people to really think hard about catch and release.

- **How can we, as club members do more?**

Chris Conroy - We hope to carry out more bird counts so any help would be welcomed there.

Mark Bilsby - We will be collecting scat for analysis from birds, mammals etc from many catchments so help would be required in the collection.

4. AOCB

AOCB was invited. Chris Conroy report that no requests of matters for consideration at this meeting had been received prior to the meeting. No further items were raised.

5. CLOSE

Michael Martin thanked the guest speaker Mark Bilsby – Chief Executive Officer for the Atlantic Salmon Trust, together with Chris Conroy and the rest of the Ness DSFB team. Finally, he thanked everyone for coming and wished them a successful fishing season.

THE MEETING CLOSED AT 21.45