

NESS DISTRICT SALMON FISHERY BOARD Annual Public Meeting Minutes

Time: 19:30

Date: 28th January 2016

Location: Kingsmills Suite, Inverness Caledonian Thistle Football Club

1. ATTENDANCE

The public meeting was attended by 32 individuals including representatives from Inverness Angling Club, UHI Rivers and Lochs Institute, Spey DSFB, Spey Foundation, Kyle DSFB, Ness-side Fishing, Ness Castle Lodges, CBEC Eco-Engineering, and Beauly Angling Club in addition to the Ness District Salmon Fishery Board and Ness & Beauly Fishery Trust. Representatives from the Scottish Government were scheduled to attend to discuss the Wild Fisheries Review, but had to cancel at the last minute due to train cancellations.

2. PRESENTATIONS

An introduction was followed by three presentations, each of which will be published on the NDSFB website (www.ness.dsfb.org.uk). The presentations were as follows:

1. Introduction

Andrew Duncan – Vice-Chairman, Ness District Salmon Fishery Board (NDSFB)

In the absence of Michael Martin (Chairman of the NDSFB) Andrew gave a brief welcome and introduction to the 2015 Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 15th May 2015. He thanked each of the sponsors (CBEC Ecoengineering, Ness Castle Lodges and Strutt and Parker), without whom the high-quality print productions would not have been possible.

2. "2015 – A Year in Review"

Chris Conroy – Director, NDSFB

Chris provided an overview of the activities of the Board over the previous year (including an analysis of the provisional rod catches for 2015) together with those planned for the forthcoming year.

3. "Ness and Beauly Fisheries Trust: Report on 2015 Activities"

Nick Barker – Senior Biologist, Ness and Beauly Fisheries Trust

Nick provided an overview of the activities of the Trust over the last year, in particular the results of their fish monitoring programmes.

4. "Wild Fisheries Reform"

Scottish Government, Wild Fisheries Reform Team

A Scottish Government representative was scheduled to provide a summary of the latest developments regarding the Wild Fisheries Reform Process. Unfortunately they had to cancel at the last minute due to train cancellations.

This item was therefore replaced with:

“2016 Conservation Regulations”

Andrew Duncan & Chris Conroy

Andrew Duncan provided background on the process that has taken place to date. Andrew stated that he felt that the Board and Trust had not been adequately consulted.

Chris Conroy described the details of the new conservation regulations and the specific implications for the Ness district. He explained how the Scottish Government had assessed the conservation status of each salmon district and the Ness DSFBs position regarding perceived problems and strategy going forward.

3. QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Questions after Presentation (1)

- *Question* - Were mortality rates of smolts high in the Garry Restoration Project?

Answer - Chris Conroy (NDSFB) confirmed that mortality to date had been higher than he would have liked. However, given that marine survival of smolts going to sea is poor (<5%), vast majority of the smolts leaving the Upper Garry will never return as adults. As such, any losses associated with the project will have a negligible effect on the number of naturally returning adult salmon. New safeguards will be in place for the 2016 season, including disease screening procedures.

- *Question* - Are pike an invasive species and what can be done about them?

Answer - Chris Conroy (Ness DSFB) explained that it is not clear whether pike are indigenous to the Ness District or not. Until genetic studies are carried out, the boundaries of their native range in Scotland will remain uncertain. It is believed that they may have been introduced by man, initially as a food source and more recently for sport and have been established in the Ness District for over a century. Anecdotal evidence suggests that populations may actually be quite small, with trout most likely taking more salmon smolts than pike.

Questions after Presentation (2)

- *Question* - What is the perceived wisdom on what is wrong with the Garry?

Answer - Nick Barker (NBFT) explained that there are a number of complex and interlinked factors at play including changes in land management, genetic interactions with Norwegian genes, problems with historical stocking practices and habitat loss associated with hydroelectric impoundments.

Questions and General Comments after Presentation (3)

- David Sutherland (Proprietor Ness Castle Lodges) commented that he had listened and decided to get involved because this seems to be one of the most ‘botched’ programmes he has seen. He said that he can see a cooperative process that can be followed. He explained that he and a number of other proprietors have decided to raise the issue separately from the Ness DSFB. They had met with a minister who was willing to agree that there are fundamentals that need to be revisited. David invited other proprietors, including the Inverness Angling Club, to come forward and join him in lobbying against this change.
- Neil Cameron (Chairman NBFT) expressed great concerns that this procedure and problem is not just restricted to the Moriston, the amount of work generated for the Boards and Trusts is concerning. A lot of the Beaulieu District is not prime spawning habitat either with its classification thought to be incorrect.
- Keith Williams (Kyle Fisheries) said there are other salmon districts that have been classified as ‘Category 1’, but every fishery is only ever one bad fishing year away from a different result. He would urge every fishery to ensure they have the data right. It is scandalous the way fishery boards have been treated. They have not engaged with the boards as competent authorities or even their own agencies.
- Through open discussion, a number of general questions and comments regarding the overall Wild Fisheries Reform Process were raised:
 - Was there any process for appeal?
 - How would this effect jobs, businesses, youth engagement?
 - Andrew Duncan (Ness DSFB) confirmed there has not been an appeal process yet.
 - They have tried to do a blanket approach, when it will not fit all.
 - Graham Mackenzie (IAC) asked– whether it would be possible to invite the scientists from Marine Scotland coming up here to see the Morrison and understand this river.
 - David Sutherland (Ness Castle) noted that the minister read out a letter from Marine Science that referred to the Ness and the Beaulieu as exemplar.
 - Given that the Scottish Government cancelled at the last minute, presumably they had a presentation. Please may we ask for a copy?
 - Should we invite them back? Is there an appetite. A show of hands was very positive.
 - Neil Cameron (Ness and Beaulieu Fisheries Trust) stated that he heard them present at the ASFB annual general meeting and the presentation was very disappointing.
 - Neil pointed that it is the scientists, not the civil servants that we want to hear from.
 - The Freshwater laboratory is there to provide information for the minister. It has never been designed to serve the individual catchments. As long as the mission remains the same, it will not serve other purposes.
 - Gordon Menzies (Loch Ness Proprietor) – how will this effect enforcement? Creating more workload and what will the fines be? Chris clarified that new regulations will be law and the Ness DSFB will be obliged to enforce it. Extra measures are being looked at swiftly including additional personnel and ownership of a boat.
 - David Sutherland (River Ness Proprietor) – we will have to look at the levy also, given ours is one of the highest in the country. It is not appropriate for us to pay for all of this scientific work for it to be ignored.
 - Should police Scotland not be more responsible?

- The Board still retains statutory duties.
- Anecdotally the Moriston catches are consistent.
- Is the ASFB not helping? Chris explained that there is a joint working group with ASFB/RAFTS that he sits on. This legislation has come in so quickly and it is so new, there has not been adequate time to discuss the issues.
- Why has this been brought in? Conservation limits have been around for some time. Many countries brought in measures based on universal systems. The fish lab recognised that there were significant differences in Scotland, such as the early or late running of fish. The problem is that the research that was required, in order to develop a more sophisticated model, has only just been recognised by the Scottish Government due to international pressure.

4. AOCB

Chris Conroy noted that, in response to our request for matters for consideration at this meeting, a proposal had been received from a member of the public for consideration of the installation of a fish counter in the River Ness.

Chris explained that the Ness has been included in a £150K Marine Scotland research project entitled “Technical, logistical and economic considerations for the development and implementation of a Scottish salmon counter network”. On the 8th October 2014 Ness Fishery Board staff accompanied representatives from Marine Scotland and specialists from ‘In-Stream Fisheries Research’, a specialist company based in North Vancouver, Canada, on a visit to the River Ness.

The final report from the research project has been subject to a number of delays; however we now expect to receive it in February. That said, and based on comments received during the site visit, it is unlikely that an economically viable solution will be possible on the Ness at the moment. This is due to the limitations of existing technology, the width of the river and the associated cost of installation.

CC pointed to another project to which the Ness DSFB is partner which explores the use of genetics to indicate the number of potential breeders. Alternative approaches to fish counters can be very precise. The challenge is to decide how to integrate this with other data such as catch data or surveys. Eric Verspoor (Director Rivers and Lochs Institute) who is leading this project explained that they have a PhD student starting just now to evaluate these potential methods.

Andrew Duncan thanked Chris Conroy and Nick Barker for their input to the Public Meeting. Andrew then thanked the Ness Board and NBFT including John, Chris, Billy and April for their work over the last year.

Andrew thanked everyone for coming and wished everyone a successful fishing season.

THE MEETING CLOSED AT 21.45