

‘Milestone’ bid to boost salmon’s future in River Ness

A blueprint is being launched next month to pinpoint potential threats to the habitat of wild Atlantic salmon in the River Ness and devise actions to counter a decline in fish numbers.

Ness District Salmon Fishery Board will deliver this major investigation into identifying what practical steps can be taken to protect and enhance this priority species of conservation interest.

“The survival of wild Atlantic salmon as a globally iconic species relies on them having a suitable environment for spawning and rearing their young”, said Chris Conroy, the Board’s River Director.

“The River Ness is renowned for its clean water, natural beauty and quality of its fishing, which attracts anglers from throughout the world, generates inward income and sustains hundreds of jobs. The river is the economic heart of the wider Ness catchment system.

“But Atlantic salmon catches have declined across their native range. Climate change is believed to be a key factor, along with changes in water and land management practices.

“Many believe that the survival of Scotland’s wild salmon is now at crisis point and we want to help. This milestone study will produce an action plan of measures to restore salmon habitats in the Ness which have degraded over time.”

The study is being funded by the Ness and Beaully Fisheries Trust who have given the Ness Salmon Board a full grant to produce a habitat restoration feasibility study.

“We’re starting with a survey of the physical and ecological condition of the river from Ness Weir downstream to the tidal limit in Inverness, a total of around eight kilometres”, explained Chris Conroy.

“This will show us the current state of play in the Ness and what has affected its condition over time.

“It will be followed by a field-based survey, conducted when river levels are low in mid-July, for which we have engaged Inverness-based water environment experts cbec eco-engineering. This survey will assess various factors affecting salmon habitats, including human impact.”

Chris Conroy added, "The third tool will be the creation of a series of maps of the river's present-day physical character. These will support any future habitat enhancement measures.

"Finally, the feasibility report will outline the influence of human pressures on the Ness over time – and identify actions which can improve the natural conditions for fish rearing and production.

"The quality of salmon habitat across the North Atlantic is under increasing pressure from human activities and climate change. This study will offer informed solutions towards countering the impacts in our local area. That's an important step forward for the future of the Ness and its celebrated fish."

cbec will liaise with key personnel at Dochfour, Ness Castle and Ness Side estates as well as Inverness Angling Club and some of the area's most experienced ghillies.

Dr. Hamish Moir, cbec's managing director and principal scientist, will lead the field-based survey. Having a PhD from the University of Aberdeen on the physical characteristics of Atlantic salmon spawning habitat, he has project managed habitat rehabilitation projects on river systems across Scotland, the rest of the UK, Ireland, the US and Norway.

"This is a challenging but fascinating assignment", said Hamish, "and we're grateful to the Ness Board for the opportunity to play our part in identifying ways to reduce barriers to fish migration, upstream spawning and juvenile habitat.

"The overall strategy is to identify planned and co-ordinated initiatives aimed at promoting a sustainable fishery in the Ness system."

All parts of the Ness restoration strategy are due to be completed by the end of the year.

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