

Cromarty Fisheries



THE CROMARTY FIRTH FISHERY BOARD MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL PUBLIC MEETING

Held at Torr Achilty on Friday 27th October 2017 at 11.30am

Present		In Attendance	
Ian Duncan (Chairman)	ID	Simon McKelvey (Director)	SM
Ronald Munro Ferguson (Novar Estate)	RMF	Edward Rush (Head Bailiff)	ER
Andrew Matheson (Cromarty Firth Fishery Trust Chairman)	AM	Saunders Campbell (Netsman)	SC
Okain McLennan (Loch Achonachie Angling Club)	OM	Hugh Cushnie (Dingwall & District Angling Club)	HC
Ian Paterson (Netsman)	IP	Iain McMyn (SSE)	IM
William Paterson (Netsman)	WP	James Ross (Netsman)	JR
Christina Pirie (Alness Angling Club)	CP	Sandra Skinner (Netsman)	SS
George Skinner (Netsman)	GS		
Dave Smith (Evanton Angling Club)	DS		
Dr. Alistair Stephen (SSE)	AS		
John Urquhart (Dingwall & District Angling Club)	JU		
Roddy d' Anyers Willis (Conon Fishing Syndicate)	RW		
Neil Wright (Clerk)	NW		

1	APOLOGIES	Action
	<p>Col Alastair Campbell (Vice Convener) The Earl of Aylesford (Scatwell Estate) Troels Barnhoi (Strathconon Estate) Gary Campbell (Netsman - Dochcarty) Lt Col Peter Hingston (Fairburn Estate) Andrew Humphries (Netsman - Lemlair) Ben Leyshon (SNH) Calum MacDonald (Contin Glebe, Blackwater) Lady Eliza Leslie Melville (Lochluichart Estate)</p>	
2	MINUTES OF THE MEETING 29TH June 2017	
	<p>ID opened the meeting and thanked the Board for electing him as Chairman for a further three years. he intimated that this is likely to be his last term as Chairman.</p> <p>ID summarised that many things have happened over the last three years but the primary objective remains constant; to protect salmon and sea trout stocks and the environment in which they live. Overall, we are looking after a sustainable stock of healthy fish in the rivers of the Cromarty firth and heading out to sea.</p> <p>The minutes of the meeting on 29th June are more comprehensive than previous sets of minutes as they are almost verbatim and were taken from a recording of the meeting. Future sets of minutes will revert to a summary format, but will be produced in the knowledge that a recording of the meeting would be available should clarification of a point prove necessary.</p> <p>There were no comments on the minutes and they were approved by the Board.</p>	
3	MATTERS ARISING	
	<p>ID opened the floor to any extra agenda items or comments. None were received.</p>	
4	FINANCIAL UPDATE	
	<p>ID noted that the financial statements for the year ended 30th April 2017 had not been signed at the last Board meeting as they had not been completed. The finalised financial statements were subsequently signed on the 15th of August with no material changes from the draft set presented at the June meeting.</p> <p>The poor preparation of the financial statement by Galbraith brought to light the need to review the accounting procedures. Galbraith had centralised its accounting service to Stirling a year ago and they had previously completed the financial statements which they admitted they were no longer willing to provide following the relocation to Stirling. As a consequence it was agreed with Galbraith that provision of the bookkeeping service to the Board would be moved to another service provider. MOATS in Dingwall (now known as Mackay & Co) have been selected. The Clerk's role will remain with Galbraith and a three year fee structure is in the process of being agreed. Galbraith will work with Mackay & Co to effect a smooth hand over.</p> <p>[Post meeting note - declaration of interest. ID employs MOATS to undertake basic bookkeeping services for his own business interests at Kildermorie.]</p> <p>AS commented that it could be difficult to change the purchase order</p>	

	<p>for the SSE work to a new accounting practice. Both ID and NW suggested that the purchase order could still be issued to Galbraith, care of the Clerk. Assessments will still be raised by the Clerk but the invoices will be produced by Mackay & Co.</p> <p>ID ran through the September accounts and noted that £20,000 was received from the Trust which was technically due in the prior year's account. This receipt is noted as a post balance sheet event in the financial year end statements and should not happen again at the end of the current year, but it does appear as if the income is ahead of budget by £20,000 when that is not the case. The other element of note is under wages, where there is an underspend of £10,000. There are two reasons for this; firstly payment of salary increases was delayed while they were agreed (but payment will be back dated) and secondly, one member of staff's wages has been budgeted twice: once under wages and then again under Trust funded Projects. This will provide the Board with a little bit of a cushion as we go into the second half of the year. The bank balance as of the 27th October was £60,900.21.</p> <p>SM added that the river bank maintenance costs were high as this included the wages for a seasonal member of staff and materials.</p>	
5	DIRECTOR'S REPORT	
	<p>SM ran through his report, which is appended to these minutes. The Conon rod catch figures over the last 17 years show that numbers have been consistent and are standing up well when compared to other rivers. The estimate for the 2017 catch will be in the region of one thousand one hundred and sixty compared with the ten year average of one thousand two hundred and thirty six. The Tweed has caught around five thousand five hundred salmon this year compared with their ten year average of thirteen thousand eight hundred and sixty. The Tay appear likely to coming in at under four thousand compared with a ten year average of nine thousand.</p> <p>The latter part of the grilse run simply did not appear. We are in a changeover period where there will be more multi sea winter fish and therefore more spring fish, but fewer grilse. It may take some time for this change to become established. The Meig counter has gone from around two hundred fish to four hundred fish this year, which would suggest that multi sea winter fish are able to get up the Meig earlier in the season. This is also being reflected in the Torr Achilty counter.</p> <p>Stock indicators across the system and rod catch figures suggest the system is holding up fairly well and the multi sea wintered stock is rising. However, the Blackwater catch has been disappointing for the last few years and this is most likely to do with the grilse stock declining. The decline is not to do with declining juvenile stock in the river, as it does not look as if this stock has declined, as evidenced by electro fishing.</p> <p>To manage stocks effectively there is a principle called the portfolio system of management. Marine and other impacts affect different stocks in different areas and at different times. The safest way to manage a salmon stock is to diversify the portfolio. To achieve this the stocks need to have access to as much of the habitat as possible, maintain the genetic diversity and restore the resilience of the habitat.</p>	

As discussed previously, the possibility of smolt trapping at Meig could increase the smolt run by a factor of up to six times per individual smolt transported. The Orrin is possibly even worse and improvement in both of these would help the Conon system. The nutrient research carried out by Glasgow University demonstrated how important nutrients are to the system. In streams that were stocked and where nutrients were added, more families survived than if nutrients had not been added. There has been a lot of work done with the Forestry Commission and there is a lot more work that can be done to improve habitat and riparian woodland. This is a key issue to retaining nutrients in the upper reaches of habitats.

On the Alness there isn't the hydro interaction but there are major land use and habitat issues. The rod catch is driven by water flow and angling effort. Where the habitat is good the fish are present, which is demonstrated through electro fishing. It is believed that the catch is predicated in fishing conditions rather than stock on the Alness. There are habitat issues and it has been found that fish struggle to get into the headwaters during droughts but the fish can get up in wet years. There are things that can be done to improve fishing on the Alness and there are 58 man-made structures below Loch Morie which change the habitat; some are beneficial to fishing but others may be causing issues for spawning habitat. The other issue with the Alness is the spate duration; it tends to be quick and dirty. One way to help with this is to restore peatland and forestry drainage, along with restoring native woodland along the river, which will help slow down the release of water.

The Alness weir is also not working properly, mainly due to the pool below the weir being washed out. Diageo has agreed to get a fish pass expert to look at the weir; improvements may allow a fish pass and possibly even a fish counter to be installed. All options will be explored.

Other aspects touched upon in the Director's report included: Biosecurity has now become more pressing with the recent pink salmon issues (see later in these minutes). Education and the angling programme remains an important element for the Board and continues to grow in strength. The research of the Board has been supported by the Trust and remains an important aspect of the Board and the improvement of the river systems.

The Board discussed the late grilse run and the fact that only a small percentage of spring fish were returning. This phenomenon was happening all over Scotland and it has been proven that it takes time for a grilse run to turn into a spring run. The Tweed has been able to demonstrate that there have been these changes before and the number of multi seas winter fish and grilse is much smaller. Global warming will also be playing its part as changes occur, for instance the food source for fish is moving further north.

Pink salmon have been reported in the Cromarty district and over two hundred have been reported in the UK this year. Invasive species have never usually had a good outcome but the timing of spawning of pink salmon is different to that of Atlantic salmon as this occurs much earlier, meaning Atlantic salmon can cut redds over the top of former pink salmon redds. One concern with pink salmon is that they die after spawning and this could increase fungal spores in the river systems just as the Atlantic salmon get ready for spawning. Juvenile pink salmon drop out to sea very shortly after hatching and

	<p>will not likely interact with native species. It is unlikely that the impact will be understood for two years, which is the life cycle of pink salmon.</p>	
6	HYDRO REPORT	
	<p>AS reported that SSE have been working with the Board to find a way of improving the smolt runs at Meig. The losses of smolts needs to be put into context as to what is normally lost going through natural lochs. Acoustic tracking has been carried out in Loch Garve, which has no hydro dam, and Loch Achonachie, which does have a hydro dam. 16% per kilometre of smolts are lost in Loch Garve compared with 32% in impounded lochs. This means in total about 35% of the fish are lost in Loch Garve along its length. The main reason for the loss is predation by pike and trout.</p> <p>It was noted that the man-made structures on the Alness will have a detrimental impact on smolts in drier weather as there is greater predation within the pools.</p> <p>On the Meig, SSE has been working with the Board, Strathconon Estate and SEPA to look at fitting a trap system. SSE does not have any statutory obligations to do this but they are willing to assist. However, SEPA have downgraded the area above the Orrin and the smolts will have to be trapped and trucked below the dam. On the Meig louvre screen pass will be looked at and the feasibility of installing an acoustic barrier and possibly even a light screen investigated. It is likely that this will take a year or two and various Universities will be invited to assist with research and design.</p> <p>It is estimated that around fourteen thousand smolts are produced above the Meig and this year they came out of the river in a block due to weather conditions, with them mainly travelling at night. The pit tagging work shows that early running smolts had a better success rate than late running smolts. It was also found that if they had not left the reservoir within 48 hours they would be lost.</p> <p>SSE has eighteen counters across the country and they are all showing the same pattern with good numbers of fish returning until June and then it tails off. On the west coast there have been very few fish.</p> <p>A number of Board members expressed concern that the water levels of the Conon fluctuated considerably over the season due to releases from the Dam. This unsettled the fish and AS was asked to comment. AS explained that the way in which the energy market operates is changing significantly due to a significant increase in the amount of energy produced by wind. AS explained that SSE is now trying to manage the production of electricity in a slightly different way than previously – in an attempt to offset the wind from the hydro generation. In the past when there was little of no wind power SSE tended to generate hard when it was raining. Now with so much “must take” wind generation there is not enough capacity on the transmission grid to allow wind and large hydro on at the same time. Hydro tends to be “constrained” and if the reservoir levels do not allow effective storage, then water spill will take place. To try and avoid this SSE is intending to reduce levels in its major storage reservoirs to a lower level than in the past so that when Atlantic weather fronts arrive – renewable energy will be provided initially by the wind farms and then as the wind drops the hydro will generate. The other change that has taken place is the lack of peak generation</p>	

	<p>at lunchtime in the summer as previously had been the case. This is because of the vast increase in energy produced by solar farms – there is no longer a demand for hydro to fill the lunchtime peak demand. AS explained that neither of the above alterations to generation should have caused the problems reported. AS asked the Board members to provide dates and times of fish being caught; this can then be checked against the SEPA gauging station. RW and OM agreed to provide AS with the data required.</p> <p>AS commented that the Atlantic Salmon Trust want to carry out another acoustic tracking project in two years' time. This would involve the Conon along with Kyle of Sutherland, Beauly, Ness and Spey systems. An acoustic array would be established in the inner and outer Moray firth. The last project was very successful and demonstrated that the majority of smolt losses were within the river and not out at sea. Although there is not much that can be done for smolt survival out at sea, it has been suggested that smolt shepherding could be undertaken. This might include reduced sea fishing in a certain area if routes and timings of the smolt run can be predicted. The cost of the project will be in the region of £1,500,000.</p> <p>The Dee carried out a tracking project to determine where the loss of its smolts was happening as it was suspected that it could have been in the harbour. It was found that 35% of smolts were being lost before they left the river. It would appear that seals have had little impact, however, there are a few resident seals that will take salmon and when these are removed, it helps the salmon runs but they are a minority and this is why the Board was able to get a licence for removing the problem seals.</p>	
7	TRUST REPORT	
	<p>AM ran through the trust report and commented that there had been problems with the financial statements for the year end, which were produced by Brodies. The team at Brodies has gone through a number of changes and the errors were corrected, with Brodies assuring the Trust that this will not happen again.</p> <p>The invested fund has grown to £391,000 which demonstrates a good investment performance. It has produced around £12,000 each year and this is being use for projects and research to support the Board.</p> <p>AM noted that he intended to retire from the Chair at the next Trustees meeting in June 2018.</p> <p>ID thanked AM for all his work with the Trust.</p>	
8	RIVER CATAGORISATION	
	<p>The Scottish Government has provisionally re-classified Scottish rivers again for 2018. There was a consultation period and an appeal paper was submitted to Marine Scotland by the Board for the River Alness which has been proposed as Category 3, along with the Allt Graad and the Balnagown (which was already a Category 3). The Conon has been downgraded to Category 2.</p> <p>Rodger Dowsett provided excellent data for the response to the consultation paper on behalf of the Alness, which argued that the rod catch is not directly linked to the number of fish in the river but is more to do with the fishing conditions and water flow. ID wished to thank Rodger for his work and the fact based evidence that he</p>	

	<p>produced.</p> <p>CP enquired why the Alness hatchery was not being used to re-stock the river. SM responded that the hatchery is being used to stock areas that fish are not able to get to because of man-made obstacles. The electro fishing data shows that there is a good stock of juvenile fish in most of the river and where salmon are able to get to naturally, stocking would not be appropriate. The rod catch has gone down on the Alness but it is not due to a lack of fish but a lack of good fishing conditions and this is the argument that has been made to Marine Scotland.</p> <p>AS commented that the calculation for the hypothetical number of fish returning to the rivers is based on the rod catch and the wetted area of the river. This is seen to be a flawed calculation as it does not take into account areas that are not ideal habitat. The Beaully has been graded as 3 but the SSE counter shows 4,000 fish returning. Due to categorisation there could be a downward helix on the rod catches if rivers are downgraded and fishing restricted. ID commented that a better, fact-based system needs to be developed.</p> <p>AS suggested that the Angling clubs should write to Rosanna Cunningham and explain the detrimental impact it will have on the club's membership and junior angling. OM and CP agreed that they would write to Rosanna Cunningham and also try to get individual members to write.</p> <p>SC commented that he was concerned that the brood stock are not being caught early enough as the numbers last year were very low. A general discussion was had surrounding the timing of brood stock capture. It was noted that there are a lot of fish being caught and some of the fish have fungus on them; any infected fish are isolated from the rest to slow any spread of infection. Malachite Green can no longer be used and industrial salt is going to be tried this year as an experiment to see if it slows the spread of infection. Smooth plastic tanks are now used instead of the concrete and mesh tanks as they were very hard on the fish which increases damage and fungus.</p>	
9	CONSERVATION POLICY	
	<p>ID suggested that the conservation policy for the Board needed to reflect the present state of fishing and the categorisations that have been proposed. Assuming the appeal to the consultation paper for the Alness is successful, all rivers would be Category 2 except the Balnagown. The coastal netting station position is known and the estuary netting will now be classed as the same as the river (ie if the river is a category 2, so will the estuary netting be a 2). The Board needs to come up with a policy that it can defend publicly. There is an argument that no fish should be kept but considering angling club membership and the ability to keep a fish (even if you don't) is an important part of human nature, it was recommended that the policy should be one fish per season and the tagging system be re-introduced. However, He commented that the Board is open to alternative ideas, but we need to be able to defend any policy adopted.</p> <p>A general discussion ensued and it was agreed that most members would only take one fish. It was suggested that the Board's policy should be to aim for a release rate of not less than 90% with only one fish being kept. Going to one fish from six (or even four) was seen by some as being too punitive. Novar Estate and the LAAC</p>	

	<p>noted that day tickets are an important element of their income and if day ticket holders are not able to keep a fish, it could affect their income but also might mean that clubs will lose membership.</p> <p>SS explained that, in her opinion, the netting moratorium is not a moratorium but a ban. To change the ban would need to be put through Parliament to turn it around. ID responded that Rosanna Cunningham has confirmed that the Government is committed to reviewing the moratorium after 3 years.</p> <p>CP explained that the AAC had a meeting at the end of the season and they are now down to one hundred members, which only a few years ago was one hundred and fifty members with twenty people on a waiting list. If members were allowed to keep one fish it would be the incentive needed to retain membership.</p> <p>The Board elected to propose the following to members: two fish per season and two fish per season for weekly tickets – a maximum of one per week; day tickets will be able to keep one fish per season. A tagging scheme will be re-introduced to comply with the number of fish allowed. A draft conservation policy based on the proposed terms will be circulated to Board members for discussion, particularly at angling club AGMs, with the wording of the Conservation policy stressing that we will 'aim' for full catch and release. A Board meeting on the 16th February has been called to discuss and agree the Conservation policy; this date will allow fishing club members to have held their AGMs and discuss the policy.</p>	
10	WILD FISHERY REFORM UPDATE	
	SM explained that there is not much to report with the reform apart from some bailiff training.	
11	ASSESSMENTS FOR 2017	
	The rate in the £ has been reduced to .90p and only a half year Assessment was raised in order to allow members to appeal against their revised rateable values. Some appeals have been lodged but none have yet been heard. It was proposed that the Assessments for the second half of the year would be raised, also at .90p in the £. ID proposed that, due to the appeals, some Assessments may change and the Board members were asked to allow the Board to alter the rate in the £ in order to keep the aggregate Assessment income level the same. OM agreed that this was sensible as the Board only collected what it budgeted and needed to operate. There were no objections to the proposal.	
12	NETTING	
	<p>IP read out a prepared statement and thanked the Chairman for adding Netting to the Agenda.</p> <p>IP commented that compensation for netsmen was being offered but the Scottish Government has made a mistake with the payments. Some owners who are also tenants of the Boards stations have been paid for both. Simon Dryden of Marine Scotland Science has confirmed that the principle should be that the compensation is paid to the owner. This has affected the Cromarty netting stations as some of the tenants have been paid but the error was spotted and it means that Jim Ross, who is a tenant of IP and the Board has not received his compensation for the Rockfield Netting station. IP confirmed that he has passed on the compensation for Wilkhaven & the Castle to Jim Ross as he was suffering the economic loss and he</p>	

	<p>would like the Board to do the same once it receives the compensation. Further in calculating the amount of compensation to be paid, the Government has also mistaken the base period. Rosanna Cunningham confirmed that it would be the last 3 years prior to the moratorium; however, up until now it has been based on 2012 to 2014. This missed out 2015 which was the last year of fishing. Simon Dryden has accepted this principle going forward.</p> <p>ID responded to IP's explanation of the situation and confirmed that it would be fair for the Board to pass compensation to the tenant involved as the compensation is meant to compensate for economic loss. However, as compensation is being paid for the economic loss it would also be fair for the Board to deduct Assessments due to the Board from this amount; the analogy being wind farms having to continue to pay out all rates and community funds even when they are compensated not to produce electricity. Looking at the 2003 Act the Board needs to raise an equal Assessment to all proprietors and it would only be fair for the Board to collect Assessments from anyone who receives compensation. IP confirmed that this would be acceptable and there were no objections.</p> <p>SS commented that she believes the compensation calculations have not been fair or transparent.</p>	
11	AOCB	
	<p>CP advised that the large tree root was still stuck in the Alness weir and needed to be removed. The AAC also held a recent meeting at which it was reported that Police Scotland will not act against anyone who is illegally fishing. ER commented that this was in the context of pink salmon and not Atlantic salmon. There is a loop hole as people can fish for and take pink salmon and it will hard to prove they are not.</p> <p>There was further discussion regarding the powers of Bailiffs.</p> <p>NW noted that a letter and map book would be sent out to proprietors and tenants over the next month or so, which would ask everyone to mark on the map salmon Fishings that are owned or tenanted. This will allow the Board to keep a map based record of all Fishings. It is a statutory requirement for the Board to keep a list of all Fishings and proprietors and this will ensure that there are no gaps. It will also assist SM and ER when they are electro fishing. The intent is to capture not just the active Fishings but also the burns, spawning grounds and upland water catchments. If proprietors have confirmation from the Crown Estate that the salmon rights are owned and not being contested, we would ask them to confirm this. Salmon rights are vested in the Crown until they are sold or if the proprietor can demonstrate certain requirements such as active fishing for salmon continuously over a minimum number of year and the right is contained within the title.</p> <p>WP commented that seals have been causing problems with netting and they were present up at the Armidale project but the Scottish Government would not allow them to be shot. This is a station that could have caught around three thousand fish in the past. The Board needs to address the situation with the Scottish Government. SS suggested that a campaign could be launched to help. SM confirmed that this has already been done but public perception of any killing of seals is an issue.</p>	

	SC ran through his concerns regarding the hatchery and Loch na Croic trap. SM explained in drought conditions fish were reluctant to enter the trap and would look for spawning gravel in the Loch na Croic burn, adjacent to the trap. SC accepted this response.	
12	DATE OF NEXT MEETINGS	
	Friday 16 th February and Friday 29 th June, both at Torr Achilty Power Station.	