

NITH DISTRICT SALMON FISHERY BOARD
MINUTES OF
BOARD MEETING
ON
19 JANUARY 2021 AT 10.00AM
CONVENED BY ZOOM BECAUSE OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC

PRESENT

Percy Weatherall – Chairman
Richard Gladwin
David Kempself – Dumfries and Galloway Angling Association
Peter Landale – Dalswinton Estate
Raymond Mundel – Dumfries and Galloway Angling Association
Peter Hutchison – Douglas Hall Fishery
Anna Ferguson – Buccleuch Estate
Robbie Cowan – Caerlaverock Estate
Thomas Florey
Nick Wright
John Charteris – Dumfries & Galloway Council

IN ATTENDANCE

Roderick Styles – Clerk
James Henderson – Fishery Director (FD)
Debbie Park – Fishery Biologist (FB)

The Chairman welcomed all present and hoped that the next meeting that would be had could possibly be convened in person.

1. APOLOGIES

Tom Brown

2. DECLARATION OF FINANCIAL INTERESTS

The Clerk explained the meaning of having to make the declaration. No declarations were made.

3. BOARD MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF 14 JANUARY 2020

The Clerk explained that this was the last full Board Meeting held, the previous meeting scheduled for August 2020 had been abandoned as *incomplete*. That meeting had also dealt with the Annual Meeting of Qualified Proprietors and the Annual Public Meeting for which there were Minutes, which would be published in due course.

4. MATTERS ARISING

None.

5. BUDGET & CLERK'S NOTES

The Clerk spoke to the Budget making mention of the excellent figures appearing in Consultancy Income for which the Fishery Director and the Fishery Biologist were to be congratulated. The Consultancy Income had risen by £40,000.

The Clerk drew attention to his Notes highlighting movement of elements of expenditure, generally not great and some downwards as a consequence of steps taken by the Board and FD to rationalise expenses.

The Clerk pointed out the funds held at Bank and Building Society Account as at close of business.

The Chairman spoke about the Notes and the Budget and made mention of the fact that the rate in the pound would have to be determined in connection with the Assessments for the forthcoming year. His initial view was to propose the same rate in the pound as last year to provide a refund of approximately £85,000 to Proprietors.

David Kempself was thankful for the proposal that the rate in the pound should remain the same.

The Chairman asked if Catch Statistic Returns had improved last year and if this had given rise to an improvement in the fishery income.

David Kempself advised that membership for Dumfries & Galloway Angling Association remains the same but visitor numbers are down slightly because of Covid-19. Membership is under 92 and it used to be 360. Catches were improved, which is always a good thing.

Peter Landale commented that while Catch Statistics had improved there would need to be a quadrupling of catches back to 2012 level before there could be an improvement in income. He stated that the Board would need to keep an eye on bringing in money from other sources. Four to five times the number of fish caught would generate more income before we could rely upon income demand from fishing.

Peter Hutchison commented that Catch Statistics Records could be wrong or should be normalised taking into account fishing efforts. While gross Catch Statistic Records were informative, Marine Scotland is now asking for more recording of rod days on river systems to try to provide a more accurate figure.

6. The Rate in the Pound

Richard Gladwin spoke as a private Proprietor having been crushed in connection with the lack of income generated from fishing. English and other visitors from further afield had been unable to attend for fishing. If ever there was a year that it was required to subsidise angling, now was the time. Hopefully after Covid and vaccination numbers of visitors will increase. He would prefer that the subsidy refund to Proprietors was bigger this year.

The Chairman responded that he would be loathed to increase the refund in such unpredictable times. Richard Gladwin reiterated his position.

Peter Landale expressed sympathy for Richard Gladwin's position, he being in the same position. However, the West Coast Tracking Project was coming down the line. If the plan of the Board is to provide for refund then the Board needed to have a strategic review in connection with the business that it was conducting. If the Board is to sustain and improve the River then the Board must hold steady and then look at matters in connection with refund and increase of it after the Covid-19 Pandemic had settled down.

It is inevitable that there will be modern funding models coming forward through Scottish Government, most likely directed to environmental and habitat improvement work and the Board would need to show that it had the technical infrastructure in place to implement such programmes before it could benefit from the funding.

David Kempself expressed sympathy with Richard Gladwin's view. He stated that while the River is worth saving and stocks of fish need to be looked after, Proprietors have to be looked after as well.

Peter Hutchison stated that in his view the Board had a fiduciary duty to look after its Proprietors. The Chairman asked the Clerk for his views on this point.

The Clerk stated that the position of the Board was governed by Fishery Legislation and generally speaking its duties were to preserve and protect the Fishery. From a strictly technical standpoint that did not mean that the Board was there to protect Proprietors.

Peter Landale stated that Marine Scotland is having a strategic review and it was recognised that salmon fishing was in crisis which was a major step forward. Unfortunately, the person dealing with the crisis management of salmon and proposed funding models had cancer. Future funding is a conversation going round and round. Peter Landale believed that following the Chairman's recommendation would be useful but in the meantime the Board should try to find what is happening in the hope that more funding from the Scottish Government would come through, probably through habitat restoration projects.

David Kempself from Dumfries & Galloway Angling Association proposed a rate in the pound and refund to match last year's rate and refund.

There was much discussion amongst Board Members about future funding. Peter Hutchison supported the Budget and the rate in the pound as the same as last year. The Chairman then asked for approval and it was established that the rate in the pound would be fixed at £1.57 and the refund to Proprietors of Assessments would remain the same as last year i.e. circa £85,000.

7. Covid-19 Update

FD stated that fishing was allowed in the current circumstances but with social distancing. Travelling into and from the Region was not permitted currently but it was to be hoped that not before too long anglers would be able to return to the River. The restrictions would be likely to have an impact upon the Opening Ceremony and the Sea Trout Festival. Two anglers can fish but have to socially distance. Hopefully, the season will not be as restricted for Members and for visitors as it was last season. Visitors from as far away as the Rive Wye had been keen to book up fishing in September and had heard that the Nith had fished better last year.

8. River Report

The Chairman pointed through the River Report that had been circulated and asked FD to speak to it.

FD reported a 98% Catch Return had been made but that he was still waiting for some Returns.

D&G Angling Association had a comparatively good season as had D&G Council's Common Good Fishings, which was good news.

Best months appeared to have been in July and August rather than towards the Autumn. Sea Trout numbers were down due to people not fishing because of Covid-19 restrictions at the appropriate time.

In catching brood stock FD had found fish to be plentiful. It had proved difficult to catch mink because there had been so many salmon carcasses after spawning.

Over the year FD had been working with FB on consultancy work which had been deemed to be essential work, especially involving Network Rail where there had been bank subsidence in the vicinity of railway tracks and reinstatement works were required. FD had worked right through lockdown falling full Covid protocols. Other river systems had struggled to carry out work during the lockdown. Civil Engineering works still continued. FD asked for comments and questions on the Quarterly Report.

Thomas Florey asked what SEPA's involvement had been in connection with any aspect of work that they would ordinarily carry out having regard to Covid-19 lockdown.

FD responded that SEPA staff were severely restricted and were not allowed out into the field. Board Staff had dealt with two pollution incidents involving spillage of heating oil into the Crawick Water which had been traced and dealt with. Heating oil is light and floats. It looked dreadful in the water but had floated off in high water. There had been no damage to the Fishery. The escape had been traced back to the properties involved and advice had been given to the proprietors to site straw bales in the watercourses leading to the Crawick Water with a view to trapping and catching the oil and thereafter disposing of the bales. The incident had been reported to SEPA. They had at that time been under cyber-attack with their systems having been affected by ransomware and they were not in a position either to communicate

by electronic means or be allowed out to inspect pollution incidents. This applied all over Scotland.

Thomas Florey asked if the Board might charge SEPA for the work that it had carried out on behalf of SEPA. FD responded that he was happy to continue to do the best for the River without charge.

Peter Landale asked for a report on Catches for the season. FD responded that he still needed some Catch Statistic Returns but when they were finally in he would circulate the Board Members with complete Catch Statistic Return.

9. Nith & West Coast Salmon Tracking Project –

FD referred to a slide show and spoke to its content. There would be two smolt tracking projects for the River Nith for this year, one with Atlantic Salmon Trust to track the pathway of smolts coming down the River Nith to be trapped in the Auldgirth area and to be tracked down the river from that point at four sites to the sea.

The second smolt tracking project will run concurrently and will commence much higher up the river system.

FD reported on the location of various points where tracking would take place. The lower four sites that he displayed showed where the AST/Marine Scotland project will site its monitoring station.

Upstream there would be four further sites for the project funded by the Regional Community Funds Project. Trapping would be carried out on the Crawick and Menzies Waters using Fyke nets. Funding for this was coming from the Region Wide Coastal Project and the Holywood Trust. In combination these two projects could highlight areas within the river creating potential difficulties for smolts. The Region Wide Coastal Community Project would fund 50 tags which have to be surgically inserted into the body cavity of each smolt. A rotary screw trap will be used at Blackwood to capture a further 100 smolts for tracking. The progress of the smolts would be monitored until they left the Nith Catchment and would be tracked thereafter at sea up the west coast of Scotland.

River Bladnoch will also trap smolts and use the same project methodology. Tracking will take place up the west coast of Scotland to be followed by the West Coast Smolt Tracking Project to try to find in which direction smolts travel after they left the river system. FD reported that he considered that it was a fantastic science to be able to help salmon management in the future. FD asked for questions for himself or Peter Landale, who as the Board's Member on Fishery Management Services and Atlantic Salmon Trust had considerable knowledge of the West Coast Salmon Tracking Project.

The Chairman advised of the new employee, Andrew Gillan, who will be assisting in connection with the project with funding supplied for the two schemes. FD and FB have undergone training. A course in fish surgery had to be undertaken by both FD and FB soon.

FD advised that in order to be able to get the benefit of bulk buying of salmon tags and similar equipment it would be necessary to pay for them prior to the grant funding coming through from the two project sources. He asked for permission for the Board to cover the cost of it obtaining tags, equipment and for similar projects in the future where there were completely grant aided by way of an interim loan before the grant aid could be claimed and collected to refund the loan. The funding sources were reliable so, the amount borrowed would be repaid. It was agreed that this was a reasonable practice.

Peter Landale referred to the booklet that he asked to be circulated entitled “Salmon in Hot Water” and spoke to the Moray Firth Project in respect of which 50% of the smolts had been lost.

Data from the Crawick Water would be really useful. It was apparent that the larger smolts were the better the survival rate for them was when they migrated to sea. It would be useful to find out why smolts were generally speaking becoming smaller and what is causing this. The results would allow the Board to gear its management project accordingly.

There will be acoustic sonar buoys located from Malin Head to Mull. Because the Nith has the technical infrastructure in place at the moment it can participate in the project. Very few other rivers in the Solway have the infrastructure to be able to carry the project forward. Peter Landale spoke to a hypothesis that he had that the Dumfries Caul is a major problem for Nith smolts.

10. Avian Predators

FD advised that the Nith Board was one of four in Scotland (Dee, Spey and the Tweed being the others) to supply Goosanders and Cormorants to Scottish Government for gut analysis to determine whether or not there was increase in predation on salmonids. FD had fulfilled the requirement for supplying birds for gut analysis during 2020. FD had draft provisional data reports and the gut contents had resulted mostly showing sea fish species. Covid lockdown had interfered with the ability to be able to supply all of the carcasses. Some Cormorants shot on the lower part of the River System and 100% sea fish in their gut. Goosanders and Cormorants were showing more salmonid species within them. The data had been compared with data supplied by the Nith System in 1995. The correlation of species of fish within gut analysis is more or less the same. Of particular relevance is that it has been estimated that the average size of smolt carcasses had reduced in size by approximately 5mm a worrying but currently inexplicable trend, possibly arising out of thermal stress.

In the Spey and Dee larger percentages of salmonids had been found in gut analysis but these rivers have no other fish species present.

Peter Landale stated that the unknown factor is climate change. Scottish Government is beginning to recognise that by declaring salmon in crisis there are steps that might have to take place. There may be different things that can be done by management

to mitigate the damage. The results of this type of project will be helpful in trying to deal with the management.

11. UPPER NITH SEPA PROJECT

The Chairman introduced the subject, referred to the correspondence circulated by the Clerk and advised that he thought that Board Members would be fully informed. The Clerk and FD had monitored the position closely. The 2020 phase of the project had over run resulting in works being carried out on site during salmon spawning times which had given rise to concern in connection with flooding and damage to the River System. The Chairman took the view that the angle that the Board had to take would be what could be done in the future to prevent it happening again. A Zoom meeting had been arranged with SEPA to raise concerns and to seek reassurances.

FD agreed with the Chairman's summary and aims. The Board's neutral stance allowed it to make representation on behalf of the Board. Peter Landale stated that this was the largest amount of money spent on a River Restoration Project in Europe. In his opinion the funding model for the River Restoration Project had been wrong. It should have come to the Board for the Board to carry out and supervise the work. However, given it was a project to enhance the whole of the River Nith System, Peter Landale took the view rather than the Board being obstructive it should be participating fully with SEPA in connection with trying to make the project work to the best of its ability. There was real benefit to be gained for the salmon fishery for the River Nith. As a consequence of the flood banks being repositioned greater habitat would be created for the benefit of the salmon within the river system.

The Clerk commented that on the basis of the information supplied thus far in connection with the project it was questionable as to whether or not there would be any benefit for the salmon fishery under the Board's jurisdiction from the work being carried out and that in fact there could be detriment to the salmon fishery, given the work methodology used by SEPA, particularly in relation to it having breached its own protocols in connection with when work could be carried out in the river. The work being carried out had strayed into salmon spawning season because the project had been delayed, giving rise to the potential for real damage to the river system and salmonids within it. It was difficult to know how the project could benefit salmon fisheries in any way. The primary aim of the project was to mitigate flood risk for areas further up the river. Nothing revealed from the information supplied by SEPA indicated that there would be any habitat enhancement work carried out, any tree planting carried out, any fencing erected to create habitat corridors or any other form of improvement that could create benefit for salmon fishery. These were points that needed to be asked of SEPA in connection with any potential benefit of this project for salmon fisheries. It was to be hoped that information could be supplied at the forthcoming Zoom meeting with SEPA.

12. AOB

Trust Project:-

(a) Smolt Tracking

(b) Fishing for the Future with Nith Young Anglers

FB reported that funding was in place for both projects. It was to be hoped to take matters to classrooms later in the year after restrictions had been lifted. FB was preparing materials for schools for both projects.

Peter Landale observed that opening on 25 February was going to be very difficult. He also noted the proposed operation of catching smolts which would take place later in the year and suggested that a limited opening day at a smolt trap as public relations exercise might be useful.

FD responded that he was gearing up for just such publicity. TV, camera and video equipment would be present to film the smolt trapping project and editing software to cover the project had been acquired.

David Kempself asked if the video could ultimately be circulated and put on the D&GAA Website. FD agreed that when the video was made available it would be pushed hard through social media and would appear on the Board's Website.

David Kempself pointed out that the foot bridge at Carnsalloch giving access to parts of the fishings and for the public to walk over was in danger of being washed away. He had contacted Dumfries & Galloway Council who would send out an Inspector to obtain information. The Bridge forms part of core footpath and is arguably therefore the responsibility of the Council to maintain.

Robbie Cowan updated on haaf netting operations, the fact that the River was in Category 3 for catch and release and that this has had an effect on haaf netting. There had been a decrease in the number of tickets taken. There had been talk from Annan and other netters seeking a Kill Licence given the historic nature of the fishery. Robbie Cowan advised that Caerlaverock Estate was not supportive of this. Whilst he supported the goal of keeping haaf netting alive, he had serious concerns for the future numbers of fish. Caerlaverock Estate would be putting in place a conservation plan to adopt Fishery Board Policy on conservation. Raymond Mundell congratulated Robbie Cowan on the Caerlaverock Estate's proposal, which was endorsed by those present.

The meeting thereafter closed.