

MINUTES OF THE FIRST ANNUAL MEETING

of

HELMSDALE DISTRICT SALMON FISHERY BOARD

held at Kildonan Hall, Helmsdale,

on Saturday, 10th May 2014 at 2.30 pm

PRESENT

Sir John Nutting Bt. QC
Sir A Heber Percy
Neil McCorquodale
William Southall
Lucy Reeves
Donald Sutherland
Robert Mackay

IN ATTENDANCE

Sir Michael Wigan Bt - Fishery Manager
Norman Wright - Clerk
Peter Quail - Head Bailiff
15 Attendees

CHAIR

Sir John Nutting took the Chair, welcomed everybody to this Annual Public Meeting, introduced the various Members of the Board present today, and intimated that copies of today's Agenda, Report for 2013 and Accounts were available for everyone on the table at the rear of the hall.

MINUTES OF LAST MEETING

There were none, since this is the First Annual Meeting of the Board since the passing of the Aquaculture and Fisheries (S) Act of 2013.

RESEARCH WORK

The River Bailiffs have carried out habitat surveys on River Halladale for the Forestry Commission. There are high acidity levels and the Forestry Commission need to know how much land they can plant. 2013 was the second year we carried out studies for the Forestry Commission, and we are undertaking two more in 2014. This is a good example of helping the public sector and moving outside our own area. The results on the Halladale, seem to be very similar to our own river. There is also an approach by another River for survey work

ELECTRO-FISHING FINDINGS

The electro-fishing in the River takes place over 100 m lengths. This is done three times for each section. It is the aim to check the same sites each year and 20 sites were inspected in 2013. Weather sometimes prevents this. The Board is grateful to the Estates in the Strath for transporting

heavy gear to remote areas. The Head Bailiff advised that since 2006, they been operating under a National Standard.

FISH RUNS

The Counter is an invaluable investment and very few rivers have one. We are very lucky to have the Counter and this is due to the generosity of Mr and Mrs Jeremy Clay. In 2013, 5460 fish were counted. The big months are May, July and September. The results are considered at the end of the Season. It has been noted that Salmon will not run at the top of a spate but only when it settles down. The results are prepared in Montrose and the counter figures are verified. In 2013, it is believed that the undercount was about 10%. Using a large dataset over 10 years, we look at trends over a particular period. Fish in the Lower River are not counted.

OPEN DAYS

The Open Days in 2013 were very successful. In 2014, the period was extended to a full week. It is believed, that we were the first river in Scotland to have Open Days. The Board consider that they are very advantageous to Helmsdale, bringing in visitors. Local businesses have commented that it is a huge boost in a quiet time. It gives people the opportunity to fish famous pools on the river, see the scenery and even catch a fish. The numbers in 2013 were about 150 and in 2014 it was about 200. For a full week, this could mean an input of between £30,000 and £100,000 to the local economy. The Board carried out an exercise recently to assess the number of people visiting the River during the Season. The calculation came to 1500 people staying in Lodges, Hotels and in the Village, and this number must boost the Helmsdale economy significantly.

HABITAT

The Fishery Manager described in some detail the significant treeplanting of native species by the Estates in the Strath, over the last 30 years. Comparison of old and modern Ordnance Survey Maps reveals this major change. This treeplanting is beneficial, in that it slows down flows, it also reduces soil acidity through a better species mix and with new planting techniques of mounds and hand planting, there is better water quality.

The Board is committed to habitat improvements, and has to work within SEPA CAR Regulations which are based on risk assessment to the water environment. These Regulations are designed to protect the wider environment, not just Salmon. The Head Bailiff then showed some photographs of the River and in particular, the floodplain. The Regulations require that there are no high vertical structures, so that floods can flow over the top of the bank and onto the floodplain. Noted that spates are increasing in frequency, it was once every five years about 3 decades ago, but it is now

once every two years. Spates can affect stabilisation of the banks, with vegetation being ripped away before it can consolidate. Regarding the effect of sheep and deer, Sir John Nutting contrasted the Kildonan bank at Four Below which had no sheep for 20 years, and the other bank where there animals - there was no real difference between them.

From the Floor, Mr Ronald Sutherland raised a question about riverbanks and grazing. He produced three photographs of sections of Beat Six and Beat Three. He asked about Rule 19 of the CAR Regulations 2011- namely, that significant environmental damage must be prevented. Mr Sutherland said that the photographs showed such damage. He then read a paragraph from a book written by Sir Michael Wigan on the Tweed relating to banks being protected, with riparian zones providing cover and food for young fish, and asked why this is not happening on the Helmsdale. Sir Michael Wigan replied that the Board is doing improvement works and the electro-Fishing results prove it. In the last 30 years, lots of areas of land have been fenced. The Board is well aware of Rule 19 and Mr Sutherland was taking a tiny sample of the River. Although SEPA inspect water quality, they do not check the riverbanks. Mr Sutherland thought that there was significant poaching of the ground, but the Head Bailiff having looked at the photographs, responded that sheep do not appear to be causing harm. Sir Michael Wigan commented that sheep and deer numbers are falling compared to 30 years ago and it is not practical to fence all the River. Mr Sutherland stated that spawning areas should be protected. The Board invited Mr Sutherland to join an electro-fishing exercise to see the Boards environmental work in action.

HATCHERY

There is a current debate as to whether hatcheries are useful or not, the most recent study had been carried out on the River Spey. It had been hoped that Prof Matthew Gage of East Anglia University would be present to give a Presentation on assessing the success of the Hatchery. Unfortunately, he was not able to attend due to an illness in his family. However, he had sent Notes to Sir Michael Wigan who read out excerpts. Prof Gage's initial comments related to farmed salmon. Lots are escaping and getting into the local population. They do not share the wild fish genes and characteristics and have enhanced growth. Farmed salmon can hybridise with wild salmon and Prof Gage commented that they should be sterilised, as happens with Rainbow Trout. He did his initial training at Kielder where he saw Peter Gray get a 100% return of hatchery fish in one area. To be successful, a Hatchery needs a good stockman

and the Helmsdale has an excellent one. He is confident that the Helmsdale Hatchery is working correctly. By taking samples of fin tissue, and after a study period of ten years, able to calculate a percentage of returning stocked fish. Prof Gage will try and secure research funding, and will discuss with the Board if he can assist them.

From the Floor, Professor Eric Verspoor of Rivers and Lochs Institute, UHI, Inverness queried if by removing Broodstock from the River, were you increasing lifetime survival. You may be depressing the wild run. On the Spey, the economics did not make sense as was costing £1000 for each stocked fish caught by the Rods. However, a very important point to note was the perception of fishermen, that if there was Stocking, then there would be more fish coming back. The Spey Study took over eight years, and any project will take that time, and will not be definitive. Also the question has to be posed - is such a study the best use of the Board's money. If stocking is carried out well, it can increase the returning numbers, but it could be to the detriment of wild fish. This will be small but cumulative, as most variation occurs at sea, but also the Counter may undercount by 10 to 15%. With Stocking, you could be looking at a variation of 0.50 % per year.

From the Floor, Anson McAusland commented that the terms of the Research Project for Professor Gage should be neutral in relation to the Hatchery, so that he is free to allow the evidence to take him where it would lead him, rather than trying to prove a particular point of view.

QUESTIONS

Mr Ronald Sutherland from the Floor, advised that North Highland College had added ghilling to its Syllabus. However, severe lack of positions for Applicants, so to become part of Gamekeepers Course, and perhaps the Board could provide Placements. Sir John Nutting advised that this would be up to the individual Estates to organise but in principle the Board do want to encourage young people to become Ghillies. He had employed a student last year and would do so again in 2014.

ANGLING CLUB

The Chairman welcomed the reinvigorated Angling Club and the Board will work positively with the Committee.

2015 MEETING

This will take place on Saturday, 10th May 2015 at 3.00 pm at Kildonan Hall.