

TAY DISTRICT SALMON FISHERIES BOARD

ANNUAL PUBLIC MEETING

Birnam Institute, Birnam, 7pm, Wednesday, 20th March 2019

MINUTES OF MEETING

Board Members Present

Iain McLaren (Convener)
Claire Mercer Nairne
Jim Perrett
Mike Smith
David Godfrey
Allister Wallace

In attendance

David Summers (Fisheries Director)
Inga MacGillivray (Administrator)
Mike Brown (Operations Manager)

Apologies

Steve Mannion
Alex Stewart

Also in attendance were 20 members of the public.

Prior to the meeting, copies of the Accounts for the year ending 31 December 2017 and the Annual Report 2017/18 were available on the website, with provision to email out copies should they be required made available at the meeting. Copies of the Agenda for the current meeting and Minutes from last Annual Public Meeting were made available (and were also available on the website).

The Convener opened the seventh Annual Public Meeting by welcoming all attendees, and introducing himself. He went on to run through the agenda of the meeting, with IMacG presenting the financials, DS to give a resume of the previous year, as well as an insight into the current year's activities, before MB presented on the smolt trap project. A Q&A session would follow.

Annual Report and Accounts:

IMacG presented the 2017 audited financials, highlighting the main areas of income and expenditure and their relationship to prior years.

A member of the public asked why the 2018 accounts were not available, to which IMacG replied that they had not been audited and would therefore not provide a like for like comparison with prior year. The member of the public pressed that they should have been included, to which IMacG replied it was usual for most companies to present prior year audited accounts many months after the year end.

The member of the public again pressed for information on the 2018 accounts to which IMacG replied the figures had not been finalised and therefore it was impossible to comment but the figures would undoubtedly be similar to prior years as salaries, rent and other major areas of expenditure showed very little change in 2018.

The Convener intervened to say that one major area of expenditure which had cropped up in 2018 was for road repairs to the main access road to the hatchery, and this was explained to the audience.

Another member of the public enquired about the rent payment situation, to which IMacG replied this was being dealt with and would be paid either this financial year or next, depending on when it was invoiced out by Government.

Activities over past year and activities for coming year:

DS then went on to talk about the activities the Board had undertaken in the past year, and what was forthcoming for this year, and in particular highlighted the following areas:

1. Catches:

DS stated that the catches for 2018 were down on prior years, with less fish caught in July and October, but slightly more in September 2018 than prior year. He went on to describe the season as the worst in a long time, and on a par with the 1950s, although in the 1950s netting was heavily practiced. Now there is none.

2. Fish Counts

DS explained that the Pitlochry Dam counter numbers were down on previous years and were probably the worst since it had been installed in the 50s. The numbers had looked OK up until May and had then tailed off.

The counter at the Lochay Falls had also been well down not helped by a lack of water in the summer leading to warm water and possible fungus, all causing stress to the fish.

3. Cause of Poor runs?

Based on the Tummel tagging, DS stated that the grilse return in 2017 from 2016 was poor at 0.77% and would have expected a return of 5% at least. The 2SW returns in 2018 were no better again at 0.77%.

If we compare to the 1970s figures of around 20% return rate, these figures are very discouraging, but the problem is not just confined to the Tay catchment and is being felt widely.

He went on to explain that similar situations, but not as bad, had happened before. The effects of global warming had not been encountered before.

Indeed, mackerel were now being found in large numbers in salmon migration areas which was unheard of 10-15 years ago, and the growth rate of both mackerel and grilse was reducing.

4. Activities for 2018

Enforcement

DS stated that the bailiffs were now known as Fisheries Officers as this reflected their new roles, which encompassed enforcement, smolt trapping, electrofishing surveys and many other activities. Enforcement now did not play such a large part of their role, although there was still illegal poaching activity to be dealt with.

Hatchery/Kelt Reconditioning Facility:

DS explained the broodstock fishing in 2017 with the help of the Tay Ghillies Association had seen the number of eggs produced by the kelt reconditioning hatchery reach the 1 million mark for the first time since the TDSFB had taken over.

All reconditioning tanks are now full and there has been work done to remove the old flume and make space for further parr tanks to increase capacity.

Rewatering of the Garry

DS stated that the Garry was now flowing, and salmon had been seen jumping at the Falls of Struan. He was keen to ensure salmon could get over these falls so stocking was being undertaken to generate a run of adults to test this out. Stocking was being allowed on the proviso that stocked and wild fish could be identified. The work for identifying stocked and wild fish is being carried out by UHI using genetics, and had some preliminary feedback which DS presented to the audience.

Tummel Smolt Project:

MB to give a presentation on this later in the meeting.

Pitcastle Hydro

DS explained that an Archimedes screw turbine had been installed at Pitcastle, which was larger than any that had previously been studied. The Board was involved in studies to see if smolts are attracted into the turbine lade, but very few smolts were caught.

NE England Drift Net and Fixed Net Fisheries

DS informed the audience that the netting ban should be in place this coming year.

Salmon Conservation Regulations

DS explained that in 2017/8 the Eden and the Earn became Category 3 rivers, necessitating a 100% catch and release policy. However, DS and others made a case against the methodology used by Marine Scotland in their classification which resulted in the Earn now being Category 2, but the Eden remaining Category 3. Roseanna Cunningham MSP announced the change in the Earn categorisation.

Scottish Invasive Species Initiative (SISI)

DS stated that this was a lottery funded initiative and the Tay shares an officer with the Esks, but that the project only covers part of the Tay Catchment.

Beavers

DS stated that as of 1st May 2019, beavers will become a protected species but that some dispensations will be available for shooting highly problematic animals as a last resort.

Blairgowrie Abstraction

DS explained that this had been an issue for years but had been exacerbated last summer by the dry weather. He stressed that SEPA were responsible for licensing and had been talking of reviewing it for last ten years. The issue had come to a head and a reviewed licence was likely to come into effect this year. DS thanked local interested parties for raising this issue with local politicians.

Offshore Windfarms

DS stated that 3 windfarms had been proposed off the Tay which may necessitate fish monitoring in the future.

Lyon Project

DS explained this project was ongoing and the Board/Foundation were in the process of furthering this in the near future.

5. 2019 Forthcoming Activities:

TDSFB Plan

DS explained the Board were currently reviewing a plan for the next 2 years.

Juvenile Surveys

DS explained that the Government had ringfenced monies to be spent on juvenile data collection, and the Board would certainly want to be involved with this.

SSE Genetics work on the Garry

DS explained this would be ongoing.

Removal of Shochie Weir

DS explained this was making some headway but removal of the dam was more complicated than it first appeared and this had to be factored in.

Hatchery – further parr capacity

As explained under Hatchery, DS stated that this coming year would hopefully see the installation of 10 new parr tanks to further capacity.

Drone Surveys

DS explained that the late Ian Young (a former Board member) had asked that Ranunculus surveys be carried out on the Eden, and these would be started in the next month.

Tummel Smolt Tagging project

MB then gave a presentation on the tagging project, stating it had now run for 3 years. In 2018, 2,220 smolts had been tagged in the Garry and Errochty, with Garry smolts being larger than their Errochty counterparts. The majority of the smolt run occurred in April (Garry 77%/Errochty 80%).

Of the returns, 14 1SW returned from 2017 (1940 tagged), and 3 2SW returned from 2016 (388 tagged).

There then followed a question and answer session:

Piscivorous Birds:

A Board member stated that 10,000 parr had been released in Catholes with 50 goosanders residing there and he felt that the Board rather ignored predation in both its annual report and meetings.

The Convener explained that the Board in fact did recognise that predation was a problem but was doing its best to mitigate this – it had applied annually for a licence to shoot protected birds as a last resort. DS explained that Marine Scotland had earmarked £750k over 3 years to carry out dietary studies on piscivorous birds. Unfortunately, the Tay would not be included in the first year's survey as it required a certain geographical area.

DS explained that the population of predatory birds had not really increased over the last few years coincident with the sudden fall in salmon numbers. The cause of this recent fall was widely recognised to be mainly at sea.

A member of the public asked if firearms could be used to uphold the licence, to which the convener replied that shotguns only were used on safety grounds. However, he did accept that this could be reviewed at Board level if strict safeguards were put in place.

ACTION: The TDSFB to review the use of firearms at Board level and update licence as necessary.

Fish Counters:

A member of the public asked if the Board would consider installing counters and indicated that Marine Scotland would supply funding of sonar counters as had been practiced on the Deveron.

DS replied that he understood the Deveron had trialled a sonar counter for a few weeks but that the software which accompanied the counter required more development. From what he could see, it was in the experimental stages and had not been refined enough for the Board to consider putting funds towards.

He went on to state that the Deveron was one thing but the Tay was a much bigger river. The sonar beam is cone shaped and would perhaps a suitable site may exist on the Deveron, but the Tay may require several machines so as to eliminate dead spots.

The member of the public asked how fish were counted on the Tay, to which DS replied adult numbers was largely guess-work but knowing actual numbers might make little difference as this did not increase the amount of fish in the river. The member of the public insisted that Ireland used counters to great effect. DS replied he was aware of one counter where if a certain number of fish crossed by a certain date, then driftnets used to be able to continue for a further fortnight.

DS summarised by saying that sonar counters for large expanses of river such as the Tay were still in development – indeed, the Spey had tried a sonar counter years ago but it didn't seem to work well. DS was unwilling to commit money to these counters until they were proven which was something Marine Scotland were better placed to do.

A Board member stated that there was a counter in the Board's office and it should be used on the Ericht, to which the convener replied that there was no good site to position the counter at. A member of the public suggested the weir, but the convener said the weir was too big and would not work.

Piscivorous Birds:

A member of the public asked that the Board put more effort into counting goosanders. DS replied that for the licence, SNH were particularly interested in breeding bird numbers rather than large ducking counts, and reminded the audience that the licence was as an aid to shoot to scare not to cull.

A member of the public then asked if all Boards could come together to create a common policy to which DS replied this is already done through Fisheries Management Scotland but the problem is SNH only have a certain amount of birds they can grant a licence to kill per year.

Another member of the public stated the birds were not native, to which the convener replied that it was irrelevant whether they were native or not because they were protected and the Board had to work within SNH guidelines.

Fishponds:

A member of the public asked why Fishponds couldn't be resurrected, to which the convener replied there were various reasons, but that cost was one of the biggest implications. He went on to explain the costing analysis for every extra fish that would be in the river using the smolt ranching method. It was economically not feasible.

DS explained that smolt ranching works where natural marine survival is good and explained that the Ranga had good returns because their natural marine survival was good, sometimes in the region of 20%.

He explained that the Tay is not Iceland and we have poor marine survival rates as we are too far south.

NE England Netting:

A member of the public asked for clarification on the netting in NE England. DS explained that DEFRA had produced a consultation last spring with the deadline being April 2018. The nets were due to start in June 2018 and it was felt this would give them too short notice if they were to be stopped. Therefore, the decision had been carried forward to 2019. Therefore, the driftnets will stop in June 2019.

DS had raised the fact that in many of the years since carcass tagging came into effect, catches per boat had increased.

Catch & Release Recommendations for 2019 season:

A member of the public asked what the Board's recommendations would be for the forthcoming season, to which the convener replied that the Board intended to stick to the same recommendations as it had started the season with last year, but these would be subject to change, as per last year.

Beavers:

A member of the public asked if the Board was applying for a licence to cull beavers in the Tay Catchment. A Board member clarified that only estates and farms would have a licence. DS added that dams could be dismantled if they were in early stages, but thereafter will be by licence, and as he understood it farmers would be able to apply for a licence to kill.

Stocking:

A Board member asked if we were increasing hatchery capacity, was the Board confident it would secure a licence to stock out increasing numbers of fish. DS replied that presently Boards self-certify their stocking but Marine Scotland are taking a closer look at this area and there was always a possibility they could take it in house at some point.

Future of salmon fishing in Scotland:

A member of the public stated that although he did understand how hard the Board worked, he wondered if they could see any positives for the future of salmon fishing in Scotland.

DS replied that fish numbers have gone up and down in the past and although at present the adult population is lower, freshwater production it is not trending to zero. Therefore, you would expect that if marine issues improve, so too would salmon survival rates and adult

numbers could rebound quickly. However, he added that events are now occurring in the Arctic that have never occurred before.

The convener added that people are reacting to the decline in fish numbers by not fishing the Tay and that he had started fishing in the 1970s and had never seen it this bad before.

Working with FMS & MS:

A member of the public stated that the Board should pressure FMS and MS to get things done, to which the convener replied that the person who sets the categorisation levels would be attending the next Board meeting in April.

Support for the Board:

A Board member stated that he had only recently joined the Board but had been overwhelmed by the dedication of the staff to their work and asked that everyone be appreciative of them, to which most agreed.

Ericht Fish Farm:

A member of the public asked why the adult screens were still up on the lade gates, to which DS replied there had been a problem which would be rectified soon.

The member of the public asked that work be done to ascertain smolt movement in the lade, to which DS replied that the Board planned to film underwater to ascertain the movements of the smolts and push for appropriate action.

There were no further questions and the Chairman then thanked everyone for coming and for their questions before closing the meeting.