

CAITHNESS DISTRICT SALMON FISHERY BOARD

ANNUAL REPORT

2017

BOARD MEMBERSHIP AS AT 31 DECEMBER 2017

Chairman	The Viscount Thurso
Upper Proprietor Representatives	Sir Richard Dunbar – Wick River S W M Threipland – Dunbeath River A MacAuslan – Berriedale/Langwell M R Newton – Forss/Achalone
Lower Proprietor Representatives	J Mackay – Wick Angling Association S W D Laird – Thurso River Ltd
Co-opted Salmon Angler Representatives	I Cormack – Wick Angling Association T Stitt – Thurso Angling Association
Co-opted Tenant Netsmen Representative	R Willis
Scientific Advisor	A Youngson
Inspector/Head Bailiff	E McCarthy
Clerk	Mrs E Constable

CONTACT DETAILS

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The purpose of the report is to summarise the work undertaken by the Caithness District Salmon Fishery Board (CDSFB) during 2017 and plans for the current year, with particular regard to the board's statutory functions and responsibilities.

2017 ACTIVITY

Catch Data

The board is required to publish catch data for the district. Cumulative figures for salmon and grilse caught during the year by each river together with numbers released are shown below (figures for 2016 in brackets). There are no netting figures to report, 2017 being Yr 2 of the 3-year moratorium.

	Total Catch: Salmon/Grilse		Released	
<u>Rod Catch</u>				
Berriedale	223	(200)	195	(156)
Dunbeath	260	(105)	193	(41)
Wick	768	(607)	335	(156)
Thurso	2088	(2631)	1930	(2436)
Forss	279	(323)	196	(170)

Marine Scotland collects catch data annually from all proprietors, occupiers or agents of salmon and sea trout fisheries throughout Scotland. Summary records for each river are published by Fishery District by the Scottish Government (SG) each April dating back to 1952. Their website acknowledges that recent conservation measures introduced to manage the pressure of exploitation through fishing in Scotland's domestic waters will have an effect on the catch and effort data reported by salmon fisheries.

Conservation and Regulatory Measures

Electric fishing

Approval was granted for the Wick Angling Association (WAA) and the Dunbeath Partnership to carry out electro-fishing (EF) studies on their respective rivers over the summer. The board's portable EF equipment was lent to the WAA for their operation.

Hatcheries

Requests from the Dunbeath and Wick rivers to continue hatchery operations for restocking with their own broodstock in the spring were approved.

River gradings

Marine Scotland undertook a major reassessment of river gradings during 2017, resulting in three of the Caithness rivers being downgraded from Grade 1 conservation status to Grade 3 under initial proposals for 2018, namely Berriedale/Langwell, Dunbeath Water and the River Forss. The River Thurso and Wick remained at Grade 1. ¹ The downgrading of these rivers took proprietors and the board by surprise, given the findings of the board's own research, and considerable effort has been devoted to pursuing the matter since then.

Of particular concern is the fact that the annual assessment is heavily reliant on catch figures reported during the previous 5 years. Using these figures it is possible to extrapolate what the gradings will be in future. It is apparent that as long as the grading system remains unchanged there is little or no prospect of any of these rivers being uprated.

¹ Grade 1 signifies that a river is expected to meet at least 80% of its Conservation Limit, therefore exploitation is deemed sustainable and the river can be managed locally. At the other end of the scale Grade 3 rivers, if exploited, are considered unsustainable, with less than 60% of their Conservation Limit expected to be met, and catch-and-release is mandatory. Grade 2, under annual review.

The board submitted a substantial response to the grading consultation, challenging the changes and providing copious evidence from the 2013-2017 electrofishing studies to confirm an abundance of healthy stocks throughout the Caithness rivers. It recommended that the Forss and Dunbeath be reinstated to Grade 1, and that Berriedale/Langwell be upgraded to Grade 2 pending further investigation of environmental factors. The River Forss was subsequently amended to Grade 2, justified as an administrative error, but there has been no acknowledgement of the board's scientific case and the two other rivers remain at Grade 3.

Fish Surveys

The 2017 survey results were uniformly favourable and, generally, the best since the survey series started in 2013. The report has been published on the board's website and the Index of EF sites updated to include those sites surveyed for the first time.

The board has two electric fishers, one powered by a bankside generator and the other worn in-river as a backpack. With the backpack equipment beyond repair at the end of 2016 the board invested in a newer, reconditioned model at a cost of £4.5k.

Armadale Tagging

The Forss, Thurso, Wick and Dunbeath rivers took part in a Marine Scotland programme designed to track the destinations of mixed stock salmon passing along the north coast. Electronic tags were fitted to fish at Armadale and twin receivers were deployed by participating rivers to east and west to monitor for signs of fish within their reaches.

The board had high hopes of the findings when first mooted and would have liked to see additional monitors installed at the western end of the Pentland Firth to provide much-needed data on migration routes taken through these waters as part of the exercise. It was disappointing that the project got off to a late start and only 80 or so of the 750 target number fish were eventually tagged. Of these 44 were picked up by receivers but none were intercepted in the Caithness rivers.

Pink Salmon

The arrival of Pacific "pink" or "humpback" salmon in Scottish rivers during July was well publicised and proprietors and managers of the Caithness rivers were put on alert. Instructions were given for any found to be killed and handed in for examination and details of their whereabouts were recorded.

Thirteen (all males) were recovered from Thurso River (mostly the lower river) and a single female was caught in the Wick River. Spawning activity was noted in the Thurso mostly on the lower reaches and largely restricted to the third week in August. Although no females were reported it is estimated that some 50 pairs were present in the Thurso from the end of July onwards.

The risk posed to native salmon is considered low but their appearance is still a cause for concern. All the fish that came to hand this year were sampled for genetic analysis and the samples passed to MSS. It is hoped that this will assist in determining whether pink salmon appearing in future are returners or strayers, and thus the measures necessary to minimise the chances of their becoming established.

Pink salmon follow a 2-year cycle so rivers are primed to look out for them in 2019. The particular challenge for fisheries will be to devise ways of catching and removing as many as possible without compromising native fish.

External Consultations

The board received a steady stream of enquiries and requests for advice and support during the year. Formal responses were issued in respect of the following:

(EIA = Environmental Impact Statement, ES = Environmental Statement)

Wind farm applications

Achlachan, Thurso catchment	Highland Council public planning notice
Drum Hollistan, Reay	SG consultation on supplementary EIA information.

Offshore wind farm proposals

Tidal Array, Brims, NW Pentland Firth	Developer request to review proposed measures in response to board concerns at the ES consultation stage.
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River and harbour works

New pontoon installation, Scrabster Harbour	Pre-licence consultation
Forss river outfall restoration	Pre-licence consultation
Pipework crossing, Burn of Houstry, Dunbeath catchment	Scottish Water request for approval/advice prior to works
Variation to harbour construction and pontoon installation, Wick harbour	Pre-licence consultation

Forestry

Longterm forest plan, Quintfall South, Lyth	Stakeholder consultation
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Environmental monitoring

Dounreay environmental monitoring	Board approval to take salmon from Thurso River during fishing season
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Bailiff Report

Frequent rainfall during the year meant that whenever good numbers of fish arrived on the coastline they were quickly brought into the river systems. As in recent years, there appeared to be a lack of grilse numbers. There was a brief period in June when fish remained on the coastline and the odd boat was observed in an unusual location but it is considered unlikely that any illegal fishing took place at sea.

Incidents

There were no incidents during 2017.

2. GOOD GOVERNANCE

Administration

After 4 years since the introduction of the good governance requirements the board has settled into the routine of providing regular paperwork to SG and complying with all its other obligations.

As of April 2018 Mr Stitt is no longer in a position to represent the Thurso Angling Association and has withdrawn from the board membership. He has served the board in varying capacities for many years for which we are grateful and we wish him well in his retirement. The board is currently consulting with stakeholders and will Co-opt another angler representative shortly.

Education and Publicity

Following an interview with the local press in March and to deter any potential black market an article was published in the John o’Groat Journal to alert the public to the risks of buying any fish advertised as wild salmon.

3. COMPLAINTS

No complaints were received during the year.

4. FLOW COUNTRY RIVERS TRUST

Trust activities in support of or aligned with the interests of the board are summarised below.

Berriedale/Langwell Water Quality Project

Investigations are being undertaken into water chemistry within the Berriedale/Langwell catchment area with water samples being taken for analysis by MSS Freshwater Laboratory, Pitlochry. The catchments have a complex underlying geology that may affect water quality and may account for certain atypical results noted in CDSFB’s annual electro-fishing studies in this area. A clearer understanding of environmental conditions will also have relevance for future assessments and decisions in respect of river gradings.

Moray Firth Smolt Tracking Project

The Atlantic Salmon Trust proposes to carry out a smolt tracking project in the Moray Firth in 2019. The FCRT attended the initial project meeting and, in collaboration with the Environmental Research Institute (ERI), is considering the form and scope of the contribution it can make and whether an extension to the Wick smolt tracking project might fit in with the organisers’ plans.

Scottish Rivers Temperature Monitoring Network

The Trust has been curating a number of loggers installed on the Thurso since 2014, downloading the data and forwarding it to MSS for analysis. The results, relating to welfare of salmon in rivers in relation to high temperature and, in particular, future prospects with global climate change, are beginning to emerge from modelling studies carried out by MSS.

Projects initiated in 2016

The following reports were issued during 2017:- a) The Pentland Firth: Fisherman’s Knowledge; b) Wick Bay Smolt Tracking Project (ERI/FCRT); c) 2016 Electro-fishing Survey of the Wester River. Plans for Phase 2 of the Smolt Tracking project in Sinclairs Bay and implementation of the River Wester Fishery Regeneration project are on hold for the present owing to lack of funding.

For more information on Trust activities visit their website www.flowcountryriverstrust.org.

5. PROPOSALS FOR 2018

Meetings

The first meeting of the year was held in March, the Proprietors AGM and next board meeting will be held on 8 June. The Annual Public Meeting of the board is scheduled for August.

River Gradings Appeal

The board's focus now is to achieve the best outcome for the rivers from the 2019 gradings assessment. The scientific advisor is already in discussion with key peers in the wider scientific community regarding the methodology applied by MS and it is hoped that he will be directly involved in any review and improvements to the assessment system in the coming months.

2018 Electrofishing Programme

The board has stipulated that the policy of revisiting at least 2 sites per river is to be maintained. In light of the gradings controversy (see above) a number of additional, new sites on the Berriedale, Dunbeath and Forss are also to be surveyed to strengthen the data already available for these rivers. The full schedule will be agreed at the June board meeting.

Other Scientific Studies

MS proposes to institute a national EF data collection scheme as an adjunct to the catch-based river grading protocol and the board will take part. Sites to be surveyed have already been determined and, whilst some are of no direct interest to the board, a number of those designated will be beneficial additions to its database. Some central funding is expected to be available and surveys will be scheduled to avoid conflict with the board's own EF programme.

ERI Genetic Studies

A project is underway to examine relationships between genetics and smolt migration timing. It is intended to include genetic analysis of the Board's archived scale collection obtained in course of its juvenile survey work over the past few years. The project may also produce an index of spawner abundance, generating (genetic) familial relationships at electric fishing sites – a subject the Board has discussed in the past.

Bailiffs

Whilst the moratorium on netting remains in place coastal monitoring will continue as previously, with a regular visible presence.
