**CAITHNESS DISTRICT SALMON FISHERY BOARD**

**ANNUAL REPORT**

**2018**

**BOARD MEMBERSHIP AS AT 31 DECEMBER 2018**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **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  D Mackay – Thurso Angling Association |
|  |  |
| **Co-opted Tenant Netsmen**  **Representative** | R Willis |
|  |  |
| **Scientific Advisor** | A Youngson |
|  |  |
| **Inspector/Head Bailiff** | E McCarthy |
|  |  |
| **Clerk** | Miss M Blackwood |

**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 2018 and plans for the current year, with particular regard to the board’s statutory functions and responsibilities.

**2018 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 2017 shown in brackets).

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Total Catch: Salmon/Grilse | Released |
| Rod Catch |  |  |
| Berriedale | 146 (223) | 146 (195) |
| Dunbeath | 64 (260) | 64 (193) |
| Wick | 386 (768) | 226 (335) |
| Thurso | 691 (2088) | 664 (1930) |
| Forss | 74 (279) | 67 (196) |
|  |  |  |

The reduction in total numbers is attributed to the exceptionally low water levels during the long dry summer. All fish caught on the Berriedale/Langwell and Dunbeath rivers were returned in accordance with regulations, following their down-rating to Grade 3 under Marine Scotland’s conservation rating system. The moratorium on coastal netting has been in place since 2016.

**Conservation and Regulatory Measures**

Hatcheries

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

River gradings

The 2018 gradings remained in place for the entire season, but Marine Scotland (MS) took steps to address concerns about the reliance of the rating system on catch numbers since there were doubts about the validity of some of the calculations used. Progress so far has been encouraging. Firstly, MS launched a national programme of electrofishing to support an alternative river grading system (see also under Fish Surveys). Secondly, the CDSFB identified that consideration of latitude in the MS grading system had an erroneous, negative effect on grading of the northern and this has since been factored into MS’s calculations.

As a result, all of the 5 Caithness rivers have been designated Grade 1 for 2019 (Forss re-rated from Grade 2, as well as Berriedale and Dunbeath up from 3 The current gradings are to remain in force for 2 years before the next evaluation exercise. This is intended to allow MS time to consider the rating system further and will provide a modicum of continuity for river proprietors and fishery managers affected by recent changes.

The board is indebted to Alan Youngson, Scientific Consultant, for his contribution in appealing the 2018 gradings.

**Fish Surveys**

The electrofishing team was heavily committed during 2018. There were two strands to the work:

a) The regular board programme, whereby the team revisits a selection of sites from the baseline surveys to verify the continued health of rivers, monitors changes, and surveys a range of new sites to consolidate previous findings and fill gaps in the database.

1. The National Electrofishing Programme for Scotland organised and funded by MS.

A total of 44 sites were surveyed, 14 specifically for board purposes and 30 randomly selected by Marine Scotland Science (MSS). For some sites the national programme called for single pass information only but the board standard is for three passes. Sites of joint interest were given the full treatment by the team so that the information gleaned could be incorporated into the board’s database for future reference.

MS data was collected and submitted in accordance with the national proforma and sample scales, taken where water levels were sufficiently favourable to avoid risk to fish welfare, were sent to the Freshwater Fisheries Laboratory in Pitlochry for analysis. The results of the MSS studies will contribute to research into salmonid sustainability and can be expected to supplement the catch-based river grading protocol in future.

From the board’s point of view, the national programme offered an opportunity to examine a greater number of sites than would usually be possible. In general, the results align with the results of previous board surveys in showing (1) that salmon are widely distributed and abundant in all the Caithness rivers, (2) salmon are absent or scarce in unsuitable habitat and (3) trout are sparse or absent in most places.

In respect of the board’s own programme juvenile salmon populations in Caithness in 2018 were again judged to be robust. No incipient problems were identified. At some sites the performance of the fish was not fully consistent with past patterns, perhaps because of the extreme summer drought. Some of the anomalous sites performed better than expected and some worse. The local ramifications of this variation, if any, can be checked by surveying the sites again in 2019.

Details and findings of the overall Caithness electrofishing effort are provided in the 2018 Electrofishing Report which was published in March – see http://caithness.dsfb.org.uk/publications/

**External Consultations**

Formal responses were issued in respect of the following works and planned infrastructure:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Wind farms |  |
| Proposed wind farm,  Stemster, Achavanich  Slickly wind farm planning application, Wester catchment  Camster II wind farm  Proposed wind farm,  Watten | Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) scoping request  Request for habitat surveys  Resurrection of project, request for updated baseline data  Guidance requested for Fisheries Protection Plan |
|  |  |
| Oil exploration |  |
| Proposal for oil exploration well,  off coast at Lybster | EIA scoping request from energy company |
|  |  |
| Water |  |
| Re-laying of mains,  Reaster Burn, Wester catchment | Scottish Water request for advice prior to works |
|  |  |
| Roadworks |  |
| Award of contract,  A9 upgrade at Berriedale | Clarification and guidance sought by tendering firms. |
|  |  |

**Bailiff Report**

The dry summer made for a disappointing year for anglers. By July-August time the low water levels resulted in unusually large numbers of fish around the coast awaiting access to rivers. This attracted members of the public to the tidal waters of rivers and the bailiffs were kept busy monitoring individuals fishing in estuaries to ensure no salmon or sea trout were landed. The police Wildlife Crime Unit were called on to assist and were most helpful.

**Incidents**

There were no incidents during 2017.

**2. GOOD GOVERNANCE**

**Board Membership**

Donald (Dookers) Mackay was co-opted on to the board as the new salmon angler representative for Thurso Angling Association. Eleanor Constable retired as Clerk at the end of the year and has been replaced by Meghan Blackwood.

**Data Protection**

Prior to the of the introduction of the new General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in May all data held and processed for board purposes was reviewed to ensure full compliance. The board is registered with the Information Commissioner’s Office under the Data Protection Act (Ref. No ZA427263). Our Privacy Statement and Data Handling Policy are set out on the website and will be kept under annual review. The Clerk is the nominated Data Protection Officer and first point of contact in the event of enquiries.

**Membership of Fisheries Management Scotland (FMS, formerly ASFB)**

The board contacted FMS with regard to the high cost of the annual subscription vis a vis the limited perceived benefits of membership to Caithness fisheries. Alan Wells, CEO of FMS, attended the November meeting in Halkirk to address these concerns and the board conveyed to him a list of issues on which it would like more central support. It is understood that FMS is to review the basis on which future fees are calculated (currently 5-yearly fish catch figures); in the meantime the board agreed to commit to the £5000+ levy set for 2019.

**Education and Publicity**

A PhD student in Marine Spatial Planning and Climate Change from Queens University Belfast contacted the CDSFB to assist with research into the Pentland Firth and Orkney marine plans. An interview was arranged locally with the board chairman.

**3. COMPLAINTS**

No complaints were received during the year.

**4. FLOW COUNTRY RIVERS TRUST**

The Trust provided support to the Caithness and Northern DSFBs for the fieldwork phases of the National Electrofishing Programme.

Other projects undertaken in support of the board include:

* Berriedale/Langwell catchment: water testing
* Thurso River: Scottish rivers temperature monitoring study
* Wick River: pilot biotelemetry study (in conjunction with ERI, Thurso and other institutions)
* Flow Country rivers: survey of water conductivity levels

Further details of Trust projects, including a report on the Conductivity Measurements in the Northern Rivers, can be viewed on the Trust's website (www.flowcountryriverstrust.org).

**5. PROPOSALS FOR 2019**

**Meetings**

The first meeting of the year was held in March, the Proprietors AGM and next board meeting will be held on 21 June. The Annual Public Meeting of the board is scheduled for August and a final board meeting is expected to be scheduled for November.

**2019 Electrofishing Programme**

The NEPS programme has been funded again in 2019 and this work will be incorporated into the board’s own electric-fishing programme.

**Other scientific studies**

The Board will continue its electro fishing programme in conjunction with MSS as well as looking at other potential projects with the ERI and FCRT.

**Bailiffs**

A regular visible presence will be maintained at estuaries and around the coast throughout the summer to deter opportunists from breaking the ban on landing wild fish from the sea.