**THE LOCHABER DISTRICT SALMON FISHERY BOARD**

**CHAIRMAN’S REPORT FOR THE YEAR ENDING MAY 31ST 2012**

Catches of salmon in 2011 in the region were generally an improvement on the previous year. The trend towards quality 2SW salmon over the smaller but more abundant 1SW grilse continued. The long-awaited SALSEA programme that reported in 2011 appeared to endorse this on a national scale and pointed further towards variable high seas feeding as the probable culprit. Some of our smaller rivers that have historically only produced grilse are beginning to see some large and often early-running salmon, something that has not been witnessed before. While this is encouraging for egg deposition, the continuing relative lack of grilse means that rivers are not reporting very high numbers of fish caught. While rod catches have not greatly increased over the last ten years on most rivers, arguably the egg deposition will be higher than a decade ago due to the size of the returning fish. This must surely bode well for the future, especially if both the grilse and salmon stock component were to find better feeding at sea.

The Lochaber Board and their network of sub Boards and management groups continue to work hard to protect and enhance migratory fish throughout the region and are involved in a very wide range of activities towards this aim.

While the threat of fish farming is just as serious as ever and in spite of the complete lack of support by the Scottish Government for the ongoing AMA process, the Board strives to remain fully in touch with fish farm developments and there are some glimmers of encouraging news. For instance, sea lice numbers in almost all fish farm locations in Lochaber are creeping downwards due the better use of SLICE and the use of wrasse in the cages. Sea trout numbers are increasing slowly again in some rivers which may well be the result of these improvements. It was however very disappointing that escapes again made headlines in Loch Linnhe at the end of the year. Disease issues also continue to plague the industry. The Board continues to press all national fisheries organisations to do what they can to persuade the Scottish Government that fish farms should be relocated away from near river mouths and out of freshwater lochs altogether. While pressure from the Salmon and Trout Association’s aquaculture campaign has been notable, RAFTS and ASFB appear to have not been able to take us further forward in this goal. Talk of a more ‘robust’ approach in 2010 that promised to explore legal options using the evidence gained over many years seemed to have changed back into more RAFTS funding bids for further ‘monitoring’ and yet more ‘stakeholder discussion’ by 2011. A ‘managed dialogue’ process between the organisations and the industry took place during 2011 and appears to have resulted in very little. Furthermore, the critically important project proposed by the Lochaber Fisheries Trust to look at the effect of sea lice on actual adult returning numbers of salmon (a huge missing piece in our knowledge) was not supported by RAFTS in their aquaculture funding bid to Scottish Government in 2011, losing out to a bid for a genetics project. All in all, and as usual with salmon farming I am afraid, I do wish there was more encouraging news to report.

Small scale hydros continue to make up a large part of the Board workload. Several new applications were made in 2011, all of which were studied and vetted in our role as the relevant statutory body. We have noticed that with the increase in applications and the desire of developers to capitalise on the currently available feed-in tariffs, developers are beginning to push at the boundaries of acceptable practice and environmental risk in their applications. It is vital that the Board keep very vigilant in this regard to protect salmon and sea trout habitat in our rivers and lochs.

Larger hydros were also making the news again with a proposal from Scottish and Southern Energy gathering pace to build one of the largest pumped storage schemes in the UK at the head of Loch Lochy. Although many years off, this scheme will no doubt form a key part of our workload in the coming years.

The expanding team of warranted water bailiffs again worked hard throughout the season to protect returning fish both at sea and in freshwater and we owe them all our gratitude for their often long hours in difficult conditions. An encouraging number of volunteer River Watchers also kept an eye on their local rivers. On behalf of the Board, I would like to thank them all for their very hard work.

The ASFB drew up a Code of Good Practice and Governance for all fishery boards at the beginning of 2012, which was distributed to all of our members. The Lochaber Board has now signed up to this document. With new legislation concerning the management of salmon fisheries due to be introduced in late 2012, it is vital that all Boards and sub Boards operate in a robustly professional and transparent manner and the new code standardises this approach.

As ever, the Board's workload has been both busy and varied over the last year and the wide range of issues that have been dealt with on your behalf can be found in the Clerk's bi-annual reports. I am particularly pleased to report that the operating budget of the Board continues to run at significantly less than a few years ago, due to no longer employing a full-time Fishery Officer and other efficiencies, and yet the effectiveness and output of the Board has not appeared to suffer in any way.

Finally I would like to express enormous thanks to Jon Gibb who has worked tirelessly and expertly on behalf of the board during the past year.

Michael Mann

Chairman