**THE LOCHABER DISTRICT SALMON FISHERY BOARD**

**CHAIRMAN’S REPORT FOR THE YEAR ENDING MAY 31ST 2013**

Catches of migratory fish around the region remained fairly average throughout 2012. The larger rivers saw a continuing increase in MSW salmon as a proportion of their total catch, but 1sw grilse numbers continued to suffer. While rivers like the Lochy used to see up to 80% of their catch made up of grilse throughout the abundant marine survival period of 30 years ago, this figure has now reduced to around 50%. While this trend is not necessarily very good for angling catches and rentals, the overall long-trend health of the fishery through egg deposition is probably not being compromised due to the high fecundity of large hen salmon compared to their much smaller grilse counterparts.

Nevertheless this trend was not universal throughout the region and it was clear that a few systems had good fishing seasons with reasonable grilse numbers present. The Morar and Ailort systems were notable in this respect, as were one or two other smaller systems in the western side of the region.

Catches of sea trout remained close to historical lows, due almost undoubtedly to the continuing impact of sea lice within the estuaries where the post-smolt sea trout spend their whole year while at sea. As with other years there are glimmers of hope on the sea trout front – there are certainly more adult fish present in some estuaries and rivers than in recent years. But we are still a long way off talking about a positive and sustained recovery of this species.

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.

Fish farming remains perhaps the biggest threat to migratory fish populations in the region and while improvements in overall management are being experienced (the use of Ballan Wrasse as ‘cleaner fish’ in the battle against sea lice being a notable example), the industry continues to present us with a great many difficulties. There was much talk throughout the year, for instance, about new expansion plans following a deal signed by the Scottish Government with China. It has been vital for us to keep abreast of this and keep a keen eye on any plans for unsustainable development of farms in our region.

RAFTS, in a bid to further inform future fish farm locations, received money from the Scottish Government to draw up some Locational Guidance in the form of a map for the whole of the west coast. The Board took advice from the Lochaber Fishery Trust about the robustness of these guidelines. It transpired that the map was going to take into account neither wild smolt migration routes nor sea lice dispersal modelling from fish farms. Instead it was going to rely on measures such as the ranking river rod catches and electro-fishing data. Both the Lochaber Board and the Lochaber Trust therefore withdrew from the project and the whole Lochaber region does not feature on the map. Interestingly RAFTS have yet to publish their map 7 months after their agreed publication date and Marine Scotland have already confirmed that the tool will not be recognised in their marine spatial planning process. It also remains to be seen whether planning authorities will pay it any heed when looking at new fish farm applications.

Small scale hydros continue to make up a large part of the Board’s administrative workload. A sharp increase of new applications was seen in 2012, due in part to the currently available feed-in tariffs coming to an end at the end of 2013. All CAR licence applications were studied and vetted in our role as the relevant statutory body. While some of our concerns were addressed, with SEPA now employing their own fisheries specialist we are noticing that SEPA are taking a much more lead role in assessing the impacts of developments on migratory fish and other species. This has significantly lessened our influence in this regard but we remain vigilant on the potential impacts of all schemes nevertheless.

The very large Coire Glas pumped storage scheme above Loch Lochy continues to be very much on our radar and while there was little development on this matter through 2012, SSE were preparing to apply for all their consents in 2013, even though the scheme is still several years from fruition. The Board remain at the very forefront of these discussions and will make full representation as these applications are progressed.

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. Several incidents of poaching were thwarted throughout the year and at least 3 cases have been successfully prosecuted in Fort William Sheriff Court. On behalf of the Board, I would like to thank all of our water bailiffs for their very hard work.

The Aquaculture and Freshwater Fisheries Bill was debated throughout the year in the Scottish Parliament and is likely to receive Royal Assent by Autumn 2013. While addressing some of our concerns about certain aspects of fish farming (for instance lice reporting) the Bill also places new responsibilities on Fishery Boards on how to conduct our business in a professional and transparent manner. This will affect, for example, how we run Board meetings and how we publicise our activities. The Clerk will be keeping all Board members fully aware of these requirements over the coming year as they come into effect.

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.

Finally I would like to thank Jon Gibb for his tireless work on behalf of the board and all the rivers in Lochaber .

Michael Mann

Chairman