



LOCHABER DISTRICT SALMON FISHERY BOARD

2023 ANNUAL REPORT

The annual report summarises the work of the Lochaber DSFB to the end of February 2024, particularly with regards to the delivery of its statutory functions, powers and responsibilities.

Membership

Clerk – Jon Gibb, Camisky Streading, Torlundy, Fort William, PH33 6SP.

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Board Members

Michael Mann (Chairman)	Lochy
Colin Corlett	Shiel
Jonathan Hart	Spean and Leven
Astie Cameron	Lochiel Estate
Alister Sutherland	Coe
Andrew Shaw	Lochy
David Stewart-Howitt	Moidart
Grace Henderson	Morar
Tom Leslie	Ailort
David Gunn	Angling Club Rep
Neil Macneill	Angling Club Rep
Chris Cairns	Angling Club Rep

Lochaber Trust Representatives Rob Pitkin

Board Advisors

Angus Macdonald Highland Council

Catches

Another year of poor catches was recorded by the catchments within Lochaber. This follows several poor years in succession. Unlike recent years, water conditions were often more favourable in 2023 with reasonable summer and autumn rainfall. This makes the low catches even more concerning. On some rivers (eg River Lochy) there were more grilse in evidence than the previous year, but at the same time some of lowest summer salmon numbers for some years were recorded.

Against this backdrop the IUCN added Atlantic Salmon in Scotland to their red list and classed the species as 'endangered'. This is only 2 grades away from complete extinction. This applies to the whole of Scotland, as declines on the East Coast have been equally as sharp as the West Coast – it is estimated that there has been a 50% decline in UK populations since 2006 and an 80% decline is predicted by 2025.

We are clearly facing very worrying times for our local salmon populations.

Conservation Policy

National conservation measures applied during the 2023 season. Most rivers in the region (aside from 3) were assigned Grade 3 status which required 100% Catch and Release of all salmon and grilse. The Rivers Leven and Morar were Grade 2 which allows independent setting of rules, although it is notable that all of these rivers voluntarily return the vast majority (estimated over 97%) of all salmon and grilse. All rivers in the region also apply local voluntary rules, endorsed by the Lochaber DSFB, where 100% of all sea trout are also returned.

Due to the current national conservation measures not permitting coastal salmon netting, all levy to salmon netting station proprietors was refunded by the Board in 2023. It is proposed that this is continued in 2024.

Fisheries Protection and Bailiffs

There were 19 warranted bailiffs currently working on both a paid full-time and voluntary basis in the region in 2023.

There were no prosecutions for poaching in 2023, although several warnings were issued. Although illegal fishing and poaching are currently at a low level due to fish numbers, it

is important to maintain a constant vigilance and a programme of information and education. With one of the largest coastlines of all Fishery Boards in Scotland, the Board continues to seek ways of funding a proper fishery protection operation more akin to the protection afforded salmon in the East Coast rivers. There were no major pollution incidents reported by local water bailiffs in 2023.

Marine Scotland Science– 2024 conservation measures and river categorisations.

The Conservation Measures for 2024 have now been set and there are a few changes from the previous year. All rivers in the region have been set at Grade 3 with the exception of **Morar and Leven** which are Grade 2 and Grade 1 respectively.

The different categories and what they mean and what action they require is as follows-

Category	Probability of Meeting CL	Effectively CL Met in:	Advice
1	At least 80%	4 out of 5 years	Exploitation is sustainable therefore no additional management action is currently required. This recognises the effectiveness of existing non-statutory local management interventions.
2	60-80%	3 out of 5 years	Management action is necessary to reduce exploitation; mandatory catch and release will not be required in the first instance, but this will be reviewed annually.
3	Less than 60%	≤ 2 out of 5 years	Exploitation is unsustainable therefore management actions required to reduce exploitation for 1 year i.e. mandatory catch and release (all methods).

	<u>Gradings 2023</u>	<u>Gradings 2024</u>
Ailort	2	3
Aline	3	3
Inverie	3	3
Guiserein	3	3
Leven	2	1
Coe	3	3
Lochy	3	3
Nevis	3	3
Moidart	2	3
Morar	2	2

Scaddle	3	3
Shiel	3	3
Strontian/Carnoch	3	3

Over the last few months the DSFB has responded to several applications and consultations from developers as well as provided a point of information for the region's proprietors, fishery managers and anglers. I have also attended several meetings, such as the FMS Aquaculture Committee and the FMS Hydro Committees. The Clerk also deals with national issues through FMS and other organisations on a weekly basis. If you require any details from these day-to-day activities please contact me.

Some of the most important current issues being dealt with are the following (I can provide further details on any of the issues listed below) –

Change of fish farm production cycles in Loch Linnhe and beyond

We are undergoing a step change in the manner in which some of our major river estuaries will be used for salmon farming. This is partly in response to pressure exerted by the Fishery Board over many years about the impacts from sea lice from a 2-year production cycle and is also a general direction of travel for the whole industry at the moment against a backdrop of rising sea temperatures and resultant biological challenges. Gorsten and Linnhe fish farms in Upper Loch Linnhe have now been moved to a single year production cycle – with 'super smolts' being moved from Loch Etive to finish of growing for 12 months in these Lochaber farms. It will be critical for us to follow the lice burden on these fish over the next cycle to see if there is a marked change from the former 2-year production regime. A meeting will be held with MOWI at the end of each year to look forensically at the data.

Coire Glas pumped storage

Ongoing discussions are taking place with SSE about this major proposal for Loch Lochy. The River Lochy Association are also involved in those discussions. SSE have told us that a decision whether to press ahead with the project will be taken some time in 2025, following on from exploratory work taking place at the site. Meantime they are engaging with stakeholders such as the Board and looking specifically at issues such as water flow management at Mucomir. These are very complex matters and it will be a busy year of discussions over the next 12 months coming to some agreements over this. We are currently a long way for any agreed design for Mucomir. That said, SSE have confirmed that they will provide a new fish pass at Mucomir to replace the controversial Borland Lift (but this will only be installed if the scheme goes ahead).

West Coast Tracking project

The WCTP, which the Board were involved in on 2 Lochy tributaries, is now complete after 3 years of tracking. The Atlantic Salmon Trust have reported a delay in issuing the 2023 results, but these are ~~expect~~expected within the next few weeks. Of particular interest this year will be the results gained from the temperature and depth tags which may give an indication of predation in the near shore environment. Results ~~wil~~will be distributed to Board members once received.

Lochaber Line Gene Bank

With financial assistance from Salmon Scotland, a live gene bank is in the process of being set up for up to 9 Lochaber rivers. This is largely an insurance policy against the current threats to the viability of some genetically distinct salmon populations in the area. This is being undertaken at Drimsallie Hatchery near Glenfinnan. Smolts are being trapped on their way to sea and then taken to the hatchery and grown on to mature adults where they are kept as a captive broodstock. They may, if ongoing monitoring by the Trust biologists suggests a need, be used to stock the natal river with eyed ova. Otherwise they will be kept on an ongoing basis as an insurance against stock collapse. Smolts will be replaced every 3 years. This year it is hoped that the rivers Nevis and Shiel will be included – an application to trap 100 smolts from each river is currently with the Marine Directorate.

Loch Long Salmon

Discussions are continuing with this new fish farm company to set up an 8000 tonne closed containment salmon farm on Loch Linnhe near Duror. A planning application has yet to be received and the company are still awaiting an appeal against refusal on their site in Loch Long - they will probably await the result of that). There is very considerable local opposition to the proposal in Loch Linnhe. The Board also has some very serious concerns about the technology and the size of the farm involved and we are in direct discussion with the company as well as liaising closely with the Argyll Board as the neighbouring fisheries interest.

SEPA sea lice framework

After many years of negotiation and deliberation there is now new sea lice regulation in place which are generally tighter than previous regulatory requirement. There are certain

protection areas (eg Loch Linnhe) where regulation is tightest. Further expansion or new farms in these areas will become increasingly difficult. It remains to be seen whether the new framework will offer much in the way of improvements to existing farms outside these areas but the Board will be monitoring the situation carefully.

Hydro CAR licence review

As part of the third round of the River Basin Management Planning process SEPA will be reviewing the CAR licences of all hydros in the country. Fisheries Management Scotland are coordinating the response to this from the wild fisheries sector through the FMS hydro committee which I sit on. The Board are using the process to highlight, in particular, the issues surrounding rapid loch drawdown on both Loch Morar and Loch Lochy. It is thought this is happening due to the increased use of (unpredictable) wind power and the lochs are being used to cover periods of lack of wind. The results has been the lochs being drained to far lower levels than seen before. Morar fishery interests have now installed loch level loggers to track this. The Board is meeting with SSE shortly to discuss this and will continue to press this issue through the SEPA licence review process.

Marine Scotland hatchery licensing regime

The Board has recently been in discussion with Scottish Government about their current salmon stocking policy and their control of the licensing of salmon stocking. The stocking policy is largely out of date and there is a commitment in the Wild Salmon Strategy to rewrite it this year. The Board has pointed out that Scottish Government only become involved in the stocking licensing if the river is Grade 3 (Fishery Boards have the authorising powers on Grade 1 and 2 rivers). The process with the Marine Directorate is confusing and long (for example only 2% of the estimated river stock can be removed for a hatchery, but this is impossible if the river is down to its last few pairs and is in desperate need of support.) The current situation is that the rivers that are in most desperate need of stock support through the use of a hatchery are the most difficult rivers to get permissions. This needs to change and the Clerk has written to the working group looking at the new stocking policy with some suggestions on how this process could be simplified and streamlined.

Bund on River Coe

National Trust for Scotland has been in touch with the Board about removal of a bund on the River Coe to stop erosion and use the natural flood plain to dissipate river energy. Davy Gunn has been helping our thinking on this as the local expert on the river. There

are differing views on what the impacts of any such proposals are, but no work has yet been undertaken. The Board has been assured that a site visit will take place first before any concrete proposal is put forward. This is an important issue as it seems clear that the impacts from any such changes on the highly mobile River Coe will be significant. Discussions are ongoing with NTS and their agents Envirocentre.

Stocking consents

Stocking applications for the following catchments were approved in 2023 – Lochy, Spean, Arkaig and Roy.

Although the DSFB is the issuing authority for stocking consents, anyone considering stocking of any sort should be aware that the application must be preceded by an application to Scottish Ministers to remove adult broodstock **at any time** on a Grade 3 river, or after 31st October on a Grade 1 or 2 river. The advice is as follows (which should be read in conjunction with the Conservation Regulations which make it illegal to remove any salmon on a Grade 3 river) -

Parties seeking consent to collect wild brood-stock, rear their progeny and release them into a freshwater river or loch system must –

- Apply to Scottish Ministers for a licence to catch wild broodstock if such an activity is planned after 31st October (*it is illegal not to have this licence in your possession before netting broodstock*);
- Specify the origin of the fish from which stock will be taken;
- Where those fish will subsequently be released and at what life stage;
- Provide evidence to support the need for artificial intervention and demonstrate that the stock and carrying capacity is sub optimal. This should include evaluation of any negative effects on existing wild fish populations;
- Provide an evidence base to clearly state anticipated outcomes from the programme;
- Provide a description as to how the effectiveness of the action will be monitored;
- Taking account of brood-stock removal, demonstrate that sufficient numbers of adult fish are left to support natural production from that area;
- Record mortalities (including loss of adult brood-stock, and ova and fry from hatchery);
- Report on the outcome – what was the measured effect by monitoring the outcome?

Furthermore, should any manager plan to trap smolts in a Grade 3 river for hatchery purposes then permission is also required from Scottish Government. Please get in touch with the Clerk in these circumstances.

Priorities for 2024

The Lochaber DSFB will continue to work with all other stakeholders for the improvement of Lochaber's salmon and sea trout.

The Lochaber DSFB will continue to deliver its statutory function to the best of its abilities, using all of the available powers wherever necessary to protect and enhance migratory fish in the Lochaber region.

Mindful of the perilous state of all Lochaber salmon fisheries, the Board will continue to aim to keep proprietor levy as low as possible, the aim of any saving being for proprietors to invest locally in the research and management of their fisheries through their local sub Boards and management groups. The Board will continue to support this practical management of the fisheries while offering a central administrative facility through their part-time Clerk (principally in the issue of bailiff warrants, stocking consents, responses to national consultations and dealing with local consultations of a regional importance).

The Board will continue to engage with all stakeholders for the improvement of migratory fish and these will likely include (amongst others) the fish farming industry, the Scottish Government, the hydro-electric industry and local fishery interests. The Board will also continue to work closely with the biologists at the Lochaber Fisheries Trust and assist this charity in their ongoing local projects researching migratory fish.

Complaints to the Board

There were no complaints received by the Board in 2023.

Good Governance compliance

Meetings

The annual meeting of qualified proprietors was held online on 27th September 2023. This meeting was publicised on the Board's website and a copy of the notice was sent to the Scottish Government.

The annual public meeting for 2024 will be held in Fort William on 14th March ~~2024~~2023.

Annual Report and Accounts

This annual report will be published on the Board's website and a copy sent to Scottish Government.

The accounts for 2023 are published on the Board's website and a copy will be sent to Scottish Government.

Complaints

The Board has set up and maintains a complaints procedure which can be viewed on the Board's website. This has been sent to the Scottish Government. Details on the number of complaints and how they were disposed of are included above.

Members' interests

The register of members' interests is available from the Clerk on request. We have included a standing item at each Board meeting inviting Board members to declare new/amend existing interests and all such instances are recorded in the minutes of these meetings.