

MIGRATORY FISH COMMITTEE ANNUAL REPORT

Overview of the Committee's Work

The purpose of the Migratory Fish Committee (MFC) is to represent the public policy interests of SANA members, i.e. angling clubs and individual members. For those who might imagine that there can be nothing further from game anglers' interests that "public policy", think again.

If there are no fish in the burn, river or loch, there is no fishing opportunity. If there are fish but no access arrangements for ordinary people, the game is blown. Whether or not conditions are right for fish and whether fishing is available to anglers are vitally affected by public policy. Our quarry, in this case primarily salmon and sea trout, need clean water, and habitats in which they can feed and reproduce successfully. Not least for migratory fish, they need also to be able to go to sea, survive there and get back. All of these things are affected by public policy and the subjects below show the breadth of subjects that we have addressed in the past year.

Wild Fisheries Reform

First and foremost, involvement in "public policy" means telling government what anglers want and responding to what's on offer from them.

In the past year, the MFC had its suspicions confirmed - that politicians having pulled back from the full blooded Wild Fisheries Reform (WFR) would put the process on the back burner. We are still represented on the Stakeholder Group which is supposed to drive the remaining issues to a conclusion before legislation is brought forward to enable various reforms. However, the Group has not met since May 2017. Nonetheless, there has been quiet progress on a number of fronts.

In summer 2018, a national electro-fishing survey was launched to assess the status of juvenile fish populations. Importantly, it is not exclusively concerned with salmon. Marine Scotland Science (MSS) have committed to including trout in their juvenile survey modelling approach. Also, a project is underway to develop a genetics tool to differentiate between individual fish that are most likely to become sea or brown trout, whilst accepting that genetic identification of populations with a sea-going proclivity is not the whole story regarding this valuable resource.

Another aspect of advancing the evidence base for advising fishery management, is prospective rationalisation of the gathering of catch data. At present, both Marine Scotland and District Fishery Boards ask for the information – and come out with slightly different results!

There are a number of other projects underway under the WFR banner*. One worth mentioning here is funds have been made available to a project to assess the efficacy of catch and release. This will include estimation of survival rates, the first to be conducted under Scottish conditions.

**More information at <https://www2.gov.scot/Topics/marine/Salmon-Trout-Coarse/fishreform/refgroup>*

I expect that the next step in the reform process will be to reconvene the subgroup dealing with reformulation of the National Strategy. In that task, a key issue will be how non-migratory species are to be treated, after the decision that fishery boards will not have all species management responsibility. That is also a MFC interest because brown trout stocks in many parts of Scotland are also sea trout stocks. To safeguard those which go to sea, conditions have to be right for the whole population.

Clean Water

On behalf of SANA, the MFC in cooperation with the NMFC responded to publication of Scottish Water's draft business plan. Our purpose in doing so was to draw attention to two disgusting waste management practices, viz. inadequate sewage treatment and no sewage treatment when combined sewage outfalls are used - without proper recording or regulation.

This subject is so fundamental to both the freshwater environment and to the marine environment around our coast that we have decided, for the first time, to engage with the River Basin Management Planning process.

River Basin Management Planning (RBMP) is a process to commit the Government and other public bodies, and some private bodies too, to actions over the plan timetable to get water bodies into good ecological condition, wherever possible, and to make them better than they are now where it's not possible. It's enshrined in law, viz. Scottish law. Therefore, it will still be in force after/if we leave the EU from whence it came as the Water Framework Directive.

Our immediate interest is to follow-up on our call for better sewage treatment and an end to combined sewage outfalls. However, RBMP is the key route to looking after all the places where we fish. Therefore, SANA getting involved with RBMP should be a long-term commitment.

In submissions to the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) SANA has set its sights on making sure that regulation is adequate and properly enforced – especially as far as Scottish Water is concerned. Further, we've asked for anglers to be engaged in the process directly. Please note that there are two "basins" in Scotland: Tweed plus Solway; and the rest. We haven't quite got that covered. One or more volunteers from the Solway area would be appreciated.

Habitats for Fish

Another aspect of what makes for healthy conditions for wild fish, is how much water gets to lochs and rivers. The Scottish Government has eyes on a substantial increase in the area to trees. The MFC and NMFC have said that such ambition needs to be tempered by an appreciation of the downside when things go wrong.

Forest design and management with respect to fresh water should be integrated with local fishery management objectives i.e. within catchment planning. Things have gone wrong in the past and only 58 percent of existing forests are certified to be applying good standards. Therefore, there needs to be stricter enforcement and substantial penalties for non-compliance. Deterrents against bad practice are needed.

Survival at Sea

The headline concern, as ever, about marine survival has been the impact of the ever expanding and hardly-at-all-regulated fish farming industry. We made representation to the second of two parliamentary committees on the subject. They seemed to have listened, understood and made useful recommendations.

The first report, from the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee was on the environmental impact of salmon farming on the marine environment. It commissioned a report and invited evidence from selected individuals. The second committee to be involved in the subject was Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee. It had a rather wider remit and used the first report as “evidence”. More importantly it opened the subject up to inputs from all interested parties, including SANA.

While the first report was fairly damning in its assessment of the fin fish farming industry’s environmental performance, the second took the wider view of whether or to what extent the industry should be allowed to expand and under what terms. While its headline result was “no moratorium on expansion”, with two members of the committee dissenting, the report can be read differently. It was so dismissive of the adequacy of controls on the industry and emphatic that things need to change before any expansion takes place, that the report has placed a question mark on where the industry goes next. SANA thinks that closed containment of its stock, from hatchery to fully grown stock, is the only perfect answer.

From the perspective of the fish farmers themselves, they must know that, **if the Scottish Government implements the Committee’s findings**, compliance with the new regime will push them down this road. As reported by the MFC last year, we think that some of them are on message already.

The outlook for whether the Scottish Government will act as we hope can be judged soon. SEPA is consulting on a tougher regulatory regime. By the time this report is delivered, SANA will have responded – and we will have agreed with the parliamentary report. However, our words will explicitly include “closed containment”. The fish being farmed should have no direct contact with the wild environment. Their surplus food, other waste, chemicals and faeces should be collected and treated as industrial waste. They will not be exposed to wild sea lice and there will be no lice hotspots to harm wild fish.

We also made representations to the fish farmers’ landlord, Crown Estate Scotland, who control all the leases for sea cages. On that subject, there have been proposals to extend devolution further by granting local bodies that power to initiate leases and deal with the fish farmers directly. SANA said that is a very bad idea. By dividing such responsibilities, fish farmers would be able to play one area off against another, driving down rents and opening up further possibilities of new cages being put in places that are important migration routes for juvenile and adult wild salmon and sea trout. The outcome is awaited at the time of writing.

Our immediate concern on the survival of salmon that are already at sea is coastal netting. For a long time these mixed stock fisheries have been regarded as bad in principle, as well as in practice. They exploit stocks of multiple river systems without regard to which stock components are big enough to ensure adequate spawning stock.

We were happy to note the extension of the Scottish ban on coastal netting, beyond the initial three year period which has just finished. Also, we thanked the Scottish Government for its

continuing commitment of funds to that project. Netting rights in Scotland are not licensed fisheries as in England. They are private, and in many cases publicly-owned, property. Therefore, Human Rights legislation obliges compensation to be paid. That amounted to about £1.5 million over the three year period.

Meanwhile, we were dismayed at the continued large-scale exploitation by nets in the North East of England of salmon and sea trout, probably most of Scottish origin. Following a consultation, in which SANA was involved, the drift nets were scheduled to cease operation after 2022 and there was to be a slow reduction in the T&J nets by not issuing new licences when licensees retired. However, this timing was later brought forward, in 2017, to closure of drift netting from 2019 and closure of the T and J nets (these are “fixed engine” nets like the Scottish coastal nets) from 2018. In spring 2018, the Environment Agency kept them going using the spurious excuse that they were re-examining stock numbers in English rivers.

SANA was represented by Dr Andy Walker at the annual meeting of the North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organisation. His report is on the SANA website and he writes:

“This year, the Annual Meeting of NASCO (www.nasco.int) was held in June in Portland, Maine, USA and attended by 101 delegates, scientists, policy makers and representatives of inter-governmental and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), including myself from SANA. Why were we in Maine? It is a precautionary tale. By the middle of the twentieth century, the formerly huge natural runs of Atlantic salmon to U.S. rivers had fallen catastrophically to a few hundred fish, mostly to rivers in eastern Maine. In 2016, a new U.S. five-year plan was announced to redouble efforts to protect wild salmon and raise public awareness of their plight as a keystone species of great cultural and ecological significance. Does all of this seem familiar?

“Due to growing international concerns about the threats facing Atlantic salmon, NASCO was formed by treaty in 1984 and is based in Edinburgh [Secretary Dr Emma Hatfield e-mail: hq@nasco.int]. The Parties to the NASCO Convention are: Canada, Denmark (in respect of the Faroe Islands and Greenland), the European Union, Norway, the Russian Federation, and the USA. Iceland left but may be re-joining (again a feeling of déjà vu?). A very full agenda was completed during 10 – 15 June. Among the other business, updates were provided by ICES on the most recent international catches and scientific developments.

“Meanwhile, the production of farmed salmon continues to expand, with the major producing countries still prioritizing expansion of inshore marine cage rearing sites, often based near salmon rivers, also flouting agreed NASCO guidelines on the control of sea lice and genetic effects from escapes. The NGOS raised pertinent questions at NASCO on less than adequate performance in meeting conservation targets by some countries, including Scotland (salmon farming), and England and Wales (delay in curtailing remaining mixed-stock fisheries) .

As well as problems at sea, various likely causes of mortality of salmon (and sea trout) occur during their early life, including environmental impacts due to issues with freshwater quality and quantity, added to effects of Climate Change. Then there are remaining dams and other barriers to migration and possible increases in smolt predation due to a growing catch and release ethos towards larger trout and pike by anglers and a more restrictive public attitude over any ‘controls’ of avian and other predators. However, more scientifically-derived data in support of smolt protection might be more persuasive.

“Through its Missing Salmon Project, the Atlantic Salmon Trust is now part-funding large-scale acoustic tagging and tracking studies on selected Scottish rivers with collaborating agencies and fisheries trusts to highlight problems encountered by smolts and losses incurred during their downstream migration to sea. These studies should identify where the main problems are occurring and may allow practical solutions to be found. Also outlined at the NASCO 2018 annual meeting in Portland was ROAM, an innovative oceanic salmon tracking and monitoring project, deployed to identify the main areas at sea where fish are going missing, hopefully allowing better targeting of research resources in helping understand and, where possible, apply mitigation to these problems.”

MEMBERSHIP OF THE MIGRATORY FISH COMMITTEE

W Balfour	Brechin	2019	2+2A	4	*
O McLennan	Fortrose	2019	3+1A	4	*
J Stephen	Aberdeen	2019	0+4A	4	*
R C Campbell	Ch Edinburgh	2020	4	4	
R Picken	Irvine	2020	2+2A	4	
F Wight	Hawick	2020	3+1A	4	
J Pirie	Sec Aberdeenshire	2021	4	4	
A Walker	V Ch Pitlochry	2021	4	4	
J McKay	Perth	co-opted	2+2A	4	*

Above, for each member, are shown the number of meetings attended and the number which could have been attended from December 2017 to October 2018. Apologies tendered are also shown. Members who stand down from the committee at the 2019 AGM are marked with an * and are eligible for re-election

The number of committee members is below the eighteen allowed for. Although the present membership is reasonably spread over the country and several members also take an interest in rivers some distance from their homes, new members would be most welcome, especially ladies and younger members. The Committee is dominated by retired gentlemen who have the advantage of experience but lack the perspective of other groups.

In contrast to its early years in the late 1980s much committee work is now accomplished by e-mail and attached documents. Thus, even if unable to attend all meetings, members can often make essential contributions to committee work. The committee normally meets four times a year in Kinross.

Craig Campbell
17/12/18