**Urr District Salmon Fisheries Board**

**Chairman’s Report - Season 2016**

**Fishing**

Total reported rod and line catches for 2016 were **71** salmon and grilse, and **38** sea-trout – the equivalent figures for the 2015 season were 111 salmon and grilse, and 54 sea trout.

The river appears to be settling into a “bumping along the bottom” mode, and there is not much to be gained – apart from nostalgia – in harking back to the good old days of 2010 and before.

The pattern of much less predictable runs of fish – seen in recent years – continues, especially with regard to the autumn months (October and November). However,if we are blessed with good water in the summer months, then reasonable sport may be found, with a fair number of larger salmon in amongst the traditional summer grilse.

The major uncertainty during the 2016 season was of course the ruling that all salmon and grilse had to be returned, under the Urr’s category 3 status. There are strong indications that this led to a decrease in angling effort, thereby adding fuel to the perfectly understandable and widely held concern that a decrease in angling effort could be reflected by a drop in reported catches, which could in turn give rise to a view (at the centre of Government) that the river actually is in decline, so needs Cat 3 status – a virtual circle if ever there was one! (More on Cat3 and Cat 2 status below). The ScotGov creation of a £100k fund to assist fisheries – especially clubs and associations – to “manage” the impact of having to operate under 100% Catch and Release rules, proved to be quite an illusion, verging on misuse of public money – more on this during the AGM.

**Wild Fisheries Reform**

Alongside these “conservation measures” there had been proposed a whole raft of further legislation to redefine the way in which fisheries are managed on behalf of proprietors, tenants and anglers in general. The intention was that the existing Salmon Fishery Boards and Fisheries/River Trusts would be replaced by new Fishery Management Organisations (FMOs), within new Fisheries Management Areas (FMAs). After almost three years of planning, discussions and use of everyone’s time, these proposals have been dropped (largely, one suspects, because there is simply not enough money available for what had been proposed) – however, the conservation measures, and river gradings thereto, remain in force.

**The Urr’s Conservation Status for 2017**

For the 2017 season, the Urr will be graded as Category 2, which changes us from “100% Catch and Release” to **“Voluntary Catch and Release”.**

The Board has devoted a considerable amount of time to debating and agreeing what Cat 2 status means to proprietors, tenants and Urr anglers – the aim is to find a practical and fair compromise between over-complex regulation and no regulation. This whole topic is a separate agenda item for the AGM – it must be emphasised though that our Cat 2 status is by no means a “given” beyond 2017, for reasons that will be explained and explored later this evening. We will also have a general discussion on what issues and actions might be relevant towards helping us to retain the Category 2 status going forward, if at all possible.

**North American Signal Crayfish**

After a massive amount of hard work and miles of red tape, in the late summer of 2016 Buittle reservoir’s water was dropped to levels not seen since the 1930s droughts, and biocide was applied in order to eradicate the crayfish. Monitoring will be ongoing for a number of years to come, and Scottish Water still has some infrastructure work to complete – planned for early 2017 – but it is hoped that the reservoir will be able to be refilled and restocked, not only with trout, but also a range of invertebrates and other creatures, from spring 2017 onwards.

On behalf of the Board, I want to thank Dalbeattie AA, Scottish Water and Galloway Fisheries trust for seeing this delicate and time-consuming operation to its current conclusions – including the most careful protection measures to ensure the safety of the river down below.

**Fisheries Revaluation 2017**

All rod and line and netting fisheries are given a rateable value by the District Assessor, and the exercise of Revaluation, to come into effect in April 2017, is currently underway. The valuation of fisheries is based on catches rather than physical size, and the 2017 revaluation will use the catches reported to Marine Scotland for the years 2010 to 2014.

Each revaluation has a two year lead-in period, so the current process started on 1st April 2015 (this is referred to as the “Tone Date”), with proprietors asked to confirm details of their fishery(ies), including catches.

Once the Revaluation 2017 is completed, the Board will use the new rateable values as a basis for its Levy. However, this is very much against the background of the wide ranging changes in the way in which rivers are to be managed going forward, plus of course many proprietors may with justification claim that the value of their fishery has been materially impaired by the new conservation rules. It is probably unwise and unsafe simply to assume that the formula for valuation traditionally used by the Assessor will remain the same against these external factors. (For previous revaluations, District Assessors across most of Scotland have by default used a valuation formula of £50 per salmon/grilse caught, plus £12.50 (i.e. 25%) per sea trout).

The Board will continue to advise its proprietors as matters proceed, also will maintain its contact with the Assessor’s office. The Valuation of Fisheries, at the end of the day, affects all of us – even if we are not proprietors, the value of a fishery may have a direct effect on rental values and other pricing decisions such as permits.

**Board administration**

It has been my pleasure to chair the Urr Board over the past twelve months, and I should like to thank my fellow Board members for their support and input during the year. Particular thanks are due to the Clerk to the Board, George Gourlay, for keeping the wheels in motion and the finances on the right side of the fence. Furthermore it would be remiss of me to fail to mention the resignation from the Board of Captain Duncan Ferguson, of Glenlair. Duncan was one of the driving forces in the setting up of the Urr District SFB and served with distinction as its first Chairman. His contribution to the work of the Board over many years has been immense and he has our heartfelt thanks for that. A replacement Board member will now be needed, of which more in due course.

Richard Bellamy