**Urr District Salmon Fisheries Board**

**Chairman’s Report - Season 2021**

**Fishing**

Subject to final verification, the total reported rod and line catches for the 2021 season were a woeful **26** salmon and grilse, and **10** sea-trout – the equivalent figures for the 2020 season were 159 salmon and grilse, and 30 sea-trout; for the 2019 season the totals were 90 salmon and grilse, and 33 sea trout. The Salmon and Grilse total for 2021 is the lowest for many years, which, if repeated in 2022, may signal a crisis-point on numbers of fish returning to the river, which will be of great concern to all, whether individual anglers, tenants and proprietors, the Board and Galloway Fisheries Trust.

The lack of fish in the Urr this year is mirrored pretty much across Scotland, but whilst true, that of course is of little comfort to any of us. Reported angling effort, for 2021, was also down, by 31%, from the previous year – objectively, less angling effort may mean less fish caught, but as even those anglers who are out on the river several times each week were reporting seeing hardly any fish, that correlation between effort and catches may be somewhat theoretical!

Further on in this report, I have tried to explain the vital role which Galloway Fisheries Trust plays in helping all of us understand and manage the challenges facing the river – particularly relevant if indeed we are entering a period of worryingly low numbers of migratory fish entering the river – and I am pleased to say that during our AGM, GFT will give us further objective information and advice on relevant aspects of the issues involved.

**Regulation**

The Urr continued as a Category 2 river in 2021, and it has been confirmed that our Cat. 2 status also will apply for the 2022 season. Whilst that status quo is welcome, it is maybe surprising, given the downward trend in fish numbers in recent years.

The Conservation Principles recommended by the Board to reflect that status will remain in place during 2022. Those principles aim to allow anglers to keep some fish – under defined circumstances – but also are designed to promote sensible and sustainable protection of our ‘under threat’ migratory fish

I am very pleased to note from the Catch Returns that 94% of salmon caught in 2021 were safely released, and that 4 out of every 5 grilse caught also were released. Runs of grilse are keenly anticipated each year, and whilst not always living up to that expectation, in terms of timing and reliability, this class of fish is the most appropriate for carefully controlled ‘harvesting’. On behalf of the Board, I should like sincerely to thank all Urr anglers for their continuing and admirable efforts on the conservation front.

**Finance and the Levy**

The accounts for the 10 month period from 1st January 2021 to 31st October 2021 have been discussed and approved by the Board at its meeting last month, and are open for discussion at the AGM.

The Board’s income is almost wholly derived from the statutory levy on Urr proprietors. As proprietors will be aware, the levy is the mechanism by which the Board raises the funds necessary to its ongoing work, principally its contributions towards work undertaken on behalf of the whole river by Galloway Fisheries Trust, and its membership of Fisheries Management Scotland, who lobby the Scottish Government vigorously and effectively on behalf of all rivers.

The amount of the levy per proprietor is derived from the Assessor’s periodic assessment of the value of each fishery on the river. It is worth restating that the (rateable) value of each fishery is entirely a matter for the Assessor, and that, quite rightly, UDSFB has no involvement or influence whatsoever in the valuation process – it remains the absolute **right and responsibility** of each and every proprietor to make representation to the Assessor, in course of the Rates Revaluation process, if the proprietor feels that the valuation is wrong (particularly as the valuation formula uses catch data as a core input to the calculation).

The Urr Board’s levy was set at 48 pence in the £ for the 2021 financial year. As can be seen from the Accounts, this has resulted in income of £4,250 during 2021 . The items and amounts of expenditure, and discussions thereon, will be covered during the AGM, including the rate poundage for the levy going forward.

**What Does the Board Do for Proprietors?**

From time to time, the question of what the Board does for Proprietors (and their tenants), is asked. That is an entirely reasonable question, which I am happy to respond to, on behalf of the Board!

The Board’s mission, and responsibility, is to look after the interests of its proprietors in relation to the health of the river and its fisheries. As already referenced above, that responsibility is covered, in practical terms, through formal collaboration with Galloway Fisheries Trust, and, in ‘monitoring and lobbying’ terms, through membership of Fisheries Management Scotland.

GFT has a far-reaching and varied programme of work across Galloway each year, but at individual river level, GFT carries out:-

* an annual electrofishing exercise (which gives us a really valuable insight into the levels and spread of the juvenile (fry and parr) salmon and trout populations in the Urr and its tributaries;
* habitat surveys, particularly in the vulnerable upper reaches of the main river and tributaries – this informs the most cost-effective locations for habitat improvements, such as fencing and tree-planting;
* collaboration with other agencies to protect and restore peat areas, which are a fundamental part of watercourse and catchment ‘health’
* surveys in relation to proposed developments (windfarms, pylons etc), which may impact on watercourses in the catchment;
* a rolling programme to control and eradicate invasive non-native species (INNS), such as giant hogweed, Japanese knotweed, and Himalayan balsam (special funding for INNS control is on the AGM Agenda)

Our membership of Fisheries Management Scotland gives us valuable access to, and insights into, Scotland-wide issues, debate and consultations at Scottish Government and Agency level, which is essential, given the need for an holistic approach to many of the serious problems facing migratory fish in particular (salmon farming as an example, but also many other aspects).

**Board Membership**

Following the sad and untimely death of Donald Biggar, I am delighted to report that Jamie Biggar very kindly agreed to join the Board this year; also joining the Board are Martin Emkes (Munches Estate) and Joe Seed (representing Knockvennie). The Board is most fortunate in having an excellent spread of proprietor and tenant members covering the length of the river.

It has been my privilege 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 – we started our year with meetings over Zoom, but I am pleased to be able now to resume physical meetings – long may that continue. If the technology behaves, we may even try a blend of physical and virtual meetings, which can be helpful in enabling all to attend in one way or another.

Particular thanks, as always, are due to the Clerk to the Board, George Gourlay, for his ongoing stewardship of the Board’s admin and treasury functions, also to GFT for its

first-class support, advice and assistance to the Board throughout the year.

Finally, I wish to advise that, following the AGM, I will be standing down from the Board – having been involved with it for more than 20 years, as observer, proprietor representative, and latterly as Chair, I am confident that, with your support, the Board will continue to be effective in its roles outlined above.

Richard Bellamy

19th April 2022