

## **Urr District Salmon Fisheries Board Chairman's Report - Season 2017**

### **Fishing**

Total reported rod and line catches for 2017 were **104** salmon and grilse, and **48** sea-trout – the equivalent figures for the 2016 season were 71 salmon and grilse, and 38 sea-trout; for the 2015 season the totals were 101 salmon and grilse, and 54 sea trout.

We now have a full five years' of catches data since the dramatic downturn in the Urr's fortunes, which started in season 2013, with a drop of more than 60% from 2012. The five year average, 2013-2017 is an annual 92 salmon and grilse, and 40 sea-trout – so it may well be useful to gauge seasons going forward against those averages.

If we are looking for crumbs of comfort, it does seem likely, based on that five year period, that the bottom of the curve has been reached – whether we will see any discernible upward movement is a matter for optimistic speculation? The other emerging constants seem to be the disappearance of the historic back-end runs of fish, countered by the arrival of larger summer fish, and, unfortunately, fewer grilse – that pattern is widely repeated in many parts of Scotland.

It remains a matter of concern that angling effort on the river continues to be at historically low levels – whilst for those who do venture out, it more or less guarantees peace and quiet, it also of course means that even if fresh fish are entering the system, not many will be intercepted, and under the “formula” that undoubtedly impacts on the river's conservation category grading.

### **Regulation**

For the 2017 season, the Urr Water upstream of the Outflow Point (set, somewhat arbitrarily, by Marine Scotland at the Glen Black Stone a few hundred metres upstream from the Solway Yacht Club pontoons at Kippford) was “upgraded” to Category 2, having been Category 3 during the 2016 season. The river and its estuary downstream from the Outflow Point continued to be Category 3, thereby 100% Catch and Release.

A Category 2 re-grading did not actually mean that Marine Scotland had suddenly decided that the Urr was no longer an unsustainable river! Essentially our re-grading resulted from a “refinement” of the egg-deposition/wetted area formula used (objectively) to determine the health of a river in terms of its salmon populations. In that connection, the Board and indeed all anglers are heavily indebted to the Galloway Fisheries Trust for its hard work in persuading the powers that be that if you are going to take a formulaic approach, then it is a fairly basic requirement to make sure that the data feeding into the formula is complete and accurate!

Category 2 status requires Boards and angling interests to define and implement Conservation Principles – essentially these need to be guidelines aimed at encouraging moderation and conservation. Members of the Board, which of course includes a representative of both CDAA and DAA, spent a considerable amount of time discussing possible guidelines for the

2017 season. Those guidelines included the recommendation that no fish measuring in excess of 27 inches in length should be killed, but also covered a number of other significant measures.

To the huge credit of all proprietors and tenants, but especially so in the case of both angling associations, the Board's recommendations on Conservation Principles were fully accepted and adopted. The Board is keenly aware that all proprietors and tenants, but again especially the two angling associations, have to find a compromise between operating at "better than a loss" and "conservation"; the Board wishes to record its heartfelt thanks to proprietors and tenants alike for what was put in place for the 2017 season.

I also want to single out CDAA for a special mention, as its members and visitors achieved a staggering release rate of more than **92%** of salmon/grilse which were caught – a remarkable result, which I believe is unlikely to have been exceeded on any other Category 1 or 2 beat in Scotland!!

### **Cluden to Brighthouse Bay Gas Pipeline**

The laying of the new 50km long pipeline finally got underway in the late spring of 2017 – in relation to the Urr catchment, the route crosses the main river a short distance below Netheryett (Stepend) Ford, then goes westwards through or past East and West Logan, Guffogland, Meikle Knox, Craigton and Breoch. The "spread" – the 40m wide track that accommodates the pipeline trench and associated machinery paths – has involved significant movements of earth and the bringing onsite of huge quantities of machines and materials. A temporary bridge across the main river was installed during the summer, to enable the conveyance of machinery and materials onto the spread from the Haugh of Urr road.

The first issue which arose was the method to be used to cross the main river – the design specified that this was to be achieved via "directional drilling" (i.e. below the river bed); in commencing that drilling, however, the contractor (SICIM Roadbridge) concluded that this method presented unforeseen risks to the watercourse. Following a site meeting of all interested parties it was agreed to seek the opinion of an independent hydrologist from Newcastle University to assess the relative risks between persisting with the directional drilling or switching to an "open-trench" cut through the riverbed.

Following that assessment, the open-trench cut was undertaken; the crossing was accomplished without any big problems, and the temporary bridge was removed at the beginning of November 2017. Subsequently though, the newly-restored riverbank at the crossing site was **breached** twice during January 2018, causing the spread for several hundred metres west of the crossing site to be inundated, and potentially carrying silt off the spread and into the main river. An assessment of the impact of these breaches will be undertaken at the earliest (sustained low water) opportunity.

Meanwhile, significant siltation problems started to show themselves further along the spread, where it runs parallel to the **Buittle Burn**. According to decades of observations by local anglers, the Buittle Burn has always been no more "silty" than other tributaries such as the Spottes Burn – that is now no longer the case! So much silt has accumulated in the low gradient stretch of the burn between Stepend Bridge and its junction with the main river that with every rise in the water – not even a big rise – silt now flows from the burn into the main river, causing heavy discolouration all the way down to Craignair Bridge and below. From late summer 2017 onwards, anglers on Dalbeattie AA beats, and the Munches Private Beat, lost many days of fishing because of the state of the water.

The siltation origin points along the spread have been identified, and a huge amount of time and effort expended by the Board, GFT, Roadbridge and SEPA to try to resolve the problems. To a great extent, those mitigation measures have been successful, but the problem of the accumulated silt may very well persist for some considerable time to come? Efforts are continuing to assess and deal with the silt issues.

### **The Urr's Conservation Status 2018 and beyond?**

For the 2018 season, the Urr will continue as Category 2, and the Board is recommending that proprietors and tenants should follow the same conservation guidelines as for 2017. Following representations from the netting proprietor at Kippford, the Board asked Marine Scotland to move the Urr's Outflow Point downstream from the Glen Black Stone to the southern end of Glen Isle ("Starvation Point"), on the basis that the Board saw no reason why the proprietor's right to fish a haafnet at Kippford could be challenged on conservation grounds, given its low-impact, together with the carcass tagging regulations. Scottish Ministers received similar 'Outflow Point requests' from the DSFBs for the Nith and the Oykel, but only the Urr and the Oykel proposals were approved.

Following that approval, the Board has defined a number of Conservation conditions for the operation of any haafnet under category 2 conditions, to which the Kippford proprietor has agreed. Those conditions include releasing all fish measuring in excess of 27 inches. The Board and GFT will also work with the Kippford proprietor to see what catch data (including fish released) might be obtained and recorded, towards a better understanding of what changes are occurring in the patterns of runs of fish entering the river.

Considerable doubts exist as to what conservation category grading the Urr might receive beyond 2018. At the level of the formula, it is pretty evident that the sharply diminished catches seen since 2013 almost certainly will pull us back down to Category 3.

If the Category 3 grading does come to pass, the Board will work with its partner, GFT, to put in an appeal; possible and plausible grounds for appeal may very well be found in terms of the solid progress which can be demonstrated towards conservation measures and actions, the negative impact of the pipeline on catches on the DAA and Munches Private beats, the joined-up approach to netting and rod and line fisheries etc etc.

### **Dalbeattie Reservoir**

In my report for 2016, I recorded that it was hoped to refill and restock the reservoir in Spring 2017. That did not happen, principally because the reservoir owner, Scottish Water, spent the year struggling to decide whether to install new (siphoning) pipework, or to abandon the reservoir and remove the dam altogether. Just a few weeks ago, that decision was made, and SW has confirmed that the new pipework will be installed, meaning that the reservoir should be able to be re-opened for fishing and leisure access, hopefully by Spring 2019. This is great news, and heartfelt thanks are due to both Dalbeattie AA and to Galloway Fisheries Trust for their hard work and determination not to give up on efforts to see the reservoir's future safeguarded!

The Board's focus during 2018 and beyond will be to ensure that if there are any surviving crayfish, they will not be able to reach the river from the reservoir.

### **Fisheries Revaluation 2017**

In April 2017, all rod and line and netting fisheries on the Urr were valued by the District Assessor, under the 2017 Revaluation exercise. The revaluation process used the catches reported by each fishery to Marine Scotland for the years 2010 to 2014.

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Monday 12<sup>th</sup> March 2018

The pattern of generally reducing catches had an effect on the calculation of values, and most fisheries saw their valuations either reduced or staying unchanged.

From the Board's perspective, the amount of money needed to enable the Board to function remains reasonably unchanged year on year – therefore the Board's levy "rate in the pound" is adjusted in order to raise the required amount in total; in that way, fisheries whose valuation has dropped, in practice will receive a levy demand more or less the same as before; fisheries whose valuation has not reduced end up paying slightly more.

This whole process is entirely independent from the rights of any proprietor to appeal directly to the Assessor's office against the revaluation figure.

### **Board administration**

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. Two new members have kindly agreed to join the Board – Angus Ferguson from Glenlair, and Tony Graham from Knockvennie – we shall enjoy the benefits of their wise counsel and knowledge in the coming months.

Particular thanks, as always, are due to the Clerk to the Board, George Gourlay, for his astute handling of the necessary evils of administration, communication and finance.

*Richard Bellamy*

12<sup>th</sup> March 2018