



EXTRAORDINARY MEETING OF THE DEE DISTRICT SALMON FISHERY BOARD
Maryculter House Hotel, Godfrey Room and by MS Teams
13:00, Monday 7th November 2022

Present: Lawrence Ross, (LR) Chairman
Paul Adderton, (PA)
Victor Beamish, (VB)
Shane Christie, (SC)
Gavin Clark, (GC)
Sam Fleming, (SF) – MS Teams
Andy Ford, (AF) – MS Teams
Martin Gardner, (MG)
Edward Humphrey, (EH)
Scott Rutherford, (SR) – MS Teams
Andrew Walker-Okeover, (AWO) – MS Teams
Mike Wilson, (MW)
Iain Wood, (IW)

In attendance: Lorraine Hawkins, (LH)
Carol Mair, (CM)
Edwin Third, (ET)

Apologies: Tara Spiers, (TS)
Craig Stewart (CS)
Keith Young, (KY)

Invited attendee: Sandy Bremner, (SB) Chairman RDT

The Board were reminded of their responsibilities to the Dee DSFB and to state whether they had any declarable interests in agenda items.

1. Apologies

As tabled above.

2. Chairman's introduction

Thank you for the submissions and apologies for having put you under a bit of pressure with the response time. Lorraine will summarise the responses shortly but before she does that, I want to set out what is expected of this meeting.

This is not the day when we will set a policy – we could not possibly do that in an hour. Today is about progressing matters towards setting policy at the Board meeting next month. Based on today's discussion, Lorraine and I will set out a pathway to making a policy decision. This will be sent to you and refined by way of email exchanges over the next month.

The Stocking Review is clear that actions must be river specific. Furthermore, there are limitations on the types of stocking available to the Dee. Having removed all manmade obstacles bar the Garlogie dam, mitigation stocking (which is what most of the cases cited in the review do) is unlikely to be applicable. Enhancement stocking is unproven, possibly damaging, almost certainly not going to be approved for an SAC and more importantly is I think not what most anglers and proprietors want to see. That leaves us with conservation and or restoration stocking, which several of you have mentioned as indeed did many of the respondents to the review. To help us get a better understanding of what is possible here, Lorraine is going to describe in detail some of the stocking-related actions that could be considered.

3. Stocking review

LH covered a summary received from 9 respondents.

1 Did the Stocking Review cover everything you needed it to, and did it provide you with answers?

Unanimous 'Yes'. Noted it was good for engagement. Comment made that there is no standard measure of success of existing stocking programmes so it is harder to draw conclusions on their successes.

2 Do you think any activities highlighted in the Review but not already covered in our current Fisheries Management Plan require to be investigated or actioned?

FMP is well-prioritised and comprehensive x4 – stay on course with this.

One comment was that we need to do something given the desire for action. Some specific suggestions were also made -

- Fish counter x2 – for stakeholders keen for more information. Further exploration.
- Gene banking could be investigated and seems a sensible precaution. X2
- Fry distribution might be worthy of investigation if we can identify suitable areas to apply it.
- Genetic structuring may be worthy of investigation
- Respondent keen for stocking – need immediate redd counts and habitat review to inform stocking.

A couple of people also specifically highlighted the decline of Spring fish and the reasons for this – suggestion that more efforts are made to identify the problems, including some focus on the upper catchment and investigating the Girnock/Baddoch.

An annual population model was suggested, which would lead to restoration stocking as an action at some predetermined stock abundance level.

3 On the basis that we would need to know what problem stocking is addressing, where it will address this problem, and how we would know if it's been successful, do you think there are any specific problems on the Dee for which stocking could be considered?

Two are in favour of stocking, suggesting there are opportunities. Consider genetic analysis to monitor. Possible stocking might be for mitigation against floods, to help spring fish, and mitigation against predation.

Other respondents (6) were not in favour of stocking, a couple of comments were that focus should be on habitat, also a focus on predation was raised, and a focus on positive promotion of the Dee fisheries. Concern was also raised for impact on genetics.

Girnock/Baddoch was raised by a second respondent, suggesting we look at these experimentally as restoration sites given their strong collapse.

Also suggested that we should pay attention to results from genetic studies and Smolt to Adult Supplementation trials in the future.

LH covered various types of stocking:

Fry redistribution - Move fry from high-density areas to low-density areas.

Benefits

- Doesn't remove broodstock
- Doesn't affect stock genetics

Challenges

- Potential to harm fry during capture
- Identifying suitable microhabitats is challenging
- Delivering at the scale needed

e.g. Girnock – best attempt. 40% increase in parr. But parr habitat is limiting factor.

=> Focus on 'whole life' survival

Board members comments;

- Are the fish not best to decide? It would mean a lot of work to identify areas and rivers are ever-changing so this would be on-going work. LH – could be useful in certain situations, e.g. after a pollution incident.
- Habitat work being undertaken is producing natural areas. ET – with the LWS work and the reconnection of channels the fry is redistributed naturally.
- Spawning area needs to provide food. What is stopping the fry finding food in their natural environment?
- The upper tributaries became unstable after Storm Frank so more habitat work needed to stabilise it. ET – work is being done to create stable gravel for spawning.
- Girnock losses was from fry to parr stage, is that due to lack of fry habitat? ET – habitat types (for fry, parr) are not evenly distributed and need to spread along the river. There is no over-wintering habitat. This is required for the whole of life cycle. Need cover and deeper water.
- Should samples of inverts be taken before reintroducing? ET – need to look at all parameters to check all this. This will require lots of fieldwork each year as there is no point introducing if they are not going to survive.
- Are there areas which have below sustainable levels? LR – Girnock & Baddoch. Is there a relation between the traps and the level of decline? A complete survey will be required. Might get experimental status to check. GC – would suggest you don't experiment in an SAC river.
- Should the traps at Girnock & Baddoch be removed? LH – MSS have an agreement with the landowner but we have a valid argument to change to modern collection methods. We are currently in discussion but they don't believe the traps are an issue, they have suggested better predator control.
- Do MSS share all their information? – LH – yes but we generally need to ask for it.

Kelt reconditioning - Female broodstock removed from river, kept in a hatchery and stripped of eggs over multiple years. Eggs stocked into the river.

Benefits

- Don't need to take female broodstock from the river every year.

Challenges

- Needs a large facility
- Fish health risks
- Tay experience is that females spawn later in subsequent spawning – hard to find unspent males
- Unknown impact of 'reusing' spawners on egg quality

Board members comments;

- Would this be in salt or freshwater? LH – fresh. It is normal to have one river source.
- Could the Dee/Don/Ythan/Esk be combined for one hatchery? LH – if this option was considered there would be no reason not to.
- Tay is doing parr rather than smolt. LH – depends on the licensing conditions.
IW offered to organise a visit to the site at Almondbank, which will give an indication of the scale of the building size required. Drawback is the amount of chemicals used to protect against disease. Water is drawn from the river, but the river now has low flows in summer.
- There is the danger of an effect on epigenetics with the development of eyed ova not being in river.
- Could a closed container be used on land which gives advantages in filtration etc?

Smolt to adult supplementation - Smolts are captured from the river and reared to adults in a hatchery; adults released back into the river to spawn naturally.

Benefits

- Bypasses the stage/environment with greatest mortality
- Natural spawning – genetics
- No hatchery rearing impacts on juveniles
- Avoids taking wild broodstock

Challenges

- Impact of fish not going to sea – no marine selection phase – weakening future gene pool?
- Cost of hatchery & husbandry skills

Board members points;

- How and where would the stock be reintroduced? LH – that would be for the Board to decide.
- Could the hatchery be at sea? LH – the fish don't need the marine environment to mature. ET – the fish would be put back into the river when they would be spawning, and therefore is not a fishery enhancement for the rods.
- How would the progeny know how to navigate to Iceland and back? LH – this is being looked at but is unknown at the moment.
- Would this be commercial due to the costs involved? LH – main cost would be for husbandry skills.
- Would the fish have a geographical disconnect, smolts have 2 years to be imprinted? ET – the sea stage markers would be missed out.

Gene banking

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Preserves genetic diversity and maintains it for replenishing wild populations in the future when wild survival is higher.

Benefits

- Future-proofing – preserves genetic diversity
- Might provide extra fish for stocking
- Time-limited

Challenges

- Does not increase numbers of fish
- Expensive and could not be done 'in-house'
- Need to understand genetic structuring in the Dee
- Time-limited

Board members points;

- Although the milt is time limited it is for a long time.
- Norwegian government, through the Norwegian Environment Agency, finance gene banking.
- Could the Dee do this before any other stocking proposals? LH – finance would be sought from elsewhere, possibly AST but there are other opportunities to explore.
- Could the milt be flown to Norway, where they have the storage facility in place already? LH – that could be a possibility.
- This doesn't address how ova is put back into the system.

LR thanked the Board members for their comments which would better able the Board to consider all the options.

Communication

LH informed the Board members that the River Office was asking for their help in getting the messages out.

- o Be more transparent with our views and actions, e.g. predator messaging to the public.
- o Message more on plight of salmon and their issues.
- o Correct facts – e.g. the idea that trees suck up water and will lower the water table still persists and should be challenged clearly.
- o No evidence that habitat restoration is working – repeated by a handful of respondents and needs addressing in our communications.

The Board agreed that although information is constantly issued from the River office in various formats it is not always understood and in some cases not even read.

Board members comments;

- Are we selling ourselves properly in the information issued?
- The walk and talk sessions are well received by those who attend.

- Are people fully aware of the licence regulations surrounding predators the Board has to adhere to? For example, if bangers were used to scare goosanders could they inadvertently disturb other protected species which would be an offence.
- Habitat improvement is best but takes time. It looks like anglers want more rod caught fish, which is why a hatchery is constantly requested. It does not necessarily add to the rod catch and most scientific evidence shows it could be damaging.
- More work with community groups.
- Do anglers care about genetics?
- Should information be put out from the FMP about what is happening now and be framed in terms showing immediate effect up to long term effect?
- Ghillies are our most valuable commodity in getting information out to anglers. Is information issued to proprietors getting passed out to them? Should we have talks/classes with the ghillies directly? Are short whatsapp info bulletins better?

LR thanked the Board members for their comments.

It was noted that 129 responses to the questionnaire had been received, whilst on one hand it was surprising to actually receive this number it was at the same time disappointing. The question is “Was it communicated properly?” but also realising that apathy is desperate, although there was passion in the responses received.



Signed.....

Date 14/12/22.....

Lawrence Ross, Chairman