



NESS DISTRICT SALMON FISHERY BOARD

2016 Annual Report

Including Accounts to Year Ending 15 May 2016



www.ness.dsfb.org.uk



NESS
District Salmon Fishery Board

NESS CASTLE *Lodges*



A WORLD CLASS FISHING BREAK

At Ness Castle Lodges on the banks of the River Ness, you can enjoy superb private salmon fishing whilst revelling in luxuriously appointed 5-star accommodation. It's the perfect escape for family and holiday groups seeking first-class facilities surrounded by the glories of the Scottish landscape.

The Lodges offer a mile of double bank salmon and wild brown trout fishing on some of the river's best fly water. With an experienced 3 times world spey casting champion ghillie to hand for advice and casting tuition, anglers can fish from the bank, wade or drift in the boat, and enjoy superb sport amid idyllic surroundings.

For more details, contact:
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Acronyms and Abbreviations

ASFB	Association of Salmon Fishery Boards
CAR	Controlled Activities Regulations
CL	Conservation Limit
DSFB	District Salmon Fishery Board
FFL	Freshwater Fisheries Laboratory
FMO	Fisheries Management Organisation
IAC	Inverness Angling Club
IFM	Institute of Fisheries Management
INNPS	Invasive Non Native Plant Species
MH	Marine Harvest
MFTI	Moray Firth Trout Initiative
MSLFB LG	Marine Scotland and Local Fisheries Biologist Liaison Group
MSS	Marine Scotland Science
MSW	Multi Sea Winter
NASCO	North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organisation
NBFT	Ness and Beaully Fisheries Trust
NDSFB	Ness District Salmon Fishery Board
NoSHEB	North of Scotland Hydro Electric Board
PAW	Partnership Against Wildlife Crime
PIT	Passive Integrated Transponder
RLI	Rivers and Lochs Institute
SAC	Special Area of Conservation
SEPA	Scottish Environment Protection Agency
SNH	Scottish Natural Heritage
SSE	Scottish and Southern Energy
SSSI	Site of Special Scientific Interest
THC	The Highland Council
UHI	University of the Highlands and Islands
WFR	Wild Fisheries Reform

Foreword

CHAIRMAN



When I wrote my introduction last year I acknowledged that it had been the busiest and most challenging year that the board had faced. I did not expect to have to repeat that statement again. The work load for salmon fishery boards, particularly boards with such a dedicated team as ours, now seems to be unending. On behalf of all the anglers and proprietors in the Ness district I can only express my sincere gratitude and appreciation for the work that Chris and his team continue to put in to dealing with the myriad of demands placed on them.

The Scottish Government's Wild Fisheries Reform process continues to roll on with no clear end in sight. We have, and will continue to engage constructively with the government and adjacent fishery boards to explore the potential ways forward to achieve the government's goals. Last year's conservation regulations meant that no fish could be killed anywhere in the system. A similar categorisation was proposed for this year, but following very constructive discussions with Marine Scotland, a way forward has been agreed which allows for a limited harvest while protecting the vulnerable spring run in to the River Moriston.

Our River Garry restoration programme took a big step forward last year and we now have smolts developing well in the Drimsallie hatchery. This programme has only been possible through cooperation between the Board, SSE, Marine Harvest, UHI and the hatchery owners. Such cooperation, which is mirrored in the cooperation we received from Marine Scotland and with the work we are doing with our netsmen, is a clear demonstration of the way forward.

Our salmon face an uncertain future in a world where there will be increasing demands placed on them, on the environment in which they live and on the food resources they rely on to survive. We must give them all the help we can.



Michael Martin
Chairman

DIRECTOR



Provisional catch returns indicate the best 'spring' salmon catches for 21 years and good numbers of early summer salmon. As with many other rivers across Scotland, the back end of the 2016 season did not fare quite so well, with disappointing catches of grilse and autumn salmon. Despite this, total catches for the season were good, with the 1,050 fish reported to date representing the second highest catch for six years.

We have seen our workload increase year-on-year, with a greater focus on science and management. Unfortunately our resources have not increased at the same rate, meaning that more than ever we have to do 'more for less'. Particular successes this year include the pragmatic 'dual grading' solution to the issue of conservation limits in the Ness district. We look forward to working with the Scottish Government to refine the assessment of the River Moriston SAC. The Upper Garry Restoration Project is also coming together well after a couple of difficult years.

There are major changes ahead in terms of Wild Fisheries Reform. We will continue to work with the Scottish Government and the wider wild fisheries network to ensure the best outcome for the Ness system. Thank you for all your support over the last year.



Chris Conroy
Director

About Us

The Ness District Salmon Fishery Board (NDSFB) is a statutory body responsible for the protection and enhancement of salmon and sea trout fisheries in the Ness district. It was constituted under the 1862 and 1868 salmon fisheries legislation, subsequently amended in the Salmon Act 1986 and the Salmon Conservation (Scotland) Act 2001 and more recently amalgamated under the Salmon and Freshwater Fisheries (Consolidation) (Scotland) Act 2003.

Salmon fishing rights in Scotland are private heritable titles that are registered separately from land. As such these titles can be bought and sold like any other property. In Scotland, the cost of the local administration, protection and improvement of the fisheries is privately financed by the proprietors.

Nick Barker with a 20lb plus salmon caught on the Inverness Angling Club beat of the River Ness in July 2016



The district boards finance their work by levying a rate on the salmon fishery owners in the district. The 2003 Act states that a district board shall have the power to impose an assessment, to be known as the fishery assessment, on each salmon fishery in their district. The fishery assessment is assessed at such uniform rate as is determined for all fisheries in the district by the board and shall be levied according to the valuation of a fishery as entered onto the valuation roll.

Elected representatives of those salmon fishery owners provide the core of the membership of the board. Since 1986, the boards are required also to include representatives of salmon anglers and salmon netsmen in the district. A further revision to the constitution of the boards was made in 1999 to allow for even wider representation on the boards by other parties who may have an interest in salmon stocks or fisheries.

A district salmon fishery board may do such acts, execute such works and incur such expenses as may appear expedient for:

- The protection or improvement of the fisheries within their district;
- The increase of salmon (and sea trout); or
- The stocking of the waters of the district with salmon (and sea trout).

Our Team

BOARD MEMBERS

Board members are elected triennially with the Salmon and Freshwater Fisheries (Consolidation) (Scotland) Act 2003 specifying who may stand for election, how many may be elected and how many may represent the lower and upper proprietors. The latest elections took place in September 2016. Board members are all volunteers and are non-remunerated for their time and effort. The elected board members subsequently elect one of the members to be their chairman. The current board members are as follows:

Representatives of Upper Proprietors

Michael Martin, Chairman (Mandate Dochfour, River Ness)
 David Sutherland (Proprietor Ness Castle, River Ness)
 Ryan Rutherford (Mandate Ness-side, River Ness)
 Angus McGruer (Mandate, River Oich)
 Annie Girvan (Mandate, River Moriston)
 Dr Robert Morgan (Mandate, River Garry)

Representatives of Lower Proprietors

Cllr Ken Gowans (Mandate Highland Council, River Ness)

Co-optees of salmon Anglers and Tenant Netsmen

Alexander Patience (Netsmen)
 Graham Mackenzie (Ness District Anglers)
 Eric Craig (Inverness Angling Club)
 Neil Cameron (Ness and Beaully Fisheries Trust)

Although not a legal requirement, the Ness DSFB invites further representation onto the board in a non-voting capacity.

Non-voting Attendees

Dr Alastair Stephen (Scottish and Southern Energy)
 Kenneth Knott (Forestry Commission Scotland)
 Ben Leyshon (Scottish Natural Heritage)
 Dr Melanie Smith (UHI Inverness College)
 Andrew Steel (Scottish Environment Protection Agency)

BOARD STAFF

The board employs a number of full and part time staff responsible for the day to day management and delivery of its core duties and responsibilities:

Director/Clerk to the Board

Chris Conroy

Head Water Bailiff

John MacColl

Seasonal Water Bailiffs

Billy Orrock
 Mike Purcell

Secretary to the Board

April Conroy

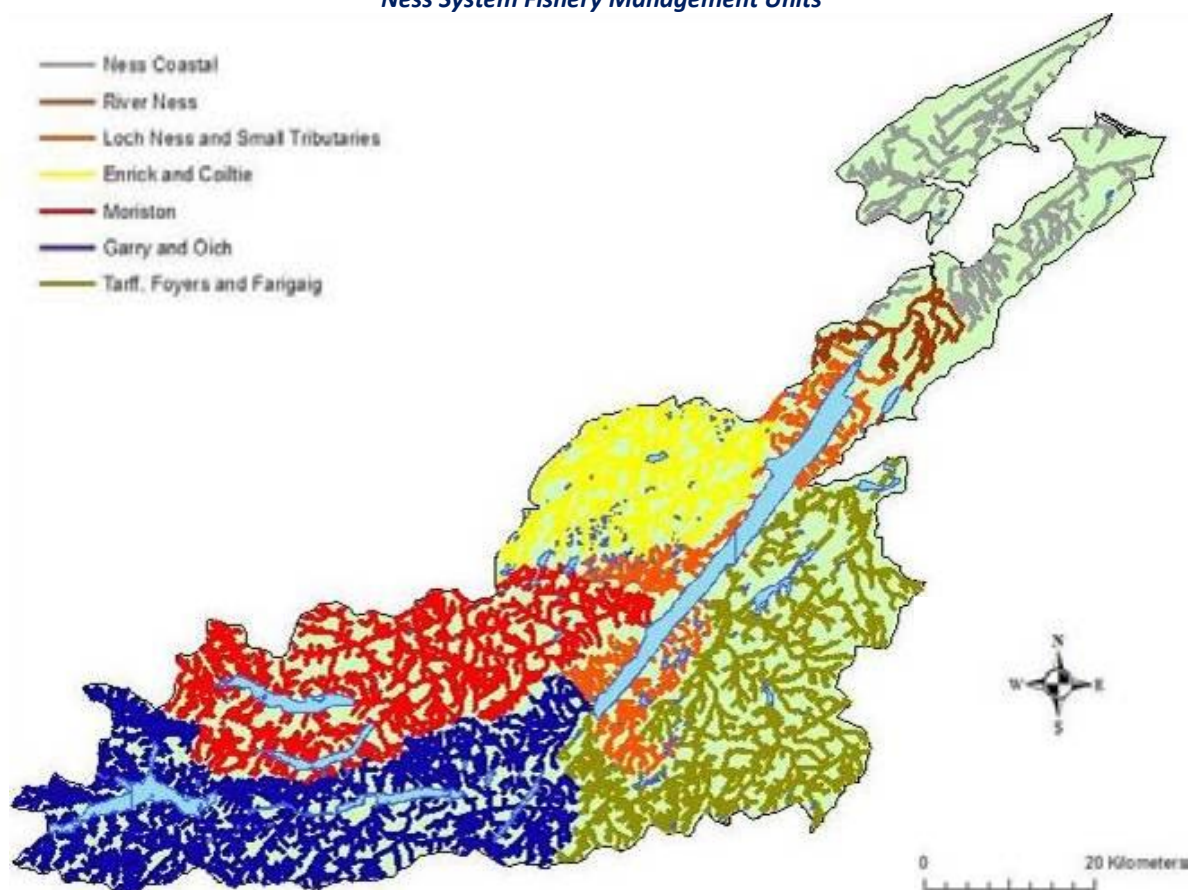
Voluntary Water Bailiffs

Graham Mackenzie	Nick Barker
Ryan Rutherford	Chris Daphne
Gordon Armstrong	

The Ness System

The Ness catchment is the largest in the North Highlands and drains approximately 2000 square kilometres of land. The upper reaches extend almost to the west coast, close to Loch Hourn and Loch Nevis. The land drains east and north through the Great Glen before entering the sea in the Moray Firth at Inverness. For management purposes the district can be sub-divided into seven key management units.

Ness System Fishery Management Units



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Each of these management units is described in further detail below:

- **Ness Coastal** - Inverness Firth and smaller coastal burns, particularly important for sea trout but also salmon;
- **River Ness** – The temperature of the main River Ness is kept artificially high by Loch Ness, so it has no temperature barrier. This unit also incorporates the key tributaries of the main river, including the Holm Burn and Allt na Skiach Burn;
- **Loch Ness and Small Tributaries** – The famous loch extends to 37km with smaller tributaries, the mouths of which are important spawning areas for salmon, trout and Arctic charr;
- **Rivers Enrick and Coiltie** – Flowing into Urquhart Bay and supporting one of only a few alluvial woods

remaining in the United Kingdom, designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). Also thought to be important spawning areas for summer and autumn salmon and grilse;

- **River Moriston** – Designated as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) for freshwater pearl mussel and Atlantic salmon. It supports an important ‘spring’ salmon fishery and is heavily impacted by large scale hydro-electric schemes;
- **Rivers Garry and Oich** – The River Oich runs parallel to the Caledonian Canal, with extensive modifications being made to its course during the construction of the canal. The two rivers are separated by Loch Oich. Both the Garry and Oich support important ‘spring’ salmon fisheries and are heavily impacted by large scale hydro-electric schemes; and
- **Rivers Tarff, Foyers and Farigaig** – All support salmon populations to a greater or lesser degree and form important juvenile and nursery areas. They are, however, less important in terms of angling. The Tarff and Foyers are impacted by hydro-electric schemes.

In addition to the above, the Caledonian Canal intersects the Ness system at various points. The canal runs some 60 miles (97 km) from north-east to south-west. Only one third of the entire length is man-made, the rest being formed by Loch Dochfour, Loch Ness, Loch Oich and Loch Lochy (in the neighbouring catchment).

A cold morning at Inchnacardoch Bay on Loch Ness in November 2016



What We Do

FISHERIES MONITORING

The NDSFB works in close partnership with the Ness and Beaully Fisheries Trust (NBFT) and others to gain a detailed and up to date understanding of the status of salmon and sea trout populations within the district. This allows us to make an informed assessment of the potential impacts of development proposals, assess applications for scientific and other exemptions to the 2003 Act and to inform our fisheries management activities.

FISHERIES MANAGEMENT

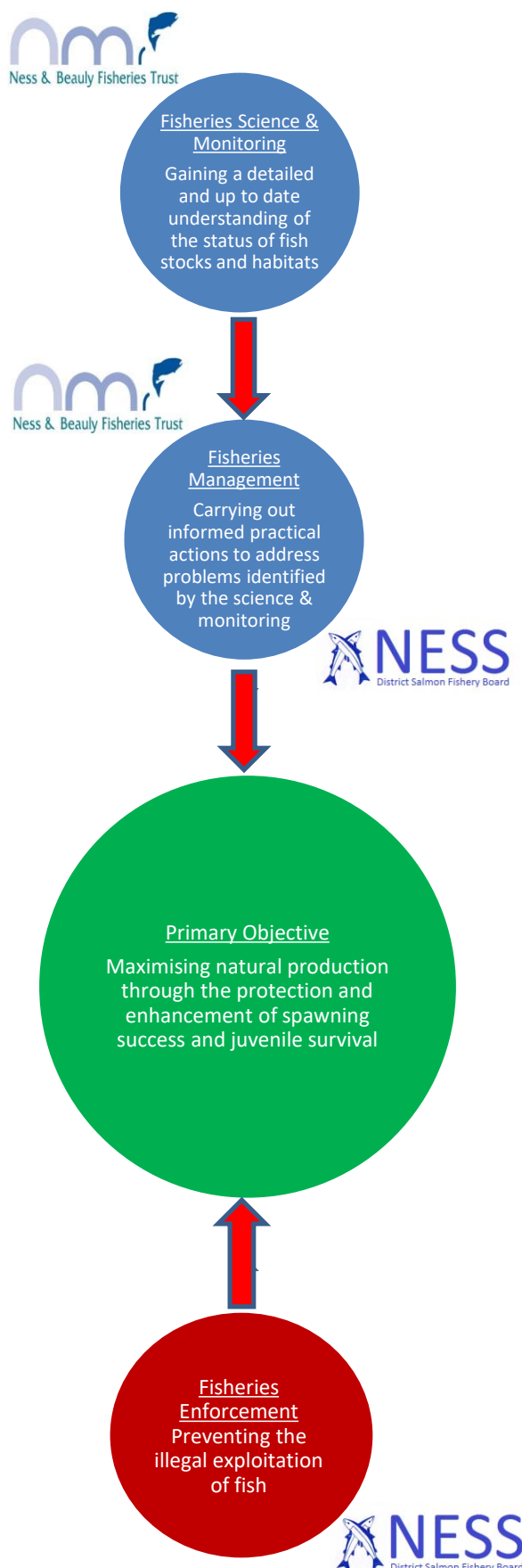
The production of juvenile salmon and sea trout in a river system is limited by the availability of good quality spawning and nursery habitat. The principle aim of our fisheries management activities is to maximise the natural production of salmon and sea trout in the Ness system through the protection and enhancement of spawning success and juvenile survival. We work with a wide range of partners to achieve these aims and objectives.

FISHERIES ENFORCEMENT

The NDSFB employs a team of highly experienced and Institute of Fisheries Management (IFM) Certified water bailiffs responsible for the enforcement of the Salmon and Freshwater Fisheries (Consolidation) (Scotland) Act 2003. Our water bailiffs carry out regular patrols of the catchment throughout the year. They work closely with Police Scotland and officers from other law enforcement agencies.

FISHERIES DEVELOPMENT

Fishing effort on the Ness system has been in decline for a number of years. The fewer the rods fishing the lower the annual catch. This has a 'knock on' effect of further discouraging anglers from fishing, i.e. a 'vicious circle'. It is vitally important that measures are taken to break the circle and encourage more rods on the river, both in the short and longer term.



Key 2016 Operational Statistics

FISHERIES MONITORING	Juvenile Salmonid Surveys	- The NBFT completed a total of 47 electro-fishing surveys; - This included 36 quantitative and three presence/absence surveys done under contract, with the remaining eight surveys completed as part of routine monitoring; and - Spawning observations, including a trial drone survey, were also carried out.
FISHERIES MANAGEMENT	Improving Access	- Fish passage improvements carried out on the Holm Burn, Rough Burn and Whin Park Lade; - Investigation into options for optimising the safe downstream passage of smolts through Garry Dam; and - A total of 12 spawning burns cleared of debris, with 2 major blockages identified (temporary access made for this year).
	Identifying and mitigating problems	- Whin Park Lade fish rescue during dewatering event; and - Pre-planned fish rescues at the Inverness West Link Bridge site and River Enrick Flood Alleviation scheme.
	Monitoring, control and management of Predators	- Continued participation in the Moray Firth Seal and Saw Bill Management groups; - Successful seal and bird licence applications made in 2016/2017; and
	Managing the exploitation of returning adults	- Scottish Government conservation regulations meant that mandatory catch and release was in force across the Ness district in 2016; and - The Ness DSFB engaged with the Scottish Government with regards to the 2017 conservation regulations. From 1st July mandatory catch and release will remain in place on the Moriston - but the rest of the Ness district will be uplifted to 'Grade 2' status, allowing a limited number of fish to be retained.
	Consultations	- During 2016 the Ness DSFB commented on five transport proposals, three dredging proposals, one aquaculture proposal, three terrestrial windfarms, three micro hydro schemes, one large scale hydro consultations, three forest plans, five flood schemes and four water treatment works; and - The board also consented applications for four fish removals in consultation with Marine Scotland.
FISHERIES ENFORCEMENT	Coastal Patrols	Over 120 coastal foot patrols completed throughout the year, with over 50 people spoken to fishing for sea trout without permission. Joint patrols were carried out with Police during peak period.
	Inshore Patrols	Individuals found fishing without permission or using illegal methods: 20 individuals on the River Ness up to Loch Dochfour; 35 individuals fishing from the shores of Loch Ness; - Seven individuals from boats on Loch Ness and Loch Dochfour; - Nine individuals on the River Moriston; - Over 12 individuals on the River Oich and six on the River Garry; and - To date, nine people fishing outside the fishing seasons.
	Illegal Instruments	One gill net was found out of season in firth, a number of live minnows were seized in the spring and a number of set lines were lifted on both the River Moriston and River Ness.
	Court Cases	- Seven individuals charged and still court pending; and - Offences committed last year: one person received Procurator Fiscal warning, one fined £100, another £60 and one case dismissed.
FISHERIES DEVELOPMENT	Promoting Angling on the River Ness	- The board has a Facebook page with 2,663 followers and Twitter account with 654 followers, in addition to its webpage (www.ness.dsfb.org.uk). These are used to promote the Ness system as a whole; - Developed and worked with partner organisations to deliver a pilot 'Inverness Angling Initiative' programme in 2016; and - The Ness DSFB sits on the steering group for the second 'Scotland's Salmon Festival' event which will be held in Inverness in August/September 2017.

Latest Catch Statistics

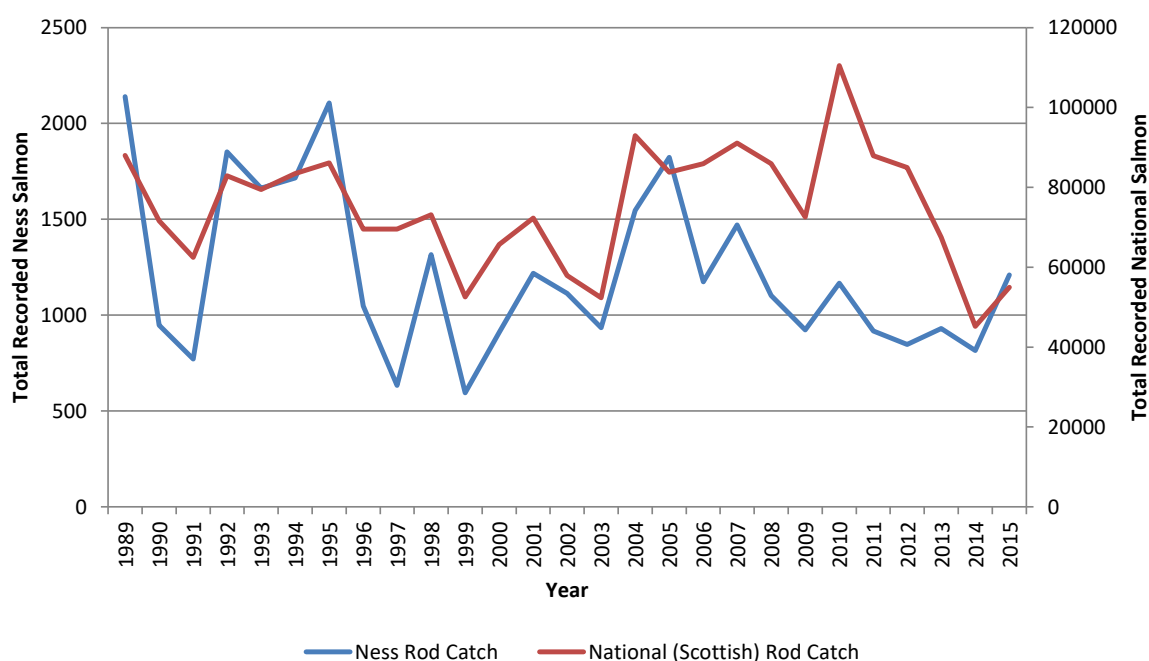
Information relating to adult run size is an essential management tool for any district salmon fishery board. Catch returns are the main indicator of adult run size available for the Ness system. Catch statistics are collected annually by Marine Scotland Science (MSS) for all fishery districts in Scotland. In addition to this, district salmon fishery boards are able to collect data directly from proprietors twice per year.

As a considerable historical data set exists (1952 to 2015), the size of the run can be used as a measure of its status by comparing the annual run against a long-term average run size. Unfortunately, the final 2016 catch data were not available in time for inclusion in this report. We have however included the provisional totals for information (please note that these are likely to be subject to change). The data used throughout this section are Crown copyright, used with the permission of MSS, who are not responsible for interpretation of these data by third parties.

2015 NATIONAL (SCOTTISH) SALMON CATCH

The total reported rod catch (retained and released) of wild salmon and grilse for 2015 was 54,969 fish. This is an increase over the return for 2014, but only 69 per cent of the previous 5-year average. The proportion of the rod catch accounted for by catch and release was the highest on record, with 98 per cent of the rod caught spring salmon and 84 per cent of the total annual catch released.

Comparison of the total annual Ness district rod catches with the national total (1989 to 2015)

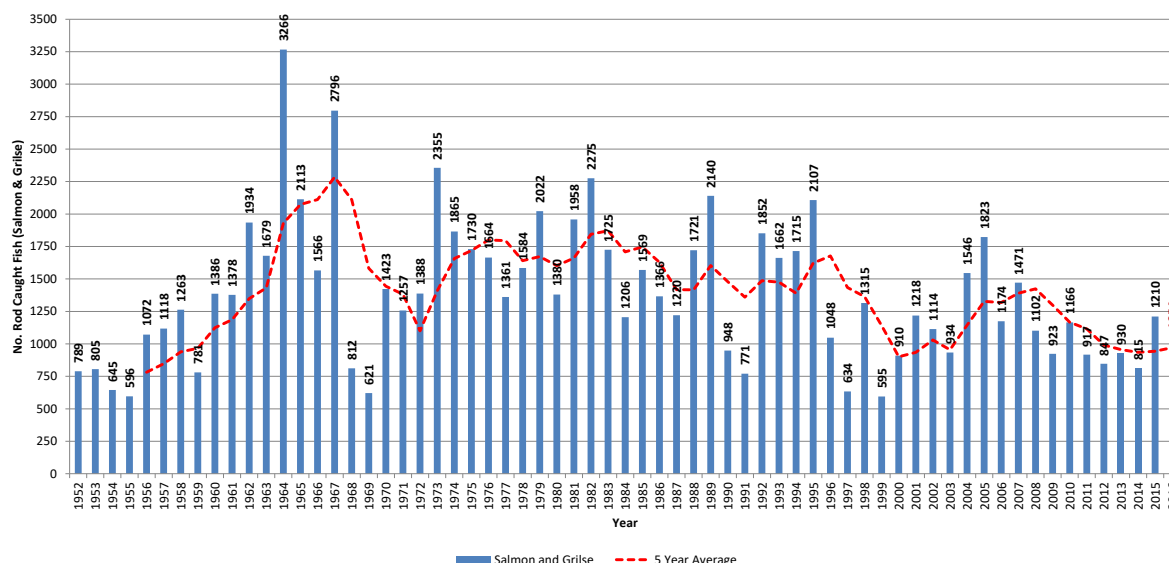


Catch and effort for both fixed engine and net and coble fisheries remain at historically low levels. Reported catch in each fishery was 10,349 and 3,234; four per cent and one per cent of the maximum reported in the respective time series. Fishing effort in these fisheries was 127 trap months and 57 crew months; the lowest and second lowest, respectively, since records began in 1952.

LATEST NESS DISTRICT SALMON ROD CATCHES

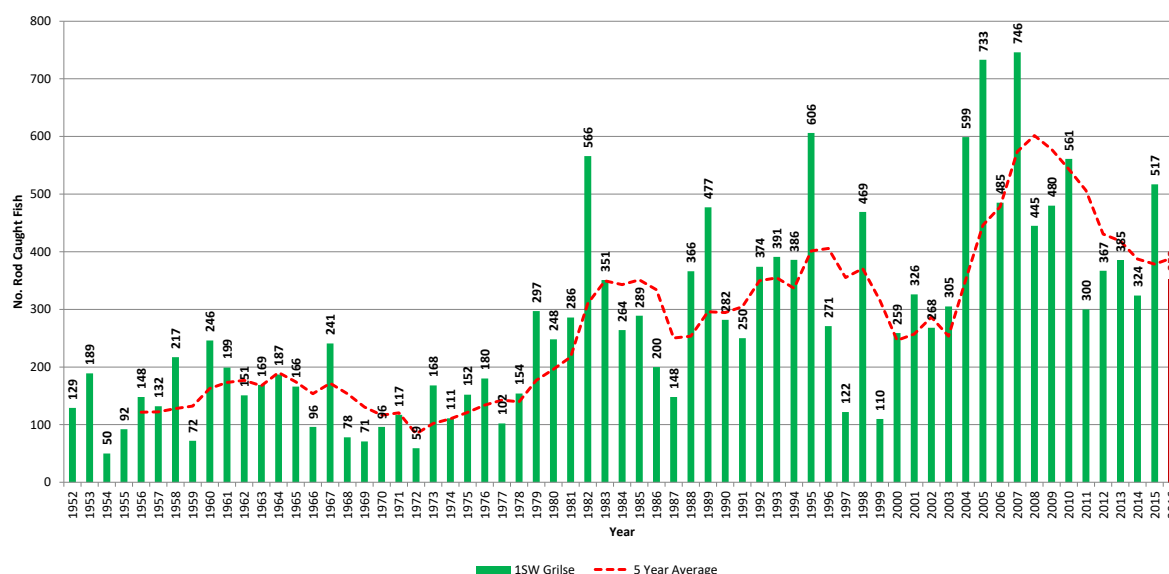
In 2015 the Ness district enjoyed its best salmon catch for eight years. A total of 1,210 salmon were recorded, an increase of 33 per cent from the 815 fish recorded in 2014 and above both the five and ten year averages (944 fish and 1,056 fish respectively). This is an extremely encouraging result, particularly given a general trend for decreasing catches experience in recent years. *The provisional catch returns for 2016 suggest that, despite a fall from the previous year (primarily due to lower grilse catches), the 1,000 fish mark was exceeded for the second year in a row (1,054 fish in total).*

Total Ness district rod catches of salmon (salmon and grilse combined) (1952 to 2016)



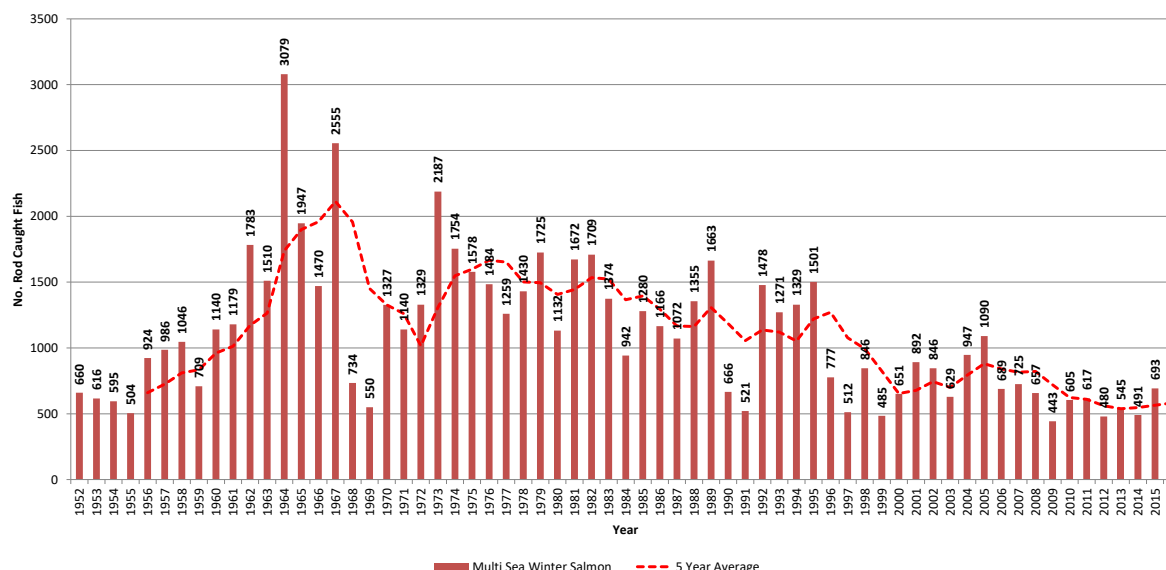
The 517 grilse reported across the district was the greatest number for five years and made up 43 per cent of the total salmon catch. This was 37 per cent higher than the 324 grilse recorded in 2014 and above both the five and ten year averages (379 fish and 461 fish respectively). This was an extremely encouraging result, particularly given the general trend for decreasing catches since the peak of 746 fish in 2007. *Provisional catch returns for 2016 suggest a significant fall in grilse catches (353 fish) compared to the previous year.*

Ness district grilse (one sea winter salmon) rod catches over the last 65 years (1952 to 2016)



The 693 multi sea winter (MSW) salmon reported in 2015 was the highest for seven years and made up 57 per cent of the total salmon catch. This was a 29 per cent improvement on the 491 MSW salmon recorded in 2014 and above both the five and ten year averages (565 fish and 595 fish respectively). We have seen a long-term decline in MSW salmon catches since a peak of 3,079 fish in 1964. The latest five year averages indicates the very early signs of improvement, with year on year increases over the last two years. *The provisional catch returns for 2016 suggest a slight increase in MSW salmon catches (701 fish) to the highest level in nine years.*

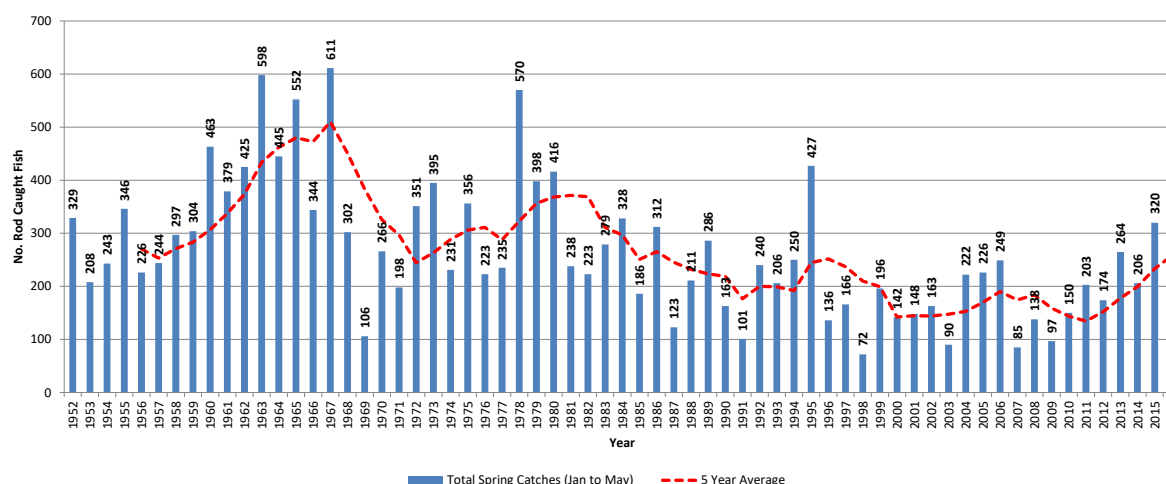
Ness district multi sea winter (MSW) salmon rod catches over the last 65 years (1952 to 2016)



Splitting the MSW catches into their 'spring' (January to May) and 'summer to autumn' (June to October) components provides further detail regarding their current status. Spring, summer and autumn caught fish tend to belong to populations in the upper, middle and lower parts of a catchment respectively.

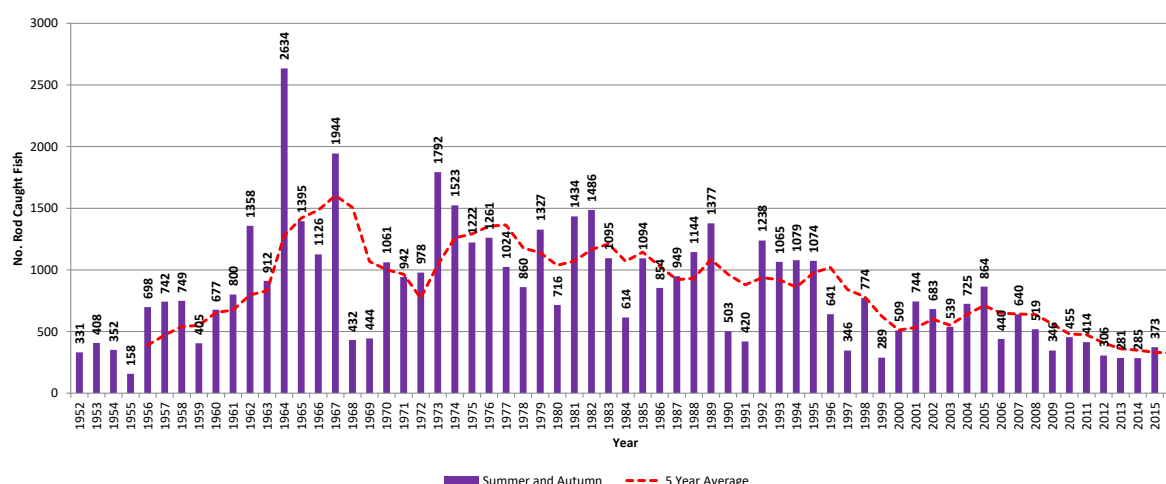
In 2015 the district enjoyed its best 'spring' catch for 20 years, with the 320 fish recorded being the highest since 1995 (427 fish) and before that 1984 (328 fish). This is a success in terms of the voluntary conservation measures introduced by the Ness DSFB in partnership with proprietors and anglers. *The provisional returns for 2016 suggest another good year for 'springers', with the 324 fish representing the highest spring catch in 21 years. This includes 11 fish recorded as spring grilse which were likely to have actually been MSW salmon.*

Ness district 'spring' rod catches (January to May) over the last 65 years (1952 to 2016)



A summer and autumn MSW salmon catch of 373 fish was reported across the Ness district in 2015. Despite being the tenth lowest annual summer and autumn salmon catch in 64 years, it marked a significant improvement on the previous year (285 fish in 2014) and was above the five year average catch of 332 fish. It is clear that the Ness district has experienced a long-term decline in summer/autumn MSW salmon catches; however we hope that this may be the first sign of an improvement. *The 2016 provisional catches seem to suggest that this is indeed the case, with the highest summer and autumn MSW salmon catches for five years (388 fish) and the third year-on-year increase.*

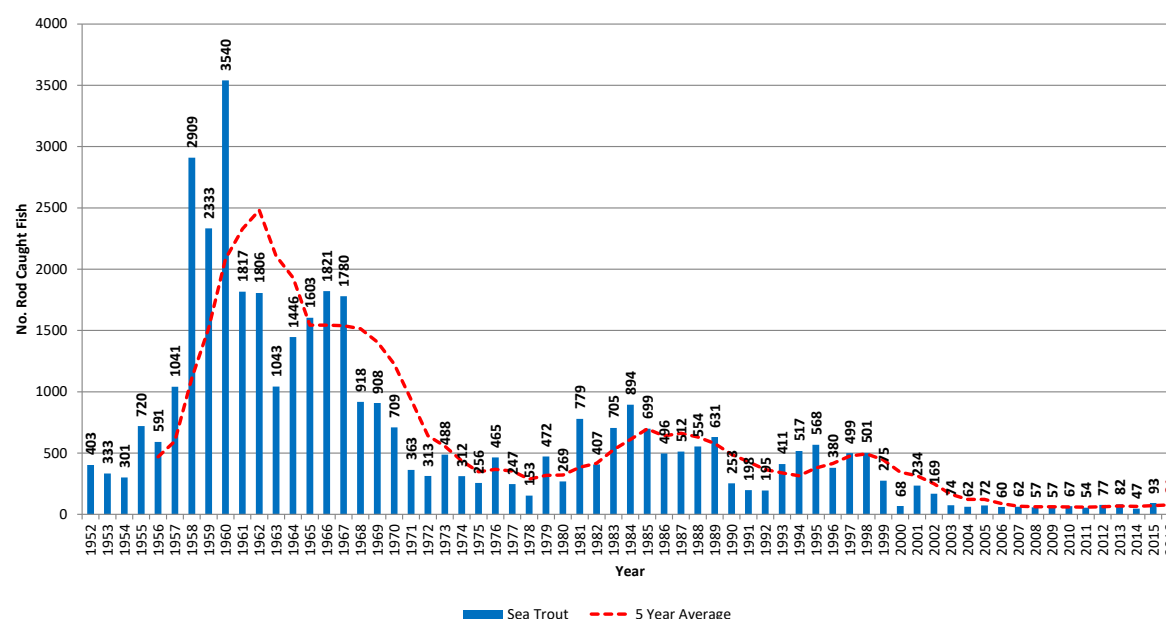
Ness district summer and autumn MSW salmon catches over the last 65 years (1952 to 2016)



LATEST NESS DISTRICT SEA TROUT ROD CATCHES

The Moray Firth once supported a prolific rod and line fishery for sea trout, with the total annual reported Ness district catch peaking at 3,540 fish in 1960. Since that time reported catches have steadily decreased. A total sea trout catch of just 93 fish was reported during the 2015 season.

Total Ness district sea trout catches (adult and finnock combined) over the last 65 years (1952 to 2016)



Although this was an improvement on the previous year when just 47 fish were reported, the catches are much lower than we would expect given the angler activity in the Firth. *The provisional 91 fish reported in 2016 present a similar picture.*

The Ness DSFB has been helping to address declining sea trout catches through its involvement with the Moray Firth Trout Initiative (MFTI). This was a collaborative project formed by local fishery boards and trusts from around the Moray Firth to conserve local wild trout populations. Unfortunately it has now come to an end.

NASCO ROD CATCH TOOL

The Association of Salmon Fishery Boards (ASFB) recommends that all DSFBs utilise the North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organisation's (NASCO) rod catch tool in order to assess the status of salmon stocks. The results of our assessment including the 2015 catches indicate an issue with the autumn salmon catches in the mid to lower system (River Ness and Loch Ness). Further to this, the summer catches were also close to failing the assessment.

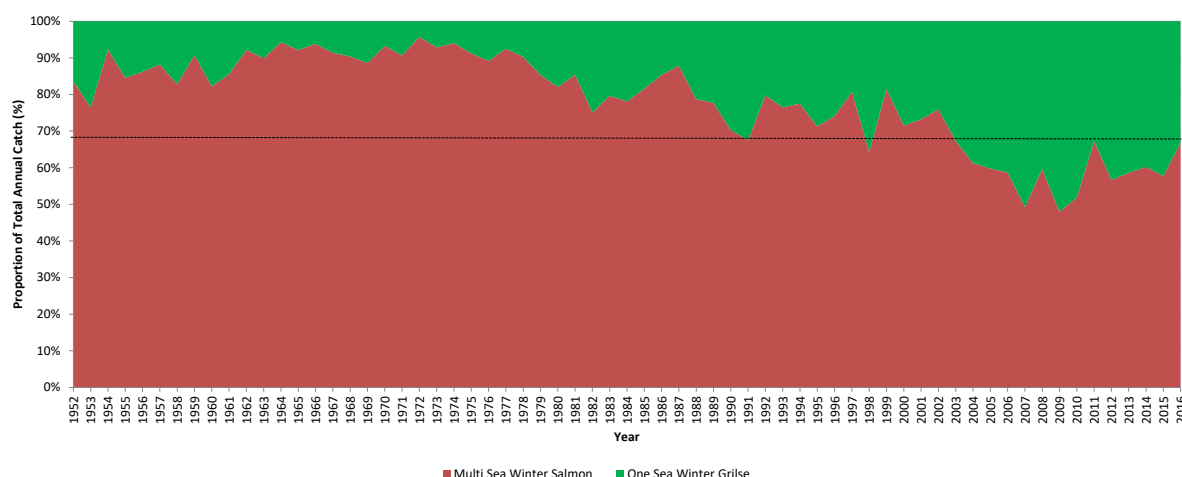
The NASCO rod tool recommends that if a problem is identified, then steps should be taken to reduce exploitation on the relevant stock component. An investigation should also be carried out to determine whether there is a specific local problem impacting upon the stock component. Furthermore, catch monitoring should continue on an annual basis and the management action should be continued until the assessment is passed.

LATEST ROD CATCH SUMMARY

Overall, 2015 was an extremely encouraging season on the Ness system. The total catch of 1,210 fish was the best for eight years, with 'spring' fish being caught in numbers not seen for 20 years. 'Summer' MSW catches were the best for 10 years, following a significant decline in numbers since the mid 1990's. This was largely due to the exceptional seasons experienced on the River Oich and River Garry, despite a major breach of the Caledonian Canal and disturbance resulting from repairs throughout the season. Provisional results for 2016 suggested another good year; with a continued trend for improving 'spring' and 'summer' MSW salmon components.

Catches of grilse improved significantly in 2015 after a long term decline. However, the provisional catches for 2016 suggest a return to the downward trend. This seems to be part of a general shift from grilse (33 per cent 2016 catch) to MSW salmon dominated catches (67 per cent 2016 catch); perhaps part of a long-term trend.

Proportions of 1SW grilse and MSW salmon in the total annual Ness district salmon catch ((1952 to 2016)



Unfortunately, the 2015 'autumn' MSW salmon catches were also down on the previous year and the third lowest since 1952. This may in part be due to the prevailing river conditions; however there has been a long-term decline in 'autumn' salmon catches with no sign of recovery at present. This is a concern for the Ness DSFB and may require further management actions in the mid to lower reaches of the system.

A selection of 'spring' salmon captured on the Ness system in 2016

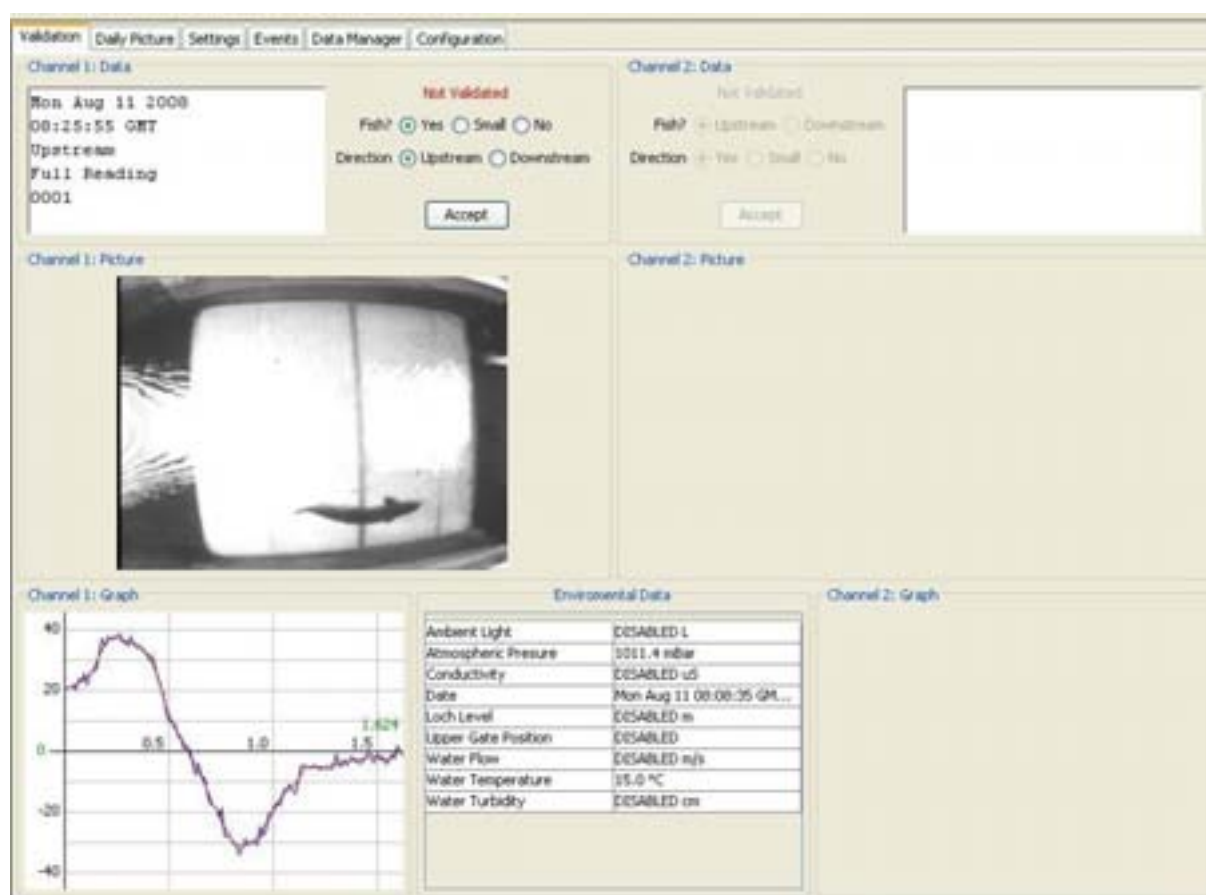


Latest Fish Counter Data

Fish counter information is available from two sites within the Ness district, both of which are operated by Scottish and Southern Energy (SSE). One is located on the River Moriston (Dundreggan Dam) and the other on the River Garry (Invergarry Dam). Areas upstream of the two fish counters represent only a proportion of the total area within the Ness catchment accessible to migratory fish; therefore the data should only be used for indicative purposes.

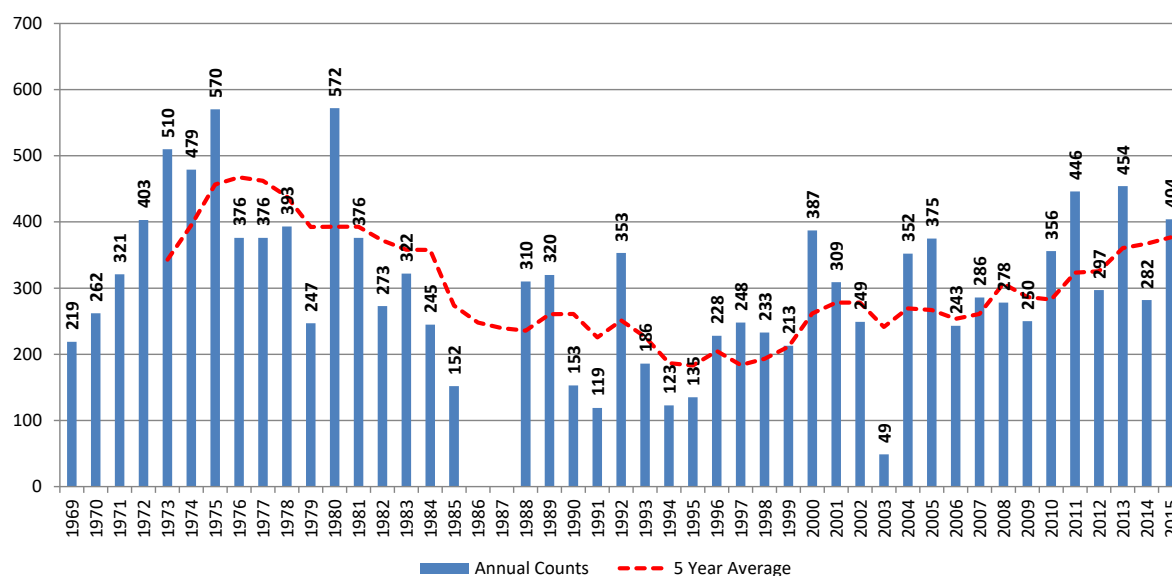
The counters operate on the principle that the body of a fish has lower electrical resistance than the surrounding water. Three electrodes are mounted across the flow of a counting channel. The distance between the electrodes determines the length of fish detected and the magnitude of the change in resistance provides an indication of the size of the fish responsible. The direction in which the fish is travelling can be determined by the shape of the signal.

An example output from a resistivity counter similar to those in Dundreggan and Garry Dams



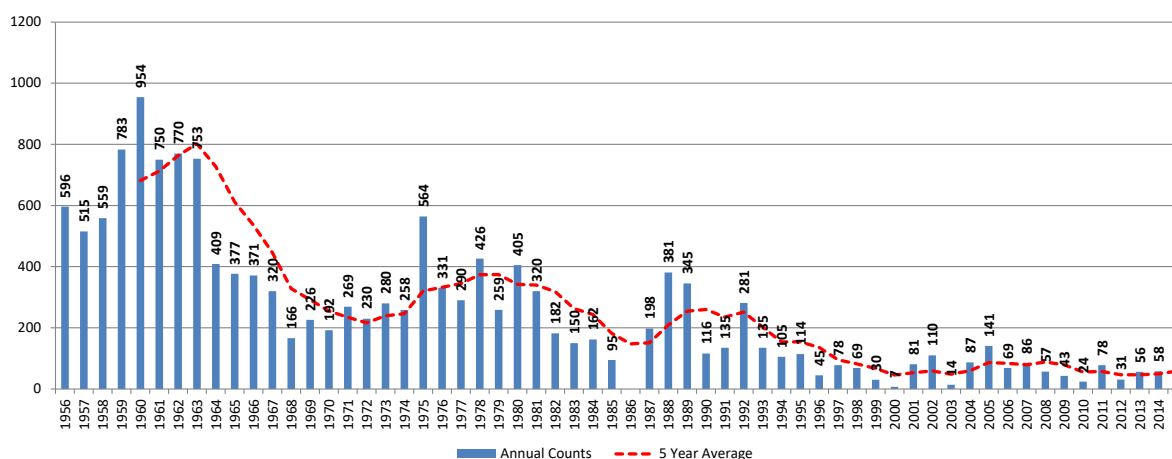
The 47 years' worth of counter data available from the SSE fish counter located in Dundreggan Dam indicates a steady increase in the five year average fish counts on the River Moriston since the early 1990's. The five year average of 377 fish passing through the counter in 2015 was the highest for 34 years, with the total count of 404 fish having only been exceeded six times over the study period.

Number of salmon ascending Dundreggan Dam 1969 to 2015



The picture at the Invergarry counter is very different, with the number counted having declined over the last 50 years. Historical annual counts of 600 to 800 salmon have now reduced to a five year average of just 59 fish. Despite the total fish count in 2015 (70 fish) being above the five year average, there is little overall sign of recovery. Data from recent electrofishing surveys suggests that in the Upper Garry juvenile salmon numbers are critically low.

Number of salmon ascending Invergarry Dam 1956 to 2015



Fisheries Monitoring

The NDSFB, NBFT and others work together to gain a detailed and up to date understanding of the status of salmon and sea trout populations within the district. This information is essential in permitting an 'evidence based' approach to fisheries management.

SCALE SAMPLING PROGRAMME

During the 2015 salmon fishing season, the Ness DSFB (in partnership with the NBFT) worked with local ghillies and anglers to collect scale samples from fish they caught. This was the second year of sampling for an ongoing fish ageing study.

The collection and ageing of Atlantic salmon scales has become a fundamental fisheries management tool. It allows determination of river age, sea age and various scale characteristics for stock discrimination. Scales can be removed without sacrificing the fish and they grow back rapidly. They exhibit growth rings similar to those found in trees. These rings are formed annually as a result of seasonal fluctuations in growth and can be used to give an indication of the age of the fish.

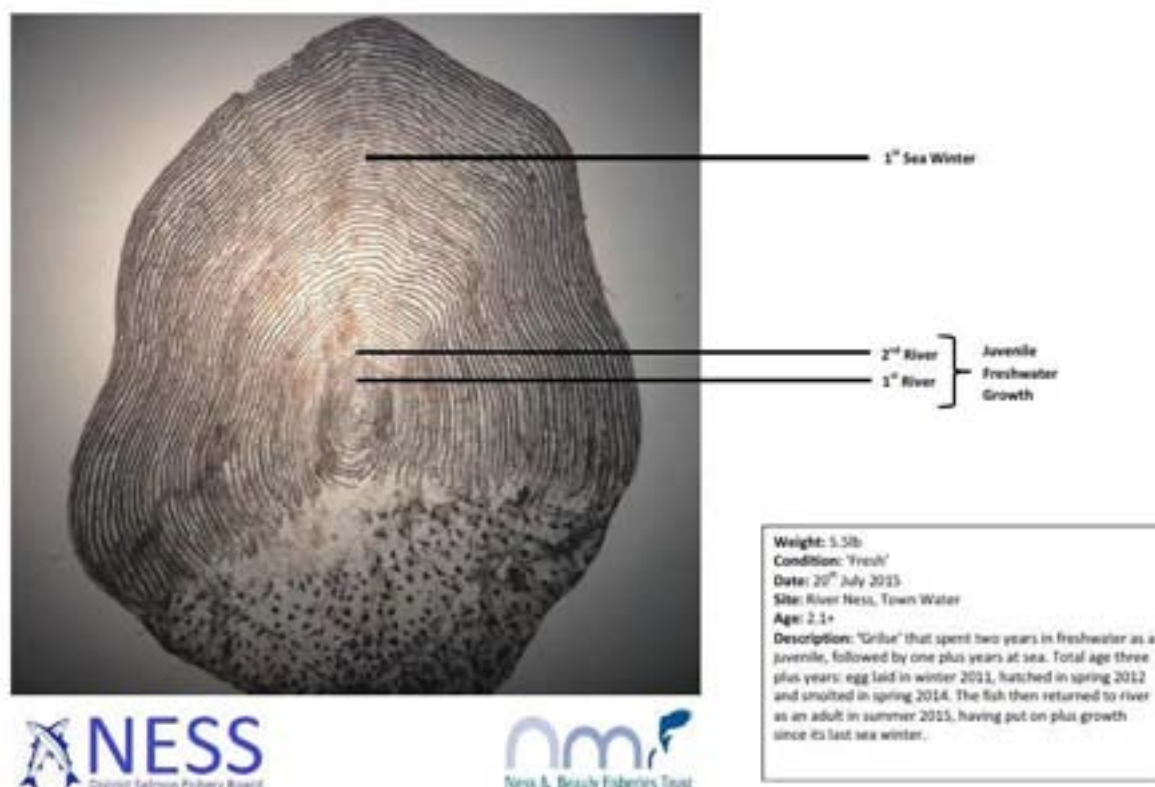
Expert scale reader Bryce Whyte during a visit to the Ness district this summer



Scale samples were submitted from a total of 81 adult salmon captured between the 28th February and 12th September 2015, equating to seven per cent of the total 2015 salmon catch. These fish were subsequently 'aged' using a specialised microscope.

The majority of those samples were found to have spent two years in freshwater before smolting and migrating to the sea (78 per cent compared to 88 per cent in 2014). A further 22 per cent were found to have spent three years in fresh water (compared to 12 per cent in 2014). The proportion of three freshwater year fish recorded in the samples from the Garry and Oich (19 per cent) and Moriston (45 per cent) in the upper system was significantly higher than on the River Ness (seven per cent) at the bottom of the system. This pattern is similar to that seen in other Scottish rivers, with the colder climate in the upper reaches resulting in slower growth of fry and parr.

Illustrated photograph of a scale from a grilse caught on the River Ness in 2015 which was found to have spent two years in freshwater as a juvenile, followed by one plus year at sea.



Two of the grilse sampled in the 2015 programme were found to have spent three years in freshwater (equating to 12 per cent of the total grilse sample). Both of these fish were caught on the River Ness in July and may have been destined for the upper reaches of the system where freshwater growth rates are lower.

The majority of the fish sampled (grilse and MSW salmon combined) during the 2015 season (52 per cent) were found to have a combined freshwater and sea age of four years (compared to 43 per cent in 2014). The majority of grilse (88 per cent) had a total age of three years, with the MSW salmon ranging between four and six years of age. One of the salmon was found to be a 'previous spawner'. This is a fish that has entered the river and spawned, returned to the sea and then entered the river again for a second time.

The samples taken in February were all found to be from 3SW fish. Those taken in April and May were dominated by 2SW fish. This suggests that 3SW fish are most abundant early in the early 'spring' period season, supporting the findings of the 2014 scale sampling programme. The first grilse were identified in scale samples taken in June (making up 29 per cent of the monthly total). By July, grilse were found to make up 80 per cent of the monthly scale samples, with only grilse being present in the August and September samples.

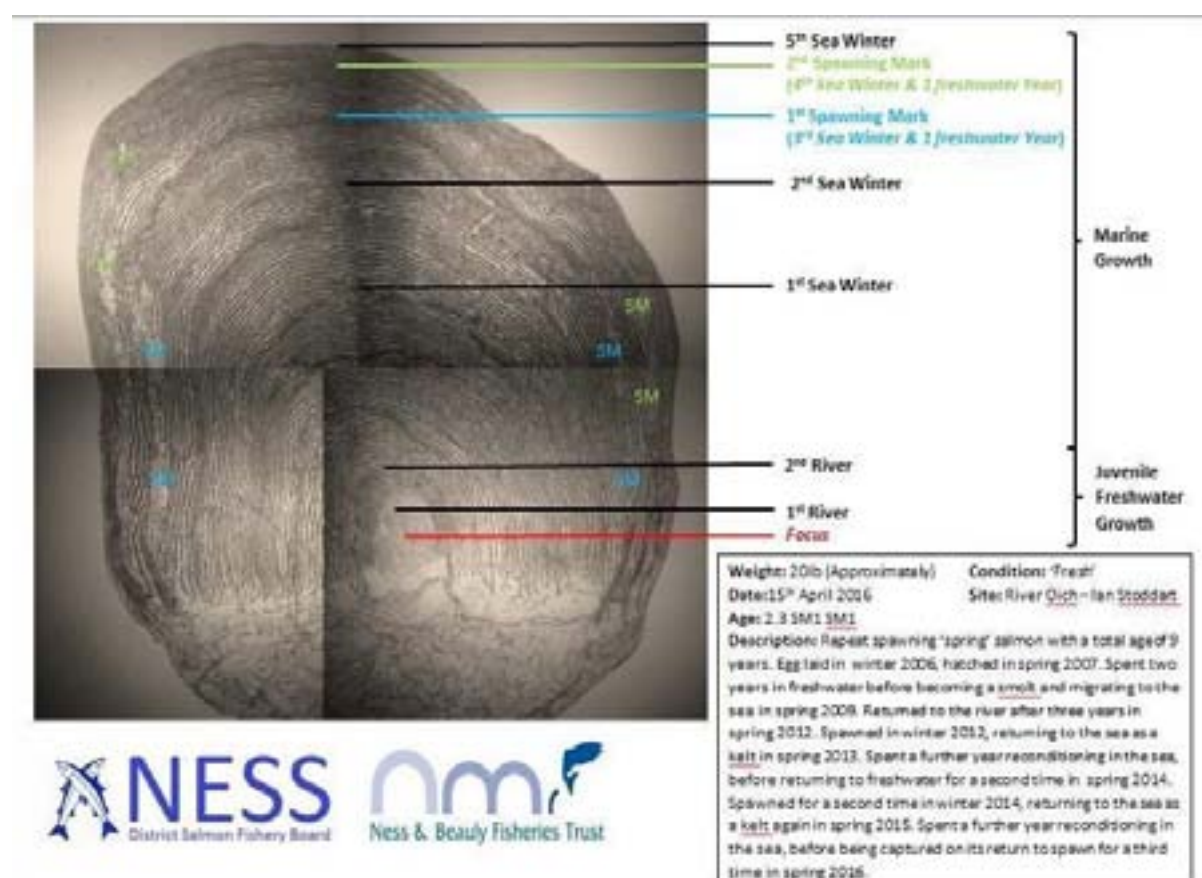
Analysis of the presence or absence of 'plus growth' on the edge of the scales suggests that the months of April and May are particularly important for 'spring' salmon on the Ness system. This suggests that the Scottish Government's statutory conservation measures for 'spring' fish (all fish must be returned up to the 1st April) do not go far enough.

Finally, the scale samples collected in 2015 provide information relating to the size ranges (in terms of weight) of both salmon and grilse. The results suggest that fish over 8 pounds are most likely to be MSW salmon, with fish under 6 pounds most likely being grilse. Fish between 6.5 and 8 pounds could be either MSW salmon or grilse (compared to 6 and 8 pounds in 2014) and difficult to positively identify without scale reading.

Reports presenting the detailed findings of both the 2014 and 2015 adult scale sampling programmes can be downloaded on the Ness DSFB website. Scale sampling has continued in 2016, with a total of 68 samples from across the district submitted to date. Of particular interest is a scale sample submitted from a slightly unusual looking 20lb 'spring' salmon caught and released on the River Oich by Ian Stoddart in April 2016.

It was in fact a repeat spawner with a total age of 9 years - caught on its way to spawn for a third time. We have recorded two other repeat spawners on the Ness system (one in 2014 and the other in 2015), but both of these had only spawned once before. This fish had spawned twice previously, such fish being relatively uncommon.

Annotated photograph of a scale from the 20lb repeat spawner caught and released on the River Oich by Ian Stoddart on Friday the 15th April 2016.



RIVER MORISTON AERIAL HABITAT SURVEY

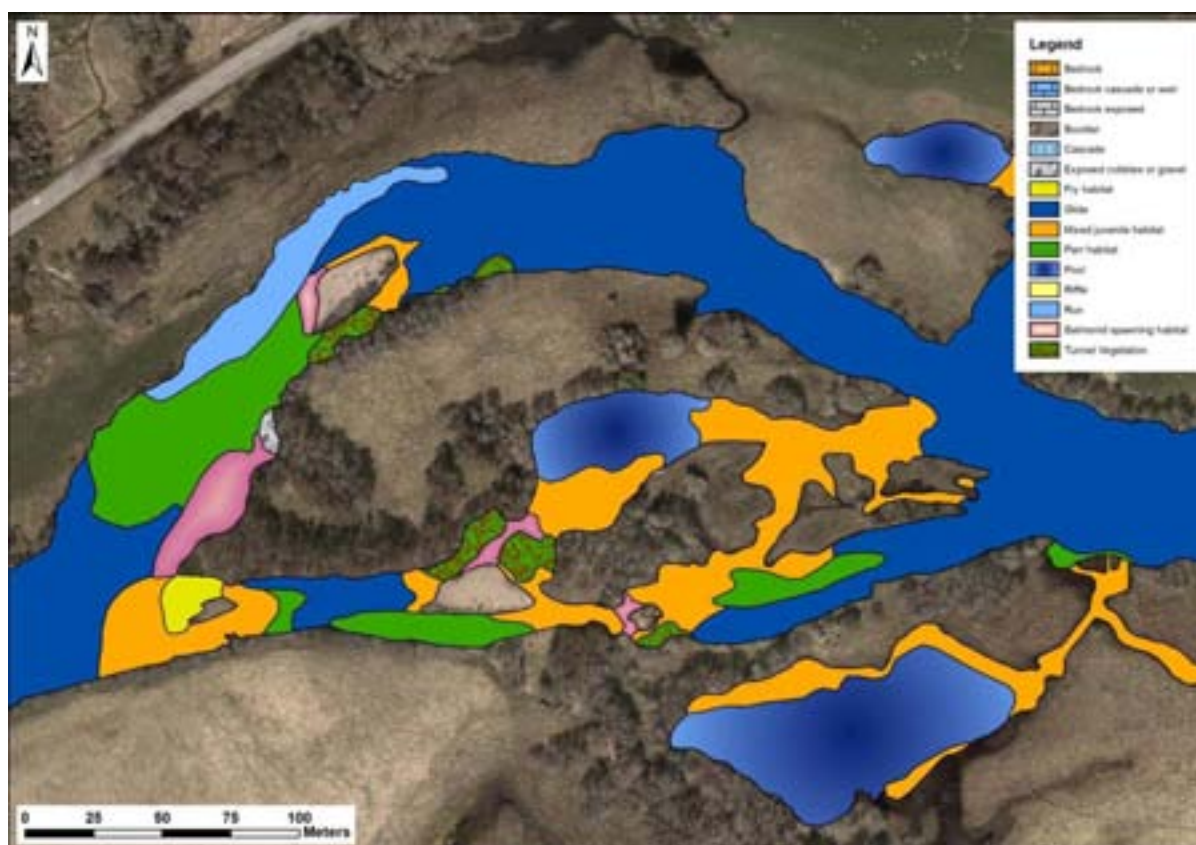
The Ness DSFB commissioned APEM Ltd to undertake a detailed fish habitat mapping survey on the River Moriston. The objective of this operation, completed on the 10th May 2016, was to map and quantify the distribution of key salmonid habitat types in the accessible reaches of the river above Dundreggan Dam. The results have a wide range of practical fisheries management applications, not least the refinement of conservation limits.

The APEM Ltd survey aircraft call sign 'G-JPEG' parked at Inverness Airport (top) with an example of a high resolution image taken on the River Moriston (bottom)



Using innovative aerial surveying techniques, detailed high resolution aerial imagery was captured and then processed to generate high resolution orthorectified imagery. The high image resolution allowed a desk based habitat assessment to be carried out, following the ground based walkover habitat surveys methodology developed by APEM (Hendry and Cragg-Hine, 1997 and Clough et al, 2008).

Habitat digitised following the digital walkover of the same river section



The survey showed that overall, the mapped reach comprised mainly of adult (glide) habitat, accounting for over 74 per cent of habitat within the mapped area followed by 'run' habitat which accounted for seven per cent. The salmonid specific habitat classifications (spawning, fry and juvenile) accounted for approximately 10 per cent of the total mapped area, with just 0.45 per cent identified as potential salmonid spawning grounds. Less than one per cent of the entire mapped area was obscured by overhanging vegetation, demonstrating the survey achieved comprehensive coverage of the survey zone.

SPAWNING OBSERVATIONS

Over the last two years the teams from the Ness DSFB and NBFT have carried out qualitative 'spawning observations' at key sites across the Ness district. This involves not only the usual recording of presence or absence of salmon and trout 'redds', but also changes in behaviour and habitat preferences throughout the spawning period.

The observations have utilised water proof camera technology to provide a window into the aquatic environment. This has proved extremely useful for locating adult salmon and trout holding in deeper pools directly prior to spawning, demonstrating the importance of riparian vegetation and large woody debris in providing cover for fish at this particularly sensitive time.

A pair of spawning salmon (top) and brown trout (bottom right), together with a typical 'redd' on the main River Ness ('tail' of clean gravel clearly visible)



The observations have allowed us to 'ground truth' the spawning periods for both salmon and trout. Already this year we have recorded evidence of trout spawning from the 23rd October in the higher hill lochs, right through to the 9th December on the River Ness. Salmon redds were first recorded in the upper reaches of the River Moriston on the 29th October, the Rivers Enrick and Coiltie in the middle reaches of the system on the 15th November, with spawning yet to commence on the River Ness as of the 5th December. This information will help us to protect fish from the impacts of proposed developments during these sensitive periods.

We have learnt a great deal about the spawning habitat preferences of salmon and trout and the interactions between the two. The preferred substrate size for 'redd' creation depends not only on the species of fish, but also the size of the individual fish. This year we observed a pair of trout spawning in the tail of a pool on the River Coiltie. A week later we observed a pair of small grilse spawning in exactly the same location, no doubt having dug the trout eggs out in the process. On the River Ness we observed grilse size fish cutting salmon sized redd in a location that salmon had been observed spawning in the previous year. The waterproof camera revealed that the fish were in fact large trout, with the salmon spawning in that area still to commence.

The Ness system has very few spawning tributaries, with the majority of salmon spawning activity thought to occur in areas of main-river. The size of our rivers, together with the fact that they are often lined with and shaded by mature trees, makes it particularly difficult to carry out accurate redd counts. We therefore decided to test whether it is possible to identify salmon redds using a drone. Marine Harvest (MH) was good enough to lend us a drone and pilot for the day, which demonstrated that the technique was indeed viable.

Trialing the use of a drone to count salmon 'redds' on the River Moriston



JUVENILE SALMON SURVEYS

In 2016, the NBFT undertook a total of 47 electro-fishing surveys across the Ness catchment. The figure is made up of 36 quantitative and three presence/absence surveys done under contract, with the remaining eight surveys completed as part of routine monitoring.

Results from surveys conducted on the River Enrick were largely encouraging. These were carried out to inform pre-river engineering works that aim to alleviate flooding in the hamlet of Kilmichael. Density of salmon fry was classified as 'excellent' (114 per 100m², 93 per 100m²) at two of the sites, whilst the third was deemed 'good' (48 per 100m²). In terms of salmon parr (1++), one site was classed as 'excellent' at a density of 36 per 100m² whilst the remaining sites were classed as good (11 per 100m², 17 per 100m²). The surveys carried out on the River Enrick focussed primarily on salmon habitat although trout fry at two sites generated density estimates of 8 per 100m² and 16 per 100m² that would be classed as 'good'.

Between 2009 and 2013, the routine monitoring site on the River Coiltie showed good numbers of juvenile salmon that frequently achieved density classifications of 'good'/'excellent'. Surveys carried out in 2015 and 2016 revealed a sharp decline in salmon fry density. The 2016 salmon fry density of 16 per 100m² would be classed as 'good' but is below the average density of 21 per 100m² and towards the lower end of the historical range of eight per 100m² to 124 per 100m². The precise reasons behind the perceived decline remain unclear although it is possible that the severe flood events in the winters of 2014 and 2015 have had negative impacts on the survival of salmon fry. NBFT intend to monitor this situation closely in the coming years.

NBFT and Ness DSFB staff processing fish during an electrofishing survey on the Mill Burn Lade in 2016



Two surveys were conducted on the Lower River Garry catchment in 2016. Allt na Caillichie is a small tributary of the Lower Garry that confluences with the main stem around 1km downstream of Garry Dam. The lower site contains habitat more suited to salmon fry with its shallow depth and largely fine substrate. Salmon fry have been present at every survey conducted between 2005 and 2016 at densities ranging from 25 per 100m² to 125 per 100m². The 2016 survey generated a salmon fry density of 98 per 100m² that would be classed as 'excellent'. Numbers of salmon parr (1++) have remained relatively stable in densities ranging from six per 100m² to 19 per 100m². Salmon parr density in 2016 was seven per 100m² that would be classed as 'moderate'. The single mainstem site has been visited annually since 2013 and has generated salmon fry densities ranging from 41 per 100m² to 92 per 100m². The 2016 salmon fry density was 70 per 100m² and would be classed as 'excellent'. The salmon parr density of four per 100m² that would be classed as 'moderate' is the lowest recorded for the site.

Four quantitative surveys were conducted on some small tributaries of Loch Garry. Surveys conducted on the Greenfield Burn in 2013, 2014 and 2015 showed salmon fry to be absent with salmon parr recorded as absent in 2014 and 2015. It was therefore heartening to note a 'good' density of salmon fry (16 per 100m²) from the lower site. Salmon parr (1++) were present at a low density of two per 100m² that would be classed as 'poor'. Despite some excellent instream habitat on Allt Daingean, surveys conducted in 2014, 2015 and 2016 have shown very low numbers of juvenile salmon. A single salmon parr and a single fry were captured in 2016 revealing a severe underutilisation of the available habitat. Results from the survey conducted on Allt na Slaitiach were similarly disappointing where juvenile salmon were found to be absent. Productivity on the Loch Garry tributaries remains at a very low ebb.

Some of the key fish species recorded during this year's electrofishing survey programme on the Ness system



Fisheries Management

The NDSFB and NBFT jointly published an updated Fisheries Management Plan (FMP) in 2014. This sets out priority actions identified as being required for the management of fish populations within the Ness district. It provides a framework for the protection and enhancement of such populations and to ensure that their exploitation is undertaken in a sustainable manner. The lifespan of this FMP is six years, commencing in August 2014 and ending in August 2019, during which time it will be regularly reviewed.

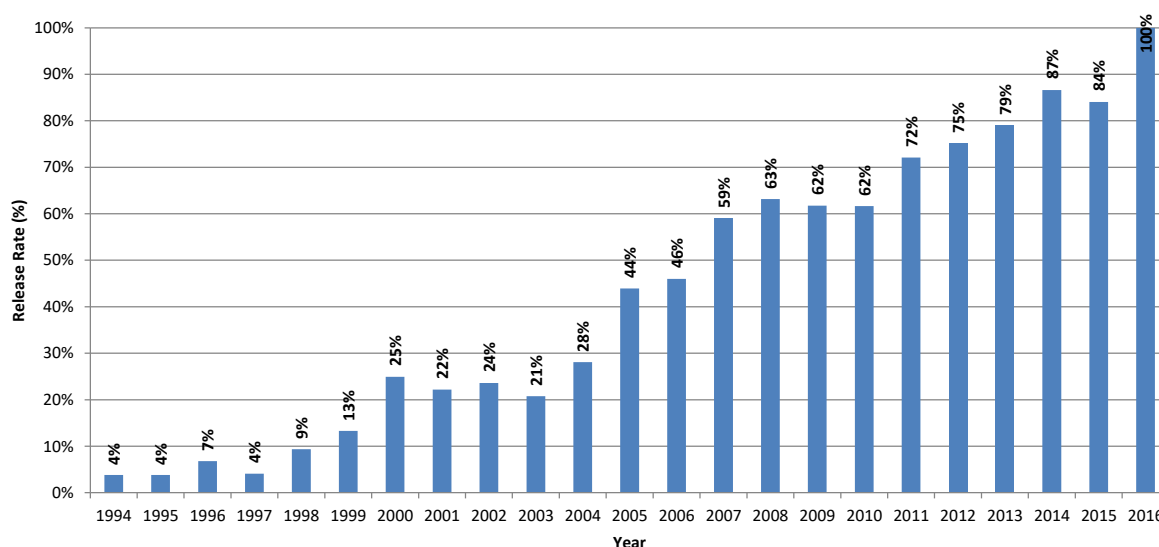
MEASURES TO REDUCE EXPLOITATION

Catch and Release

Voluntary conservation measures, introduced by the Ness DSFB in partnership with proprietors and anglers, were in place across the Ness district for many years. These resulted in a significant improvement in the overall release rates, with 84 per cent of all rod caught salmon and grilse being released on 2015.

In 2016 the Scottish Government introduced a package of conservation measures which meant that mandatory catch and release (all methods) was in force across the Ness district throughout the 2016 salmon fishing season. The resulted in 100 per cent of all fish caught being returned. Further information regarding the Scottish Government's conservation measures, together with implications for the forthcoming 2017 season, can be found in the 'Conservation Limits' section of this report.

Proportion of salmon and grilse released across the Ness system (1994 to 2016)

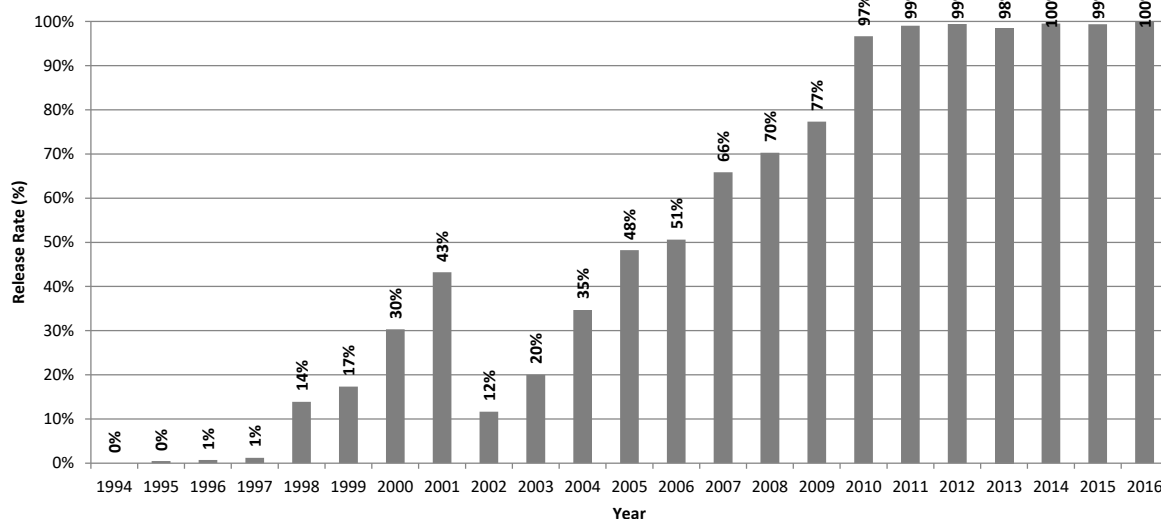


Over the years particular voluntary effort has gone towards protecting the vulnerable 'spring' component of the Ness district salmon population. These fish are important not only in terms of their conservation value, but also their economic value. This is particularly true on the upper tributaries such as the River Moriston (designated as a Special Area of Conservation for freshwater pearl mussels and salmon), River Oich and the River Garry for which the 'spring' fish make up a large component of the rod catches.

Further to this, the Scottish Government introduced The Conservation of Salmon (Annual Close Times and Catch and Release) (Scotland) Regulations 2014 which came into force in time for the 2015 salmon fishing season. These regulations prohibit the taking of salmon in Scotland before 1st April each year, although the Ness district voluntary conservation policy went further than this by asking that all salmon be released to the 30th June.

As a result of the voluntary measures, 'spring' release rates (January to end May) of between 97 per cent and 100 per cent have been regularly achieved across the Ness district since 2014. The introduction of statutory spring conservation measures in 2015 resulted in 100 per cent of those fish caught between January and April being released, with 99 per cent of those between January and the end of May being released. This equated to the retention of two later running spring fish, both of which had died before release. The Scottish Government's 2016 conservation measures resulted in 100 per cent of spring salmon (January to the end of May) being released.

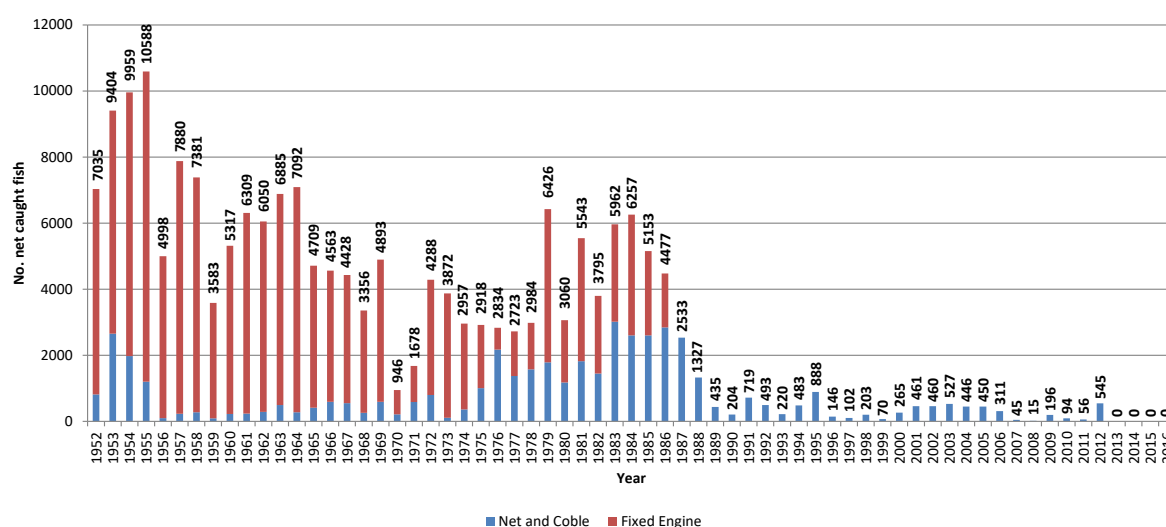
Proportion of 'spring' salmon (January to end of May) released on the Ness system (1994 to 2016)



Coastal Netting Agreements

Many of the original salmon netting stations in the Ness district were bought out by the Atlantic Salmon Conservation Trust in the 1980's. These and a number of others are no longer operational, resulting in a significant reduction in the total numbers of net caught salmon reported in the district.

Total Ness district net salmon catches (salmon and grilse combined) over the last 65 years (1952 to 2016)



The fixed engine or 'bag net' fishery closed in 1986. Those remaining are net and cobble fisheries, which use a 'sweep net' paid out from a boat and worked from the shore. The key remaining operational sweep netting stations in the Ness district are located at Rosemarkie, Longman and Alturlie Point. The Rosemarkie station ceased operating between 2007 and 2011 following a conservation agreement with the Ness DSFB. Fishing commenced once again in 2012 when 545 fish were reported.

A conservation agreement reached by the Ness and Beaully DSFBs with the Rosemarkie and Longman net and cobble operators in 2013 meant that these stations remained closed for the entire season. As a result, the total Ness district net fishery catch reduced from 545 fish in 2012 to zero in 2013. This was the first time in at least 61 years that no fish were recorded by the net fishery.

An extension to the voluntary agreement in 2014 and 2015 meant that salmon had free passage through the Inverness Firth for three years in a row. Further to this, in 2016 the Scottish Government's conservation measures prohibited the taking of salmon by inshore nets in 'category 3' waters such as the Ness district. This meant that no fish were recorded by the net fishery for a total of four years in a row.

PREDATOR MANAGEMENT

Significant numbers of goosanders, mergansers and cormorants frequent the Ness catchment. These birds predate on a wide range of fish species, with juvenile salmon and trout forming a major component of their diet. In particular, the relatively wide, shallow and clear waters of the River Ness below Loch Ness make ideal feeding grounds for these birds. Sawbills are known to take advantage of 'pinch points' or 'bottlenecks' during smolt migrations. Cormorants will take larger prey items than sawbills, including adult trout and even small grilse. They are also known to cause damage to larger fish that they attack but are too large to swallow.

A damaged salmon smolt recorded on the River Garry in spring 2016



It is difficult to quantify the overall impacts of bird predation on salmon and sea trout population in the Ness catchment. However, there are a number of sensitive areas where fish populations are most at risk, impacts have the potential to be significant and a precautionary approach is required. A key indicator of this is our salmon smolt trap on the River Garry. Of the 437 smolts recorded in 2016, a total of 13 were found to exhibit some degree of bird damage (three per cent of total catch up from two per cent in both 2014 and 2015). It should be noted that these marked fish are those that had been attacked by birds, but subsequently managed to escape. It is highly likely that the proportion of fish actually killed and eaten by birds is significantly higher than this.

The Ness DSFB and NBFT teams completed detailed bird counts on the Rivers Ness and Beaully in April 2015. These fed into a detailed supporting document accompanying a Moray Firth wide Bird Management Licence application. The application was successful, permitting the shooting of a limited number of goosanders and mergansers as an aid to other non-lethal scaring techniques from the 1st October 2015 to the 31st May 2016

A range of scaring methods were employed, ranging from a simple clapping of hands to the use of a starting pistol and then shooting over the head of birds with a shotgun. A record was made of the occasions when the various scaring techniques were deployed and how effective they were. Over the last few years we have found that the use of starting pistols, together with shooting to scare with live ammunition (firing over their heads), have proven to be a very effective way of moving the birds on from vulnerable locations. Key to this has been the ability to reinforce the effect with a licence to kill as an aid to scaring. When licences have been obtained for limited shooting it has been noticeable that birds respond more readily to non-lethal scaring methods that are utilised concurrently.

The population of goosanders and mergansers on the Ness system seems to be relatively stable. As such there was no doubt that going forward we will need to employ a similar approach of shooting as an aid to scaring on an annual basis. Further bird counts were completed by the team in April 2016 and a detailed licence application supported for the 2016/17 period. We have been successful in securing a licence covering the period 8th September 2016 to the 31st May 2017.

CONTROL OF INVASIVE NON-NATIVE SPECIES

The Inner Moray Firth Invasive Non-Native Plants Project drew to a close in October 2016. The project aimed to control invasive non-native plants (INNPS) around Inverness, especially those along watercourses, in riparian woodland and on adjacent floodplains in the Lower Ness, Lower Beaully and Nairn catchments.

Control efforts have been focussed primarily on giant hogweed, Japanese knotweed, Himalayan balsam and rhododendron, but some populations of white butterbur, American skunk cabbage and other species have also been tackled. The project was first set in motion in 2007, when Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) commissioned a survey of INNPS in the Glenurquhart catchment. Over time, the project widened its scope, often driven by the requirements of funding bodies. Coille Alba has managed the project in its current form with WREN funding since 2014.

Glenurquhart catchment

The first INNPS control operations started in Glenurquhart in 2008, and have continued every year since. In 2007, Japanese knotweed was estimated to occur over an area of approximately 20 hectares, with a core area in which it was dominant of approximately four hectares. This year approximately 200 small plants were located and sprayed by the Coille Alba team. Most of these were scattered through the most flood-prone areas of alder woodland in the lowest-lying part of Urquhart Bay Woods.

Invasive non-native species Japanese knotweed (top left), white butterbur (top right), American skunk cabbage (bottom left) and giant hogweed (bottom right)



Himalayan balsam was present along 12 kilometres of the River Enrick when control efforts started in 2009. Wherever the Enrick spread out over the floodplain, such as in Urquhart Bay Woods and Kilmichael, balsam had colonised, frequently to the complete exclusion of other plants. Balsam was present, often in high densities, over at least 25 hectares. Over the last eight years, working systematically downstream, Coille Alba has steadily shifted the upper limit of the balsam towards Loch Ness.

This year, in an attempt to achieve the target of eradicating Himalayan balsam in Glenurquhart, the interval between visits was reduced to seven to 10 days, rather than the usual two to three weeks. Approximately 1,510 plants were found and removed. Of these, only two were above the Drumnadrochit Bridge and all but 46 were in the SSSI along the River Enrick. Balsam control has been the most labour-intensive element of the IMFINNPS project. Eradicating a well-established population of Himalayan balsam along a narrow riparian corridor is a challenge, but it is much more so where it has colonised an extensive and densely-vegetated floodplain.

White butterbur remains widespread in Glenurquhart. While knotweed and balsam are almost entirely confined to the main river corridors and their floodplains, white butterbur has also established along small tributaries, in non-riparian woodlands and roadside verges. Through an annual spraying programme, the project has significantly reduced the frequency of white butterbur along the River Enrick and in Urquhart Bay Woods. Regrettably, the project has not been granted access to a single land-holding immediately upstream

from the SSSI. Without continuing systematic control of white butterbur, it will re-colonise the flood prone parts of the SSSI from which it has been largely removed, and so compromise the site's condition as assessed by future Site Condition Monitoring surveys.

Lower Ness catchment

The project has been tackling several INNPS at sites around Inverness since 2011. The most widespread of these is Himalayan balsam, which occurs on several watercourses in the environs of Inverness. Following six years of control, we are close to eradicating balsam on four of these.

Several relatively small populations of Japanese knotweed, giant hogweed, American skunk cabbage and Tibetan cowslip *Primula florindae* were controlled again this year. Coille Alba advised the contractors undertaking the West Link road project on measures to mitigate the spread of INNPS, and especially giant hogweed. Plants were subsequently sprayed in spring and the site re-visited to check for flowering. Flowering stems were felled using a pole saw.

For the first time, giant hogweed was found to have spread from the Cairnlaw Burn onto the adjacent railway at Milton of Culloden. A site visit was arranged with Network Rail to cut flower-stems. This site should be checked in April 2017, and the hogweed sprayed. The population of skunk cabbage on the Ballindarroch Burn is much reduced following last year's treatment, and was sprayed again in June. Given the longevity of seed, this site will need regular monitoring and treatment for several years.

Avoch Burn

The project team have been controlling Himalayan balsam along over eight kilometres of the Avoch Burn since 2013. The source is by Easter Strath of Auchterflow just above Killen. Following four years of control, with special effort focussed on the uppermost kilometre of watercourse, plant numbers are much reduced.

2017 and beyond

To achieve eradication at all the sites where the project has been working will require many more years of control and monitoring. Fortunately, Scotland's fishery trusts are becoming increasingly engaged in INNPS control. The NBFT and the Findhorn, Nairn & Lossie Fishery Trust have committed to continue control with the help of HLF funding. Over the last seven years Coille Alba has also trained a team of technicians who have gained a great deal of experience in INNPS control.

FISH PASSAGE IMPROVEMENTS

Rough Burn

The Rough Burn is a coastal burn running close to the Norbord plant at Dalcross. Significant scour occurred downstream of a railway crossing during an extreme high water event in October 2014, resulting in the undermining of a bridge and significant risk to the railway network.

Emergency works were carried out by Network Rail to stabilise the bridge; however these did not consider fish passage. As is the case with many of the small coastal burns across the Ness district, the Rough Burn is believed to support an important population of sea trout.

The undermined bridge (left) and 'emergency repairs' (right) on the Rough Burn



The Ness DSFB advised the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) that the 'emergency' works were rather more permanent than expected. The idea of emergency works is that temporary repairs can be put in place, while a long term solution is considered. SEPA agreed and Network Rail was subsequently instructed to provide a fish pass over the structure. The task of designing and building a fish pass was made more complicated by the fact that the bed of the river had been filled with porous rock armour and gabion baskets. It was not possible to remove this material, so a water tight solution had to be constructed on top of it.

The Ness DSFB produced some initial sketches, which were then translated into design drawings by Network Rail and their contractors. The final design consisted of a series of pools, lined with water tight concrete matting material, with 'notched' sleeper weirs on their downstream edges allowing fish passage.

Whin Park Lade

Work has been carried out to remove an unauthorised impoundment at the bottom of the Whin Park Lade. This had been built some time ago as part of a canoe slalom training area. Unfortunately it acted as a barrier to the migration of fish, with efforts having been made to secure its removal for at least four years.

Removal of the unauthorised impoundment at the bottom of Whin Park Lade



Holm Burn

The Holm Burn, also known as the Big Burn, is the larger of two major tributaries entering the River Ness. It was a historically important spawning and nursery area for salmon and sea trout. However, water abstraction, morphological alterations and barriers to fish migration have resulted in its fish stocks becoming severely degraded over time. Efforts are underway to restore the burn to its former condition.

Historically, access to migratory fish was largely restricted to the first 60 metres of the Holm Burn due to the presence of a weir in the grounds of Ness-side Estate. In 2010 the Highland Council modified the structure to incorporate fish passage during the construction of a flood defence scheme.

The effectiveness of this fish pass under normal flows is questionable, with re-colonisation of salmon populations taking longer than expected. Electric fishing surveys undertaken by the NBFT since the construction of the fish pass indicate that year classes of fish are missing. It is believed that the structure is only passable if there is adequate flow, i.e. it is likely a partial barrier that at the very least will cause delay in migration under lower flows.

The Ness DSFB met with representatives from SEPA, The Highland Council (THC) and Ness-side Estate in June 2016 to discuss repairs to the structure. As part of the wider repairs, plans were agreed to incorporate alterations to the structure that would improve fish passage. This included the following:

- Provision of a notch in the top weir to concentrate flows under low water levels, increasing the range of flows under which the fish can negotiate the structure;
- Alterations to the positioning and dimensions of subsequent notches, creating an easier route for fish to take;

- Deepening of pools in the pass to help fish negotiate the individual steps; and
- Addition of a 'pre-weir' to improve passage over lowest step.

The first phase of the works, involving the creation of the notch in the top weir, was completed by THC in October 2016. The rest of the works will be completed in summer 2017 once the salmon spawning, egg incubation and smolt migration is complete.

Creation of the notch in the top of the Holm Weir in October 2016



Garry Dam Screens

The adult salmon stock in the upper River Garry is in a very fragile state, with the 'Upper Garry Salmon Restoration Project' aiming to restore a self-sustaining wild salmon population to this area of the catchment. In addition to this, the Ness DSFB is currently working with SSE and SEPA to investigate options for optimising the safe downstream passage of smolts through Garry Dam.

The numbers of adults ascending the fish pass at Clunie Dam on the River Tummel on the Tay had slumped to barely 100 by the end of the 1970s. Investigations concluded that smolts were having difficulty locating the entrance to the fish pass. After significant work by the Freshwater Fisheries Lab (FFL) and North of Scotland Hydro-Electric Board (NoSHEB) it was concluded that removing the smolt screens at the intake to Clunie Power Station, to allow smolt passage through the turbines, was preferable to leaving the smolts in the loch attempting to find the fish pass. The intake screens at Clunie were subsequently removed and the adult fish counts have now increased to between 600 and 700 per year.

Reports produced by the FFL show that a lot of experimental work was also undertaken at Garry Dam during the 1960s. This involved passing smolts and smolt sized trout through the machine at Invergarry Power Station to assess turbine passage mortality and survival. This highlighted the relatively high 80 to 90 per cent survival of smolts passing through the machine at optimum load (18MW).

Going forward it has been agreed that the potential for passing the smolts through the machine at Invergarry will be investigated in further detail. The first step of this process will be to replicate the experimental work from the 1960's to ensure that survival through the machine is at an acceptable level. A positive result will be

required before any removal of smolt screens or change to the current Controlled Activities Regulations (CAR) licence at the Dam.

The fish screens at Garry Dam on the River Garry



Ceannacroc Heck (Update)

The heck (which is a fish trap) was constructed as part of a hydro scheme which became fully operational in 1962. Cluanie and Loyne Dams cut off access to headwater spawning and nursery habitat. Returning adult salmon were instead captured in the heck and their progeny stocked elsewhere in the catchment. Numbers of adult salmon returning to the heck dwindled.

In 2006 a fish pass was constructed in the Heck as part of the £3 million EU funded Conservation of Atlantic Salmon in Scotland (CASS) Project. This permitted access for salmon to the 5km reach of the main River Moriston between Ceannacroc and Cluanie Dam for the first time in 44 years. Since the removal of the Ceannacrocc fish trap in 2005, NBFT have regularly surveyed the areas of productive salmon habitat identified by Watt (2005) to gauge recolonisation.

Surveys conducted at the Buinn Loyne Site have shown salmon fry to be absent from two out of the last five surveys with low numbers recorded in 2011 and 2013. The 2016 quantitative survey generated a salmon fry density of 172 per 100m² that would be classed as 'excellent'. This is the second highest density of salmon fry ever recorded from the Moriston catchment. Given the low numbers of salmon fry recorded prior to 2016, it is of no surprise that densities of salmon parr (1++) have also been low. The 2016 salmon parr density from the Buinn Loyne Site was four per 100m² and would be classed as 'moderate'. Two further surveys conducted close to Cluanie Dam showed salmon fry to be absent in 2016 with low densities recorded in 2009, 2011, 2012 and 2013.

Construction of the fish pass at Ceannacroc Heck, permitting access to salmon to the upper reaches of the River Moriston for the first time in 44 years



A salmon 'redd' (area of clean gravel) recorded above Ceannacroc Heck during a spawning survey in late October 2016



INVERNESS WEST LINK BRIDGE CROSSING

The West Link Road is a project in Inverness which will complete the link between the Dores roundabout and the A82 at Torvean. This includes a bridge that will cross over three distinct water courses as it joins the north and south banks of the River Ness; the main River Ness, the Holm Mill Lade on the south bank and the Whin Park Lade on the north bank.

In June 2016 the NBFT were contracted by Wills Bros Civil Engineering Ltd to complete pre-construction fish habitat and fish population surveys as part of the West Link bridge construction project. This information would subsequently be used as a baseline with which to assess the extent of any losses and/or degradation of fish habitat and fish populations associated with the bridge construction works. Further to this, the NBFT were also contracted to carry out fish rescue operations within the footprint of the bridge piers.

In terms of the fish habitat surveys, Holm Mill Lade was found to contain ideal trout spawning habitat along the majority of its length. It was extremely well utilised, with trout fry present in 'excellent' densities indicating that it may be an important sea trout spawning area. Salmon fry were absent, indicating that it was not utilised by spawning salmon in autumn/winter 2015, however 'excellent' salmon parr densities were recorded. Concrete slabs in the lower reaches of the Lade provided ideal habitat for eels, which were present in high densities.

Recording information collected during an electrofishing survey on the lower Holm Mill Lade



Whin Park Lade was characterised by shallow glide, with silt and organic matter covering the river bed along the majority of its length. 'Poor' densities of salmon fry and 'moderate' densities of salmon parr were recorded in the limited faster flowing areas. These are likely to have passed through the screen at the inlet sluice at a small size. Eels were distributed throughout the Lade, with high densities of lamprey ammocetes also present. The River Ness contained a range of high quality spawning and nursery habitats for salmon, together with deeper holding areas for adult fish. Historical fish population surveys indicate that this habitat is well utilised with 'excellent' densities of both fry and parr being present.

Salmon fry (bottom) and parr (top) captured during the electrofishing survey on Whin Park Lade



Fish rescues were carried out NBFT and Ness DSFB staff between the 27th July and the 3rd August 2016. Approximately 1,000 fish were rescued from the north pier (trout, salmon and eels), with a further 100 from the south pier (salmon and eels).

A fish rescue being completed by board and trust staff in the south pier of the West Link Bridge



UPPER GARRY SALMON RESTORATION PROJECT

Scottish & Southern Energy (SSE), Ness & Beaulieu Fisheries Trust (NBFT), The Ness District Salmon Fishery Board (NDSFB), Marine Harvest (MH), Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) and the Rivers and Lochs Institute (RLI) have come together to collaborate on the delivery of a project to restore a self-sustaining wild salmon population to the Upper River Garry.

The abundance of salmon in the Upper River Garry has declined over the last 50 years and is showing little sign of recovery. Historical stocking undertaken as mitigation for loss of habitat following historical hydroelectric development, together with subsequent easing of fish passage, has proven to be unsuccessful. It is believed that the indigenous population may have been effected by none-native strains of salmon that may not be fully adapted to their environment. Initial baseline genetic monitoring has indicated that a remnant of the original native stock of salmon is still present.

The screens on the heck at Poullary were removed in 2004 resulting in a significant increase in juvenile habitat accessible to salmon



In 2012 the RLI was commissioned by the NDSFB to carry out a scoping study for the development of a salmon stock restoration programme for the Upper Garry. Their recommendations included the implementation of carefully targeted, designed and linked enhancement initiatives, encompassing habitat improvement and stock rehabilitation through supportive breeding and supplementary stocking. The supportive breeding and supplementary stocking element of the project involves capture of a proportion of the Upper Garry salmon smolts as they migrate downstream towards the sea between April and May. These fish will then be grown on to maturity in captivity, enabling a sufficient number of eggs to be produced to have a meaningful impact on the system.

It is intended to stock these eggs to areas accessible to salmon upstream of Garry Dam for a period of four years in an attempt to “kick-start” the population. The success of the work will be monitored and evaluated on a regular basis. SSE is committed to supporting this project to the tune of £70k per annum, with other partners making in kind contributions.

Smolt trapping and transport operations carried out by the Ness DSFB and NBFT in spring 2016



A total of 250 salmon smolts were captured in our rotary screw trap and retained as broodstock between April and May 2016. Each fish was anaesthetised on removal from the trap and a Passive Integrated Transponder (PIT) tag surgically implanted into its abdomen. This allows each individual fish to be identified using a hand held reader. The fork length and weight of each fish was recorded, with tissue and scale samples taken. The fish were then transported to the temporary freshwater holding facility at Loch Garry, where they were introduced to a specialist pellet diet.

On the 4th May 2016 the fish were prepared for transportation to the Drimsallie Freshwater Hatchery on the River Lochy by the Ness DSFB team. The fish were found to be in extremely good condition on removal from the temporary holding facility, with a number showing signs that they had been feeding. Care was taken to ensure that stress was minimised and dissolved oxygen levels were at an optimum.

Previous attempts to introduce the smolts to a marine facility proved to be unsuccessful and resulted in high mortality. The decision was therefore taken to instead rear the smolts to maturity in freshwater. The downside to this approach is that it will take an extra year to produce good quality eggs; however on the plus side, omitting the transition to salinity is likely to reduce risk. Furthermore, Jon Gibb the hatchery manager at Drimsallie has a successful track record with regards to growing on wild salmon smolts in captivity.

***Introducing the wild Garry smolts to their new home at Drimsallie Freshwater Hatchery in May 2016 (top),
with the now post-smolts developing well in November 2016 (bottom)***



The smolts were in very good condition on arrival at Drimsallie with no losses during transportation. They were lightly anaesthetised before being transferred into three metre diameter round tank with a good flow of fresh water. The fish settled in very quickly and began to shoal and swim against the flow. After about 30 minutes we noticed that a number of the fish were rising to the surface. A handful of pellets confirmed that a number of the fish were indeed feeding, a very significant observation. It was clear that the strategy of introducing pellet feed in the Loch Garry facility had worked.

So far the 2016 River Garry smolt trapping programme has proven to be very successful. This is a welcome development after the difficulties experienced over the last two years. A month into the programme there were no reported losses at the Drimsallie Hatchery. This was a significant improvement on the previous two years when fish began to die immediately. As of the 1st August 2016 the average weight of the fish was around 100 grams (i.e. more than double the 25 gram average on capture), with most survivors appearing to be doing well on the pellet diet and overall survival standing at 57 per cent.

The latest update on the 28th November 2016 indicated that only two further fish had died with a 56 per cent survival rate. We are very happy with progress and the fish are feeding well. They have now reached an average weight of approximately 400 grams.

Healthy looking River Garry salmon post-smolts photographed during a visit to Drimsallie Hatchery on the 28th November 2016



Conservation Regulations

2016 CONSERVATION REGULATIONS

In 2016 the Scottish Government introduced a package of measures to manage the conservation of salmon on an annual basis according to its conservation status.

The conservation status of each stock is defined by the probability of the stock meeting its conservation limit (CL) over a five-year period. Rather than a simple pass or fail, stocks have been allocated to one of three grades, each with its own recommended management actions. This included the introduction of mandatory catch and release in areas where stocks were below their conservation limit ('Category 3').

Scottish Government conservation status grades with associated management actions

Category	Probability of meeting CL	Effectively CL met in:	Advice
1	At least 80%	4 out of 5 years	Exploitation is sustainable therefore no additional management action is currently required. This recognises the effectiveness of existing non-statutory local management interventions.
2	60-80%	3 out of 5 years	Management action is necessary to reduce exploitation; mandatory catch and release will not be required in the first instance, but this will be reviewed annually.
3	Less than 60%	≤ 2 out of 5 years	Exploitation is unsustainable therefore management actions required to reduce exploitation for 1 year i.e. mandatory catch and release (all methods).

The Scottish Government output for the Ness district outside the Moriston SAC suggested a 'Category 2' status (69.4 per cent probability of meeting its conservation limits). However, they deemed the conservation status of the Moriston SAC to be poor 'Category 3' (22.7 per cent probability of meeting its conservation limits). Given that salmon destined for this sub catchment will pass through (and be available for killing in) the wider district, they decided that the rest of the Ness district should also be given 'Category 3' status, i.e. the district could not be given a final grading higher than that of the SAC.

The Ness DSFB objected to the categorisation of the Moriston SAC based on the Scottish Government's use of rod catch data rather than fish counts and total wetted area. Staff from the board and trust subsequently completed a significant amount of work in terms of a critical analysis paper for the catchment, validation of fish counts in partnership with SSE and UHI and the completion of an aerial habitat survey on the Moriston

Further to the above, board and trust staff positively engaged with the Scottish Government by attending technical group meetings relating to fish counters and grilse error. They also fed into a number of other groups via the biologists working group and completed online surveys relating to wetted area (within Scottish Government guidelines). All of this information was made available to the Scottish Government for use in its 2017 conservation assessments.

2017 CONSERVATION REGULATIONS

On the 1st September 2016 the Scottish Government advertised its new proposed regulations for 2017 as part of a statutory 28 day consultation (closing on the 29th September 2016). They reported that a number of refinements had been made to the assessment model for 2017 as follows:

- **Individual River Data** - The regulations for 2016 were based on fisheries district, with the aim of moving over to assess by river when available data allowed;
- **Sub catchment SACs** - There are a number of rivers that contain a sub-catchment designated as an SAC for Atlantic salmon. In these cases the conservation status was assessed for the whole river (including the SAC) and a separate assessment was made specifically for the SAC;
- **Estimating number of salmon** - A method of estimating the number of salmon entering rivers in each month was developed using data from counters run by Marine Scotland, Scottish Power and Scottish and Southern Electricity. The model included the effects of flow on rod catches using data supplied by the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA);
- **Ages and sizes of fish** - Information on the ages and sizes of fish were modelled using scale sampling data collated from a number of organisations including the Ness DSFB and NBFT;
- **Proportion female** - Information on the proportion of grilse and multi-sea winter fish that are female was obtained using new genetic methods;
- **Egg content of salmon** - The numbers of eggs in female fish were estimated using the relationship between fish length and egg content derived from data collected on the Rivers Conon, Dee, North Esk, Spey, Tay and Tweed; and
- **Distribution of salmon** - In conjunction with Scottish Fisheries Co-ordination Centre a consultation exercise was undertaken to update information on the distribution of salmon within river systems.

For the 2017 season, the Ness district as a whole has been assessed as having an 88 per cent probability of meeting its conservation limits ('Category 1'), whereas the Moriston SAC has been assessed as having only an eight per cent probability ('Category 3') of meeting its conservation limits. As such, the Scottish Government initially proposed that the whole Ness district be assigned 'Category 3' for the second year in a row.

The Ness DSFB logged a formal appeal based on the potential socio-economic impacts on the rod and net fishery, together with the fact that we have technical concerns regarding the approach used to assess the Moriston's conservation status.

Following extremely constructive dialogue between the Ness DSFB and the Scottish Government, it was agreed that 'Grade 3' status will remain across the district until the 30th June to protect 'spring' salmon and early running grilse destined for the Moriston. From 1st July it will remain mandatory that all fish caught in the Moriston conservation area must be released - but the River Ness, Loch Ness and the rest of the Ness district will be uplifted to 'Grade 2' status, allowing a limited number of fish to be caught and retained.

This will be accompanied by the new Ness system '2017 Salmon Conservation Policy' to meet the Scottish Government's requirement for reduced exploitation on 'Grade 2' systems. It is hoped that these measures will ensure that the necessary protections are in place for the Moriston stocks whilst maximising the economic benefits on the wider Ness system.

2017 SALMON CONSERVATION POLICY

Area	Date	Conservation Policy	Restrictions on baits and Lures
River Moriston SAC (Grade 3 Conservation Status)	15 th January to 15 th October	Mandatory catch and release of salmon will be in force across the River Moriston SAC throughout the 2017 salmon fishing season. Exploitation of the River Moriston stock has been deemed to be unsustainable and so mandatory catch and release has been implemented. Any salmon caught, including any dead or bleeding fish, must be returned to the water with the least possible harm.	The River Ness Salmon Fishery District (Baits and Lures) Regulations 2007 prohibits the use of prawns and shrimp throughout the Ness district and worms for salmon and sea trout above Dochfour Weir (including the Moriston). Any spinning lure or plug should have only one hook no bigger than size 6. Preferably all hooks should be single, barbless or crimped.
Ness District Excluding the River Moriston SAC	15 th January to 30 th June (Grade 3 Conservation Status)	Mandatory catch and release of salmon will be in force across the Ness District from the 15 th January to 30 th June. Salmon destined for the River Moriston SAC will pass through, and be available for capture/killing in the wider district. Evidence suggests that the majority of fresh run Moriston fish will have entered the system by the 30 th June. Salmon should not be retained anywhere in the Ness district before 1 st July to ensure protection of the Moriston stock.	Anglers should not fish with worms anywhere in the district while mandatory catch and release is in force. A high proportion of fish caught using this method are deeply hooked, reducing their chances of survival. Any spinning lure or plug should have only one hook no bigger than size 6. Preferably all hooks should be single, barbless or crimped.
	1 st July to 15 th October (Grade 2 Conservation Status)	All hen fish of any size and all cock fish over 8 pounds (69cm/27 inches) must be released. Furthermore: - Only one cock fish weighing 8 pounds (69cm/27 inches) or less may be retained per angler per week, with a maximum of two per season; and - All coloured and unseasonable fish must be released, providing protection for Moriston SAC fish throughout the season. - Guidance on the sex and condition of fish provided overleaf - IF IN DOUBT PLEASE RELEASE THE FISH.	Anglers should not fish with worm anywhere in the district after the 31 st August. A large proportion of fish captured after this date are 'coloured'. Any spinning lure or plug should have only one hook no bigger than size 6. Preferably all hooks should be single, barbless or crimped.



This conservation policy represents a **MINIMUM** requirement in terms of helping to ensure that the Ness district and River Moriston SAC meet their future conservation limits. Fishery proprietors and anglers are urged to go 'above and beyond' and practice **total CATCH AND RELEASE** across the Ness district



CATCH AND RELEASE BEST PRACTICE GUIDANCE

With mandatory catch and release in force on the Ness district, it is important that fish are handled correctly. By following the advice below, you will give them the best chance of going on to spawn successfully:

- Use 'pinched' or barbless hooks to reduce unhooking time.
 - Limit the duration of the fight, especially during warm low water periods. Using a stronger leader enables an angler to reel in the fish more rapidly.
 - If 'tailing' a salmon, never beach or drag it onto the bank or exposed gravel bar. After firmly grasping the fish by the tail, place the other hand under the abdomen to support it. Avoid taking the fish out of the water, holding it upside down by the tail or keeping it in areas where you have disturbed river sediment. When handling salmon, avoid any contact with the eyes or gills.
- 
- After carefully removing the fly, position the salmon facing upstream and allow it to breathe naturally without moving it back and forth (which in fact hinders the salmon's breathing mechanism). Water must be sucked in through the mouth and expelled through the gills by the pulsating movements of the gill covers.
 - If the fly is too deeply embedded in the throat, it is best to simply cut the leader and leave the hook where it is.
 - Sometimes recovery may take several minutes, notably after a long exhausting struggle. There is no set time to free the revived salmon; its increasing vigorous behaviour will indicate to you the right moment to let it go.
 - If using a net to land salmon, use a knotless small mesh size net to prevent injuries to the eyes. The angler should manoeuvre the salmon towards the net which is held stationary, usually by someone else. This person should not chase after the salmon with the net.
 - Take the salmon out of the net by grasping it by the tail and supporting it under the abdomen. Large salmon can also be supported horizontally over your forearm to prevent excessive pressure on its internal organs.
 - If pictures are desired, keep the head of the salmon under water while making preparations. For posing, salmon can be held out of the water for less than five seconds without endangering its survival.

Recent studies have shown that when done correctly catch and release had little or no effect on the reproductive capacity of the freed salmon. With an average sized hen salmon weighing 10lbs producing approximately 5,000 eggs, catch and release can make a significant contribution to salmon conservation.

Fisheries Enforcement

Decline in the numbers of salmon returning to our rivers in recent years has resulted in a shift in priorities for many DSFBs. There is now an increasing focus on fisheries science (to identify problems) and management (to address the problems).

Water bailiffs, as the primary employees of a DSFB, are expected to have a much wider range of skills and experience than in the past and are spending a larger proportion of their time on 'non-enforcement' issues. The proportion of a DSFB's annual budget available for enforcement has decreased, leading to fewer dedicated water bailiffs. At the same time poaching is still an issue, so there is a need to 'do more with less' and to make the best use of available resources.

TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

Ness DSFB water bailiffs attended a two day Conflict Resolution and Handcuff Training course with Niton Training Ltd in West Sussex (training providers for the Environment Agency, the NHS and others). The techniques covered on the course are in line with those currently taught to UK Police officers. They are tried and tested, simple, effective and safe when used correctly. Niton Ltd also ensures that students are fully aware of the lesser options available before any force is used on another person. Our full time staff members are now fully certified in court credible techniques for a year and Niton Ltd will provide court backing if required.

We have also produced a Ness DSFB policy on the issuing and use of personal protective equipment to fisheries enforcement officers. This document provides instruction on the training requirements relating to personal protective equipment, how the equipment must be issued, exact specifications of the equipment and procedures to follow if the equipment is used in the course of duty. The Ness DSFB can now clearly demonstrate that it has considered the safety of the public, its staff and any offender in terms of the enforcement activity carried out by its officers. It should be noted that the primary aim of the Ness DSFB is to prevent illegal fishing activity rather than to take enforcement action.

Personal protective equipment carried by Ness DSFB water bailiffs



PARTNERSHIP WORKING

The Ness DSFB Director represents the Association of Salmon Fishery Boards (ASFB) on the Highland branch of the Partnership against Wildlife Crime (HPAW). Other partner organisations include Police Scotland, The Highland Council, Scottish Natural Heritage, RSPB Scotland, Scottish Land and Estates, National Farmers Union Scotland and the Scottish Gamekeepers Association.

The primary focus of the group involves working closely with partners to raise awareness of and prevent wildlife crime from occurring. During a series of initial meetings, an action plan to combat wildlife crime over the period 2016 to 2019 has been developed. This plan was formally launched at the Highland Environment Forum on the 14th March 2015. Specific salmon related actions include:

- The introduction of a River Watch scheme and addition of all water bailiffs in the area to the Wildlife and Rural Crime alert system; and
- Delivery of two specific operations annually to combat salmon poaching and freshwater pearl mussel crime ('Operation Salmo').

Other broader objectives will also raise awareness of salmon poaching issues. All in all this is a really positive partnership that will be of significant benefit to the Ness district salmon populations. It is clear that there is a real commitment by all partners to deliver on the strategy.

Police Scotland wildlife crime officers accompanied NDSFB water bailiffs on a number of patrols across the Ness district throughout the 2016 season. The purpose of these patrols was to engage with members of the angling community and to ensure compliance with the Salmon and Freshwater Fisheries (Consolidation) Scotland Act 2003.

Police officer and water bailiffs working in partnership across the Ness district



Salmon poaching is one of the six national UK wildlife crime priorities and tackling those involved in it remains a priority for the local partnership between water bailiffs and Police Scotland wildlife crime officers. By preventing the illegal exploitation of fish, we aim to maximise the numbers going on to successfully spawn.

LOCH NESS PATROL BOAT

For many years the Ness DSFB has relied on the use of patrol boats and crew from neighbouring areas to police fishing activity on Loch Ness. This limited the number of patrols that we were able to carry out each year and, more importantly, our ability to respond to incidents at short notice. This year the board has invested in its own MECAL certified patrol boat 'BRADÁN' (Scottish Gaelic for salmon). This will act as a visible deterrent on Loch Ness and allow us to significantly increase the number of boat based patrols completed each year.

Carrying out a patrol on Loch Ness in August 2016



Returning salmon migrate rapidly through the River Ness and enter the relative safety of the deep waters of Loch Ness. Here they stay until the autumn, when they migrate upstream and downstream into rivers and tributaries to spawn. Being such a large water body, it is particularly difficult and time consuming to carry out effective enforcement patrols from the shore. Our new patrol boat will allow us to ensure that regulations on the loch are being adhered too and in so doing prevent the illegal exploitation of fish.

Fisheries Development

SCOTLAND'S SALMON FESTIVAL, INVERNESS

The first Scotland's Salmon Festival was held in Inverness between the 31st August and 5th September 2015. Its primary aim was to raise awareness of the Atlantic salmon, its lifecycle, cultural and economic importance in Scotland and the pressures that it currently faces. The event was a great success.



The second 'Scotland's Salmon Festival' in Inverness is scheduled from the 29th August to the 2nd Sept 2017. The steering group has been meeting regularly and plans are coming along really well. Events will include a film night, international Speycasting competition and festival fair. Further details to follow on the festival website (<http://www.scotlandsalmonfestival.org/>). In the meantime please 'save the date'.

INVERNESS YOUTH ANGLING INITIATIVE

This year the Ness DSFB joined forces with other local organisations to develop a youth angling initiative. The aim was to raise confidence, particularly in disadvantaged kids, and demonstrate that there are alternative pathways and better opportunities available to them.

Qualified coaches from Inverness Angling Club (IAC) delivered a four-week programme of tuition for young people attending The Highland Council's Bridge Educational Unit. The programme was supported by the Ness DSFB, NBFT, Inverness tackle dealers Graham and Company, international tackle manufacturers Shakespeare, Scottish Canals and Police Scotland. The events included angling tuition and an educational component to raise awareness of the aquatic environment.

Young angler Aiden Moffat with a four pound fly-caught rainbow trout at Achagour Fishery



Wild Fisheries Reform

BACKGROUND

In January 2014, the First Minister announced that a Wild Fisheries Review would be undertaken during 2014. The aims of the review were to:

- Develop and promote a modern, evidence-based management system for wild fisheries fit for purpose in the 21st century, and capable of responding to the changing environment; and
- To manage, conserve and develop our wild fisheries to maximise the sustainable benefit of Scotland's wild fish resources to the country as a whole and particularly to rural areas

On 8th October 2014, the review submitted its final report and 54 recommendations to the Minister for Environment and Climate Change. Following on from the Review, Marine Scotland has embarked upon a programme of Wild Fisheries Reform, including a package of Conservation Regulations. The Salmon Conservation Measures (formerly known as the Kill Licence) were progressed separately from the wider reform programme.

During 2015, a consultation paper was published which set out the Government's response to the Wild Fisheries Review. The consultation closed on 7th August 2015. The responses have been considered and the analysis has been published.

Dr Aileen McLeod, former Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform, launched a consultation paper on Draft provisions for a Wild Fisheries (Scotland) Bill and draft Wild Fisheries Strategy on 8th February 2016. The consultation closed on 2nd May 2016. The Scottish Government's forthcoming 'Programme for Government' was announced in September 2016. This excluded the Wild Fisheries Bill, meaning that the legislative process is now delayed and will not start until September 2017 at the earliest.

STAKEHOLDER GROUPS

An external Stakeholder Reference Group was established to inform detailed proposals for legislation arising from the consultation on the broad policy principles on the reform of the management system. In addition, a number of working groups have been established to inform and develop thinking across a range of key issues:

- **Regulatory Enforcement (Ness DSFB representation)**
- **Training and Continuous Professional Development (Ness DSFB representation)**
- **Change Management and Transitional Matters (Ness DSFB representation)**
- **Fishery Management Plan Template**
- **Promotion and Development**

The Scottish Government also intends to establish a Finance Working Group and Science and Data Working group in the near future. An external National Wild Fisheries Strategy Development Group was established to inform the development of the National Wild Fisheries Strategy.

The Marine Scotland and Local Fisheries Biologist Liaison Group (MSLFBLG) has been set up to co-ordinate the involvement of local biologists throughout Scotland in refining the data and methods used to determine conservation status and develop an agreed template for salmon conservation plans. Reporting to the

MSLFBG, four technical working groups have been established to refine components of the Conservation Regulations assessment:

- **Grilse Error** - To provide methods and data to determine the correct age structure of salmon stocks around Scotland, either through independent sampling or correcting reported catches for misidentification of actual sea age (Ness DSFB representation);
- **Electrofishing** - To discuss the use of electrofishing data for determining the conservation status of rivers;
- **Exploitation** - To provide methods and data to determine the exploitation rates of salmon around Scotland; and
- **Counters** - To discuss the use of data collected from counters in the conservation regulations in both the short and long term (Ness DSFB representation).

FISHERY MANAGEMENT ORGANISATIONS (FMOs)

The ASFB/RAFTS have reported to the Scottish Government on potential FMO formations across Scotland, including one covering the Lochaber, Ness and Beaully area. Initial discussions have taken place between Ness and Lochaber (boards and trusts) who are supportive of collaboration. The Beaully DSFB is supportive of a Ness and Beaully collaboration, but is opposed to this area being extended to include Lochaber. All parties would welcome further discussion with Scottish Government on this issue.

Geographical range of the combined Lochaber, Ness and Beaully Districts



There are also further issues to be discussed relating to which Inner Hebridean islands fall within a Lochaber, Ness and Beaully area and which within the Argyll/Lomond area. The outcome of such discussions have a bearing on any fisheries in these areas (migratory and non-migratory) and on the management of fish farm planning applications and other aquaculture related issues. The Ness DSFB would not support the inclusion of any of these islands.

There are likely to be 15 to 17 FMOs across Scotland, compared to the current 41 DSFBs. The majority of these areas are in general agreement with geographical proposals emerging and in many areas there is strong support for the idea of testing ideas through a “pilot” programme. Discussions on many aspects of the WFR process, not least the areas being considered in this report, are becoming increasingly constrained by the absence of any real clarity on how the funding gap between the existing levy system, and the required budget to adequately fund such organisations, will be filled.

Compliance with Good Governance Obligations

Statutory 'good governance' obligations are placed on district salmon fishery boards as defined in law by section 46 of the Salmon and Freshwater Fisheries (Consolidation) (Scotland) Act 2003. They comprise the original obligations placed on boards by the 2003 Act together with those introduced through amendments of the 2003 Act by the Aquaculture and Fisheries (Scotland) Act 2013 which came into force on the 16th September 2013.

The purpose of the obligations is to enhance openness, transparency and accountability of the management of salmon fisheries by district salmon fishery boards. They bring together existing best practice to ensure that all boards act in a manner consistent with bodies operating in the public sphere.

Key activities covered by these obligations include:

- Annual reports and accounts;
- Meetings of the board;
- Complaints procedures; and
- Register of member's interests.

This section of the report demonstrates how we have complied with each of the key obligations since the coming into force of the Aquaculture and Fisheries (Scotland) Act 2013 on the 16th September 2013. We will continue to follow the advice and guidance produced by both Marine Scotland and the Association of Salmon Fishery Boards over the coming year to ensure continued compliance with our good governance obligations.

ANNUAL REPORT AND ACCOUNTS

This annual report including accounts to the year ending 15th May 2016 will be published on the 'Publications' page of our website (<http://ness.dsfb.org.uk/good-governance/publications/>) together with those for previous years. Hard copies will also be available from the clerk of the board on request.

MEETINGS

2015 Annual Meeting of Qualified Proprietors

The 2015 annual meeting of qualified proprietors took place on the 17th December 2015. This was publicised on the 12th November 2015 via our website, Facebook page, Twitter feed, written notice to qualified proprietors and by advertisement in Graham's Tackle Shop in Inverness. Notification of the meeting was also emailed to the Scottish Ministers on the same date.

Five board members (from a total of eleven), five non-voting attendees and one public observer were present. The minutes of the meeting can be viewed on the 'Publications' page of our website and were sent to Scottish ministers on the 25th March 2016 (following approval at our March 2016 board meeting). The 2015 annual report and accounts to year ending 15th May 2015 were approved and subsequently published on our website and submitted to Scottish ministers on the 4th January 2016.

2016 Annual Public Meeting

An annual public meeting was held on the 28th January 2016, with the primary purpose of presenting the agreed and finalised annual report and accounts to the wider public. This was publicised on the 23rd December 2015 via our website, Facebook page, Twitter feed, written notice to qualified proprietors and by advertisement in Graham's Tackle Shop in Inverness. Notification of the meeting was also emailed to Scottish ministers on the same date. The notice publicising the meeting invited interested parties to suggest items for discussion. In response a proposal was received from a member of the public for consideration of the installation of a fish counter in the River Ness.

The public meeting was attended by 32 individuals including representatives from Inverness Angling Club, UHI Rivers and Lochs Institute, Spey DSFB, Spey Foundation, Kyle DSFB, Ness-side Fishing, Ness Castle Lodges, CBEC Eco-Engineering, and Beaulieu Angling Club in addition to the Ness District Salmon Fishery Board and Ness & Beaulieu Fishery Trust. Representatives from the Scottish Government were scheduled to attend to discuss the Wild Fisheries Review, but had to cancel at the last minute due to train cancellations.

Attendees at the Ness DSFB 2016 Annual Public Meeting held in Inverness on the 28th January 2016



There were three presentations given as follows:

1. Introduction

Andrew Duncan – vice chairman, Ness DSFB

In the absence of Michael Martin, chairman of the NDSFB, Andrew Duncan gave a brief welcome and introduction to the 2015 Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 15th May 2015. He thanked each of the sponsors (CBEC Ecoengineering, Ness Castle Lodges and Strutt and Parker), without whom the high-quality print productions would not have been possible.

2. “2015 – A Year in Review”

Chris Conroy – director, Ness DSFB

Chris provided an overview of the activities of the board over the previous year (including an analysis of the provisional rod catches for 2015) together with those planned for the forthcoming year.

3. “Ness and Beaully Fisheries Trust: Report on 2015 Activities”

Nick Barker – senior biologist, Ness and Beaully Fisheries Trust

Nick provided an overview of the activities of the trust over the last year, in particular the results of their fish monitoring programmes.

4. “Wild Fisheries Reform”

Scottish Government, Wild Fisheries Reform Team

A Scottish Government representative was scheduled to provide a summary of the latest developments regarding the Wild Fisheries Reform process. Unfortunately they had to cancel at the last minute due to train cancellations.

This item was therefore replaced with:

“2016 Conservation Regulations”

Andrew Duncan and Chris Conroy, Ness DSFB

Andrew Duncan provided background on the process that has taken place to date. Andrew stated that he felt that the board and trust had not been adequately consulted. Chris Conroy described the details of the new conservation regulations and the specific implications for the Ness district. He explained how the Scottish Government had assessed the conservation status of each salmon district and the Ness DSFBs position regarding perceived problems and strategy going forward.

A question and answer session followed the presentations. The suggested item for discussion relating to a fish counter on the River Ness was then discussed. Chris Conroy explained that the Ness has been included in a £150K Marine Scotland research project entitled “Technical, logistical and economic considerations for the development and implementation of a Scottish salmon counter network”. On the 8th October 2014 Ness Fishery Board staff accompanied representatives from Marine Scotland and specialists from ‘In-Stream Fisheries Research’, a specialist company based in North Vancouver, Canada, on a visit to the River Ness.

The final report from the research project has been subject to a number of delays; however we now expect to receive it in February. That said, and based on comments received during the site visit, it is unlikely that an economically viable solution will be possible on the Ness at the moment. This is due to the limitations of existing technology, the width of the river and the associated cost of installation.

The minutes of the meeting can be viewed on the ‘Publications’ page of our website and were sent to Scottish ministers on the 25th March 2016 (following approval at our March 2016 board meeting).

Ordinary Board Meetings

Ordinary board meetings were advertised on the 'News' page of our website (<http://ness.dsfb.org.uk/news/>) with the public being invited to observe. These were held on the 24th March, 30th June (rescheduled as quorum could not be met on the original date of the 16th June) and the 15th September 2016 (including a triennial election). The minutes of each of these meetings can be viewed on the 'Publications' page of our website.

2015 Annual Meeting of Qualified Proprietors

A further ordinary board meeting will follow the 2016 annual meeting of qualified proprietors, which will take place on the 22nd December 2016. This was publicised on the 27th November 2016 via our website, Facebook page, Twitter feed, written notice to qualified proprietors and by advertisement in Graham's Tackle Shop in Inverness.

COMPLAINTS

The board has set up and maintains a complaints procedure which can be viewed on the 'Good Governance' page of our website (<http://ness.dsfb.org.uk/good-governance/>). This procedure was first produced on the 28th August 2013 and approved at the board meeting on the 19th September 2013. It has since undergone three iterations, with the latest version 1.3 published on the 5th December 2014.

During the last 12 months the Ness District Salmon Fishery Board received no complaints.

MEMBERS' INTERESTS

The register of members' interests can be viewed on the 'Good Governance' page of our website (<http://ness.dsfb.org.uk/good-governance/>). We have included a standing item at each board meeting inviting board members to declare new or amend existing interests. All such instances are recorded in the minutes of these meetings, with the latest version 4.4 of the register produced on the 14th September 2015.

FORTHCOMING MEETINGS

The provisional dates of forthcoming board meeting are as follows. Please note that these may be subject to change, with notification of the final dates being posted on our website and circulated to proprietors at least 21 days prior to the meeting.

- **19th January 2017** – 2017 annual public meeting
- **16th March 2017** – board meeting
- **15th June 2017** – board meeting
- **14th September 2017** – board meeting
- **14th December 2017** – 2017 annual meeting of qualified proprietors and board meeting

The NDSFB invites the public to attend all of our meetings. However, certain items of business may be held in private. Please note that the legislation only makes provisions for members of the public to propose matters for consideration and speak at the annual public meeting. However, the NDSFB may at its own discretion wish to give interested parties the right to do so at other meetings.

Key Priorities for the Forthcoming Year

In addition to the delivery of its core objectives in relation to fisheries science, management and enforcement, the board proposes to progress the following key objectives over the coming year:

- **Efficiently and effectively manage the board, through:**
 - *Full compliance with all statutes including the new good governance requirements;*
 - *Compliance with the ASFB/RAFTS Code of Governance for DSFBs;*
 - *Provision of efficient administration;*
 - *Ensuring sound financial control; and*
 - *Being a good employer.*
- **Work in close partnership with and financially support the NBFT to help ensure:**
 - *The conservation and maintenance of the diversity of salmon and sea trout populations in the Ness system and to conserve their aquatic environment;*
 - *The collection of accurate, adequate and up-to-date information on the status of fish stocks, their habitats and exploitation to facilitate an evidence based approach to fisheries management; and*
 - *Education of the public and any association, company, local authority, administrative, or governmental agency or public body or representative body.*
- **Work with partners to delivery key management actions identified in the 'Ness District Fisheries Management Plan (2014 – 2019)', to facilitate the:**
 - *Maintenance of or improvement in the density and distribution of juvenile salmon;*
 - *Stabilisation or enhancement of the number of returning adult salmon and sea trout; and*
 - *An increase in the socio-economic value of fisheries within the Ness district.*
- **Support the promotion and development of salmon fisheries in the Ness district, by:**
 - *Encouraging the development of measures to generate more rods on the river, both in the short and longer term;*
 - *Continue to promote the Ness district via the NDSFB website and social media;*
 - *Commissioning an economic evaluation of fisheries in the Ness district; and*
 - *Work with partners to deliver a 'Scotland's Salmon Festival' in September 2017;*
- **Ensure the delivery of on-going projects, including:**
 - *The Upper Garry Salmon Restoration Project;*
 - *The Holm Burn Restoration Project; and*
 - *The Ness District Scale Sampling Programme.*
- **Work with the Scottish Government to refine conservation limits for the Ness district and River Moriston SAC, through:**
 - *Continued representation on various technical working groups; and*
 - *Provision of accurate and up to date information in a timely manner.*
- **Positively engage with the Scottish Government's Wild Fisheries Reform process:**
 - *Make representation on behalf of salmon and sea trout fisheries across the Ness district;*
 - *Ensure that any new systems or regulations are fit for purpose; and*
 - *Engage with neighbouring DSFBs and trusts as appropriate regarding the formation of a larger fisheries management organisation.*

Financial Summary

CHAIRMAN'S FOREWORD

The accounts for the year ended 15 May 2016 are included in this section of the report and show a net surplus of £15,650. The Ness DSFB had actually budgeted for a loss of £29,930, but not achieved this due to an under spend on the Upper Garry Salmon Restoration Project. This will be carried over to the next financial year. The board's reserve position remains satisfactory and is forecast to fall in the future as planned work is implemented.

Michael Martin
Chairman

Ness District Salmon Fishery Board

Accounts

for the year ended 15 May 2016

Ness District Salmon Fishery Board

Information

Accountants

Frame Kennedy
Chartered Accountants
Metropolitan House
31 - 33 High Street
Inverness
IV1 1HT

Bankers

Clydesdale Bank
38 High Street
Banchory
AB31 5SR

Chief executive / clerk

Chris Conroy
Birchwood
4 Loch Lait
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IV3 8LB

Ness District Salmon Fishery Board

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Ness District Salmon Fishery Board

Independent examiner's report to the Board.

We report on the accounts for the year ended 15 May 2016 set out on pages 2 to 5.

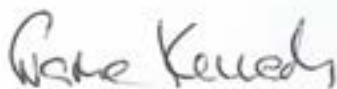
Basis of Independent examiner's statement

Our examination includes a review of the accounting records kept by the board and a comparison of the accounts presented with those records. It also includes consideration of any unusual items or disclosures in the accounts, and seeks explanations from the board concerning any such matters.

Independent examiner's statement

In the course of our examination, no matter has come to our attention:

1. Which gives us reasonable cause to believe that in any material respect the board have not met the requirements to ensure that:
 - proper accounting records are kept in accordance with the Salmon and Freshwater Fisheries (Consolidation) (Scotland) Act 2003, and
 - to prepare accounts which accord with the accounting records
2. to which, in our opinion, attention should be drawn in order to enable a proper understanding of the accounts to be reached.



Frame Kennedy
Chartered Accountants
Metropolitan House
31 - 33 High Street
Inverness
IV1 1HT

8 September 2016

Ness District Salmon Fishery Board

Income and expenditure account for the year ended 15 May 2016

	2016		2015	
	£	£	£	£
Income				
Assessments on Proprietors		102,832		102,341
Scottish & Southern Energy Plc		70,040		70,470
		<u>172,872</u>		<u>172,811</u>
Expenses				
Salaries	90,142		88,627	
Staff training, meeting costs	1,949		1,277	
Netting Operators compensation	4,624		4,624	
Insurance, health and safety	6,088		5,621	
Repairs and renewals	657		784	
Stationery, advertising and telephone	5,966		5,894	
Moray Firth Sea Trout Project	500		500	
Motor expenses	12,144		10,174	
Legal and professional fees	-		180	
Accountancy and Clerk's expenses	1,050		1,148	
Bookkeeping	2,544		2,400	
Bank interest and charges	295		293	
Bad debt provision	(82)		1,710	
Ness & Beaully Fisheries Trust	16,560		17,422	
Subscriptions	1,776		2,096	
Catch and release	1,451		1,752	
Sundry expenses	58		948	
River Garry project	1,799		24,853	
RLI - Project	3,000		-	
Inner Moray Firth INNP	680		-	
Depreciation plant and equipment	974		739	
Depreciation motor vehicles	4,209		5,088	
Loss/(gain) on disposals of tangible assets	633		136	
Hire purchase interest	205		616	
		<u>(157,222)</u>		<u>(176,882)</u>
Net Surplus/(Deficit)		<u>15,650</u>		<u>(4,071)</u>

Ness District Salmon Fishery Board

Balance sheet as at 15 May 2016

		2016		2015	
	Notes	£	£	£	£
Fixed assets					
Tangible assets	1		16,594		20,523
Current assets					
Debtors	2	9,625		17,905	
Cash at bank and in hand		121,137		89,321	
		<u>130,762</u>		<u>107,226</u>	
Current liabilities	3				
Trade creditors		116		350	
Other creditors		5,686		2,112	
Accruals		16,162		15,545	
		<u>21,964</u>		<u>18,007</u>	
Net current assets			108,798		89,219
Total assets less current liabilities			<u>125,392</u>		<u>109,742</u>
Capital account					
Brought forward at 16 May 2015			109,742		113,813
Surplus/(Deficit) for the year			15,650		(4,071)
			<u>125,392</u>		<u>109,742</u>

In the opinion of the Board, the statement of accounts for the year ending 15 May 2016 gives a true and fair view of the state of affairs of the Board at the end of the financial year in question and of the incoming resources and application of resources of the Board in that financial year.



Michael Martin
Chairman



Chris Conroy
Chief executive / Clerk

Date: 8th September 2016

Ness District Salmon Fishery Board
Notes to the accounts
for the year ended 15 May 2016

1. Tangible assets

	Plant and machinery	Equipment	Motor vehicles	Boat	Total
	£	£	£	£	£
Cost					
At 16 May 2015	29,803	1,670	41,383	250	73,106
Additions	1,433	454	-	-	1,887
Disposals	-	(1,038)	-	-	(1,038)
At 15 May 2016	<u>31,236</u>	<u>1,086</u>	<u>41,383</u>	<u>250</u>	<u>73,955</u>
Depreciation					
At 16 May 2015	27,267	521	24,547	248	52,583
On disposals	-	(405)	-	-	(405)
Charge for the year	819	155	4,209	-	5,183
At 15 May 2016	<u>28,086</u>	<u>271</u>	<u>28,756</u>	<u>248</u>	<u>57,361</u>
Net book values					
At 15 May 2016	<u>3,150</u>	<u>815</u>	<u>12,627</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>16,594</u>
At 15 May 2015	<u>2,536</u>	<u>1,149</u>	<u>16,836</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>20,523</u>

2. Debtors

	2016 £	2015 £
Assessment arrears	2,827	4,059
Prepayments and accrued income	6,798	13,846
	<u>9,625</u>	<u>17,905</u>

Ness District Salmon Fishery Board
Notes to the accounts
for the year ended 15 May 2016

3. Current liabilities	2016	2015
	£	£
Net obligations under finance leases and hire purchase contracts	-	1,142
Trade creditors	116	350
Taxes and social security costs	1,262	1,143
Other creditors	4,424	(173)
Accruals and deferred income	16,162	15,545
	<u>21,964</u>	<u>18,007</u>



Fisheries Consultancy Services

The Ness and Beaully Fisheries Trust (NBFT) is a Registered Scottish Charity (SC 037684) and a Company Limited by Guarantee (SC 294401). The income raised through our consultancy services is used to further the protection and enhancement of the Ness and Beaully systems and the fish populations that they support.

We provide an extensive range of freshwater, transitional and marine consultancy service by drawing upon the skills and experience of our team, together with that of our network of associates. Our core services include:

Fish Population Assessments

- Juvenile Salmonid Surveys;
- Eel and Elver Surveys;
- Lamprey Surveys;
- Coarse Fish Surveys;
- Freshwater Pearl Mussel Surveys; and
- Estuarine Fish Surveys.

Environmental Assessment & Coordination

- Fisheries and Ecological Impact Assessments;
- Appropriate Assessments;
- Due Diligence;
- Aquatic Project Design and Management; and
- Ecological Clerk of Works.

Habitat Restoration & Enhancement

- Rivers, Lochs, Estuaries and Coastal waters;
- Mitigation Solution;
- Design and Implementation of Restoration and Enhancement Projects; and
- Fish Pass Guidance.

Development of Recreational Fisheries

- Fisheries Management Advisory Visits;
- Fisheries Action Plans;
- Angling Development Projects; and
- Catch Data Analysis.

Aquatic Habitat Surveys

- Fish Habitat Surveys;
- Fish Barrier Assessments; and
- Invasive Species Surveys.

We work closely with our clients to scope, design and implement the most appropriate and cost effective programme of works to achieve their objectives. We can deliver our services across Scotland.

If you would like to learn more about our services, or have a specific project that you would like to discuss, then please do not hesitate to contact Chris Conroy (NBFT Director) or Nick Barker (NBFT Senior Biologist) on nessandbeaully@gmail.com or 01463 783505.

www.nessandbeaully.org.uk/consultancy



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