

MINUTES of MEETING of THE RIVER UGIE DISTRICT SALMON FISHERY BOARD held at Broad House, Broad Street, Peterhead on Thursday, 22nd June 2023 immediately following the Annual Public Meeting of the River Ugie District Salmon Fishery Board.

Present:

Joseph Yule (Convenor) (JY)
Alexander Buchan for Lunar Fishing Company Limited (ABL)
Alexander Buchan for Score Group plc (ABS)
William Stephen for Ugie Angling Association (WS)
Stephen Buchan for Ugie Angling Association (SB)
David Low Mandatory for Mrs Booth, Ednie (DL)

In Attendance:

Louise Kershaw for Bruce Milton, Clerk to the Board (LK)
David Will, Water Bailiff (DW)
John Fraser for Ugie Angling Association (JF)

APOLOGIES

Simon Stephen for Ugie Angling Association (SS)
James Ritchie for Ugie Angling Association (JR)

MINUTES

ABL proposed that the Minutes of the last meeting held on 3rd November 2022 be taken as read and this was seconded by WS.

MATTERS ARISING

Request from Ugie Angling Association (UAA) to Re-open Hatchery

JY advised that he had forwarded the UAA's proposal to all members of the Board to consider and then invited the representatives from the UAA to come forward and present their case.

JF volunteered to speak on behalf of the UAA and read out Paragraph 9.0 from their proposal dated 17th April 2023 (page attached to these minutes).

JY then asked those in attendance for their views and comments.

DW acknowledged that there were issues with the river and level of fish.

WS advised that, from his own personal experience, the hatcheries never yielded the expected results. The issue was always that as soon as the fish were put back into the river, they were immediately eaten by the brown trout.

DW agreed with this, commenting that there were too many brown trout for the salmon to stand a chance.

WS advised that when the hatcheries had been attempted in the past, they were a lot of work and required attention almost every day (sometimes twice per day) for very little results. For all the effort put in, the returns were miniscule and the whole experience was very disheartening.

WS stressed that he didn't want to come across as being negative, he was just being honest about his previous dealings with the hatcheries. His view is that everyone's time would be better spent trying to improve the existing habitat.

DW agreed with this.

WS outlined numerous issues with the hatchery process, advising that salmon would be too difficult to spawn as the weather here is not cold enough at the right time of year, causing the salmon to spawn too late. Stripping and fertilising is the easy part, however catching and keeping the fish alive is very difficult. As soon as the fish are caught, they become stressed.

JF acknowledged this, and agreed that holding the fish would be the main concern and that the holding pool would need a lot of work.

WS commented that even if the holding pool was sorted, there would still be problems. He reiterated that he was not being negative, and that he would love to see the hatchery work, he was just being realistic.

ABL mentioned that any success would need to be monitored, or else there would be no point in embarking on the re-opening of the hatcheries.

SB pointed out that it would be a long-term project, and it would likely take 4 or 5 years for results to show.

JF stated that he agreed with WS that the existing habitat does need improvement, however the hatchery is ready to be re-opened now and would it not be an idea to at least try.

ABL expressed some doubt over whether the hatchery would solve the river's problems and voiced his concern that there is a chance the hatchery could do more harm than good.

JF advised that it would be less likely to cause damage if the salmon being reared were small.

ABL maintained that there was a risk that more fish could be lost than what would be produced.

WS agreed with this.

DL commented that emphasis should be placed on maintaining and improving the habitat.

DW agreed with DL, and cited an example from Speyside where trees have been thrown into burns which is providing shelter for the fry.

WS pointed out that it is very different here, due to the bulk of the river running through agricultural land – farmers have a huge impact on the river.

Steering the discussion back to the hatchery, DW suggested starting on a very small scale (i.e 3 or 4 trays) and seeing how that goes.

WS commented that the relevant licence and paperwork would still need to be obtained.

DW made the point that JF and SB have not had any previous experience with hatcheries, and asked WS if he would be willing to offer any help.

WS declined and advised that he would not be getting involved. Again, he stated that he admired JF's ambition and would wish them the best but he is not prepared to embark on a hatchery project again.

JY then asked the members of the Board to raise their hands if they were in favour of granting permission for the hatchery to be re-opened. No hands were raised.

JY stated that he appreciated this was a disappointing result for the UAA, however he was unsure how effective a hatchery would be given the other ongoing problems with the river. The emphasis should be on habitat improvement – need to focus on 5 or 6 burns, however there is no-one willing to take this on.

JF agreed and commented that there needs to be leadership and clear direction. It's the same volunteers who are coming forward every time.

JY suggested that more anglers need to help.

ABL agreed with this, but pointed out that it is difficult to depend on voluntary work. He then raised the option of paying someone to come in and provide some professional guidance.

JF thought this would be a good idea and it would be worth getting someone with experience to help.

JY suggested that DW could ask Ritchie Miller if he would be interested as he will be doing electro fishing again this year. David Summers could also be an option.

WS commented that Ritchie Miller has always been amazed at the amount of life in the river.

ABL noted that one of the main problems with any improvement plans is the restraints on the river due to where it runs through (i.e estates, farms etc.). Any restoration work would also be very expensive.

WS feels it would be better tackling the issues that are causing more harm than a hatchery would do good, for example there a lot of herons eating the fish at the moment.

JY advised that it would be unlikely that they would obtain the licences to shoot any birds given the current shooting numbers in Scotland – there have been no licences given out this year to shoot, for example, which is very worrying.

JY went on to suggest that JF and DW form a committee to address the various issues.

JF agreed that he was willing to give this a try. He also reiterated that he thought it would be a good idea to consider paying someone for their professional services.

JY agreed and advised JF that any proposal to hire someone could be brought to the Board to approve.

Request from Hutton Institute to Install Samplers for Study

JY went through the proposal received from the Hutton Institute regarding permission to take samples for their study. The Board will be given the results of the study when available.

ABL didn't see any reason to object.

JY confirmed he would advise the Hutton Institute that they had the Board's permission to access the sampling sites.

APPROVAL OF DRAFT ACCOUNTS YEAR ENDING 31ST MAY 2022

The Clerk produced a draft set of accounts for the year to 31st May 2022, which had been prepared by Bain Henry Reid Accountants.

There were no queries raised.

WS proposed the approval of the accounts and this was seconded by ABS.

FINANCE & RATES

The Clerk then produced a projection of income and expenditure for the 12 months up to 31st May 2024.

After consideration of the financial projections, it was agreed that the rate of £2.40 in the pound should remain. This was proposed by DL and seconded by SB. The Clerk agreed she would issue the rates notices accordingly.

FISH COUNTER REPORT

ABL provided an update on the fish counter. A new router has been installed, which is providing a better signal and reducing the number of offline incidents.

There are still cases of false events being recorded, however the computer program which sorts through the data is good at picking these up.

Every so often the power will trip but the Water Board will not inform anyone, so the counter needs to be manually checked and powered back up.

ABL went on to say that he doesn't believe the counter is necessarily picking up every single fish, however it is not recording any additional fish so the numbers are as accurate as they can be.

ABL also advised that he was aware that some anglers have been requesting to see the regular reports, but he doesn't think this is required. His view is that if the numbers on the report were low, this would discourage anglers from fishing.

WS commented that falling numbers were the case throughout Scotland.

ABL agreed with this.

WS also pointed out that the Ugie was certainly no worse than anywhere else, and indeed in some places the situation was far worse.

JY agreed, and added that there are lots of positive things about the river, including the fish counter being in place. The counter is a great guide to trends in the number of fish, and the Ugie is lucky to have one.

AOCB

Request from Scottish Government via Fisheries Management Scotland for Funding

JY advised the Board that Fisheries Management Scotland have been in touch to request a financial contribution from every Board in Scotland towards their research into *Saprolegnia* outbreaks.

JY has already informed FMS that the Ugie is not a wealthy Board, however he did agree to put forward the request.

JY's own view is that the Board should not contribute.

WS agreed with this, and noted that the Scottish Government should pay.

It was agreed that no contribution would be made.

Offshore Wind Cables

JY brought up the ongoing push for green energy projects from companies such as Green Volt and Salamander. He confirmed that whenever he receives any contact from these companies regarding upcoming wind/ solar farm projects, he requests reassurance that the river and associated wildlife will not be adversely affected.

JY commented that there is likely not much that can be done to stop these projects as green energy seems to be the main priority for both the Scottish Government and the energy companies. All the Board can do is keep reiterating the importance of maintaining the river.

NEXT MEETING

The date of the next Board Meeting was set for Thursday 23rd November 2023 at 3:00pm.

There being no further business the meeting closed at 5.00 p.m.



Joseph Yule
Convenor

9.0 Recommendations

The number of fish in the river is falling, this is understood by the Anglers on the river and is confirmed by the Catch Returns and Fish Counter trends.

The NEPS measurement of Salmon Fry and Parr in the Ugie has also confirmed that we are short of the Benchmark for both life stages and are therefore a Category 3 river (poorest). This is because there is not enough adult Salmon in the river, depositing enough eggs to allow the species to hit the Benchmarks **(Fig 7)**.

NEPS have not yet benchmarked Sea Trout numbers in the river, so we look to the Fish Counter and Catch Returns to check the health of the Sea Trout Fishery. While it is good to know that the Fish Counter recorded 1% more medium sized fish (assumed Sea Trout) in 2022 than the average of 3 previous years, large fish some of which would have been Sea Trout were down 27% in 2022 **(Fig4)**.

The Salmon and Sea Trout returning to the Ugie are probably only numbering in the 100's **(Table 1)**. Fisheries Management Scotland have issued a new report warning that salmon could vanish completely from Welsh rivers in the next few decades. ⁽⁷⁾ The report includes Forecasts that small populations are at risk of extinction.

Salmon and Sea Trout must deal with extremes of low warm water and floods and find safe clean usable redds to lay their eggs. The shortage of usable redds could mean that Trout and then Salmon are laying eggs in the same areas.

There is much to do on the Ugie to improve Habitats, reduce predation etc and hopefully in time major projects to improve the river will happen.

Although the Willowbrae Hatchery would operate on a small scale it could just make a difference and help the Salmon and Sea Trout to survive and thrive in the river.

Therefore, The Ugie Angling Association recommends that the existing facilities at Willowbrae and Stonemill are brought back into use, to play vital roles in mitigating against further loss of Salmon and Sea Trout.

Therefore, we request the Ugie District Salmon Fishery Board to authorise reuse of the Hatchery for Salmon stocking and to obtain permission from the Freshwater Fishery Laboratory to relicense the Hatchery for Sea Trout stocking.