

Solway Firth Partnership Conference February 2010

Pick 'n' Mix session 6

Heritage fisheries of the Solway

Jim Henderson: Nith District Salmon Fishery Board

This is an overview of the presentation and questions and answers in this session, and represent the views of the presenter and audience; the views expressed here are not necessarily those of Solway Firth Partnership. Whilst every effort has been made to produce an accurate transcript of events, the Partnership cannot be held responsible for any errors made in the production of this account.

A selection of excellent old photographs illustrated some of the heritage fisheries of the Solway. The presentation was intended to provide examples and was recognised as being by no means comprehensive. The aim was to provoke thought about the social, cultural and economic importance of these activities in the recent past.

Yair netting took place at Kirkcudbright until relatively recently and involved creation of a partial willow barrier across the Dee. The fisherman would sit on a raised platform waiting for fish to enter the trap below. Shoulder netting also took place at Kirkcudbright.

Poke nets are particular to the Annan area, while shrimping took place at Carsethorn. Flounder nets were built at Caerlaverock while net and cobble fishing took place on the River Nith.

Haaf netting is an iconic feature of the Solway and the activity was at one time so well supported that Haaf Netters' Balls were held. A jovial group of about 40 men in best suits were gathered with a haaf net to the fore in an old photograph taken at one of these events.

Mussel and whelk fishing has taken place around the Solway and an old photograph of children gathering shellfish at Southernness illustrated the activity. An excellent old photograph of a school outing showed children on the mudflats engaged in net fishing.

Historic photographs also provide some interesting records of species which have turned up in the Solway in the past including a whale washed up at Douglas Hall in 1921. A further photograph from the 1920s shows a group gathered around a large sturgeon.

A series of contemporary photographs showed existing fixed nets on the Solway including flounder nets and stake nets. Haaf netting still takes place with netters fishing in a line across tidal channels. Traditional inner Solway fisheries still taking place from boats include shrimping, drift netting and cockling. Cockling has created controversy in recent years as a result of the intensity of the fishery which at one stage attracted large vessels from abroad leading to special regulations being put in place.

Points raised in discussion:

- There are historic records of 500-800 salmon being caught in yair nets and transported by train for sale.
- There are concerns about regulation of gill netting and the adequacy of fishery enforcement on the north Solway.

- There was a query about whether or not salmon could be picked up from gill nets and it was confirmed that this is illegal.
- Members of the group highlighted the difference of view between Nith District Salmon Fishery Board and the Environment Agency. The EA was felt to be overly stringent in regulation of netting on the south Solway. NDSFB is of the view that netting needs to be carefully controlled but that it must also be championed to prevent loss of important, distinct and traditional Solway activities. There is a need to involve more young people in activities such as haaf netting.
- Management of salmon fisheries is more devolved to local catchment level in Scotland and members of the group felt that this is a better approach than in England where management is based at a higher countrywide level. Decisions should be taken as close as possible to the area under consideration.
- Some people expressed the view that there is a place for both levels of management.
- Net fisheries are low impact and low tech; the biggest impacts on salmon populations are at sea.
- Haaf netters these days are retired or have jobs, therefore the effort expended is not the same as in the past.
- The Solway shrimp fishery is still viable and economically important. Landings are mainly to the English side with 2 processing plants in Silloth. Landing at Carsethorn should be explored.
- Byelaws are killing rod fisheries in England; tickets are £80 a year.
- Local decision making and voluntary measures which are more flexible than statutory regulations are the best approach.