

## Moray Firth Seal Management Plan 2005

Common and grey seals have long been regarded as a threat to salmon fisheries, but they are protected and are an attraction for marine wildlife tourism. The Moray Firth is an example of the conflicts that exist between fisheries, tourism and conservation regulations. The Dornoch Firth has been designated a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) for common seals under the EC Habitats Directive. Six Moray Firth rivers have also been designated as SACs for salmon: the Spey, Moriston, Oykel, Cassley, Berriedale and Langwell. Moray Firth rivers produce approximately 30% of Scotland's total salmon catch, and generate £30 million expenditure by anglers annually. Wildlife tourism based on seals, dolphins and whales generates £3 million annually. Seal shooting has been undertaken for decades within the Moray Firth under the Conservation of Seals Act 1970, but common seal numbers have declined from approximately 1,500 in 1996 to 1,000 in 2002, threatening the conservation obligations of the Dornoch Firth SAC.

This situation was brought to a head in 2002, when the Scottish Executive introduced a Conservation Order to create a year-round close season to reduce shooting of common and grey seals in expectation of a second outbreak of Phocine Distemper Virus, which could further threaten the status of the Dornoch Firth SAC. To find a solution, the 12 Fishery Boards in the Moray Firth met in October 2002. It was agreed that in collaboration with the Executive, Scottish Natural Heritage, Fisheries Research Services (FRS) and the Sea Mammal Research Unit (SMRU), a Moray Firth Seal

Management Plan would be produced. To provide a legal framework, the Executive introduced a new Conservation Order for the Moray Firth in September 2004. In April 2005 Ministers approved the Plan as a pilot project for the future management of seals and fisheries in Scottish waters. The Plan aims to:

1. *Manage seal and salmon fishery conflict on a Moray Firth scale without impacting on wildlife tourism;*
2. *Identify Management Areas in rivers and estuaries where predation on salmon is most likely, but which exclude seal haul out sites;*
3. *Allow the removal of seals from these Areas, particularly during the spring salmon and smolt runs, and at salmon netting stations;*
4. *Issue an annual licence for shooting a quota of seals which does not threaten the common seal population;*
5. *Improve the identification and reporting of seals shot;*
6. *Establish Nominated Marksmen and design a Seal Management Training Course for them;*
7. *Develop non-lethal methods of excluding seals from Management Areas.*

In April 2005 the Executive issued a licence to shoot 50 common and 60 grey seals within Management Areas. With the Executive's Seals Forum, the Deer Commission, police, and SMRU, local Fishery Boards have designed and held training courses for Nominated Marksmen, including sessions on seal biology, identification and carcass retrieval.



### Catch Update 2005

For the period February-June 2005, 3,607 salmon and grilse and 1,022 sea trout were caught by rods on the River Spey. Comparisons with previous years, and release rates are:

	<b>Salmon &amp; grilse</b> (% released)	<b>Sea trout</b> (% released)
<b>2005</b>	3,607 (66%)	1,022 (32%)
<b>2004</b>	3,825 (68%)	1,550 (21%)
<b>2003</b>	2,579 (62%)	1,525 (14%)
<b>2002</b>	2,208 (29%)	1,853 (5%)

**SPEY FISHERY BOARD RESEARCH OFFICE**

**1 NETHER BORLUM COTTAGE, KNOCKANDO, MORAYSHIRE, AB38 7SD**

**TEL: 01340 810841 FAX: 01340 810842 E-MAIL: [research@speyfisheryboard.com](mailto:research@speyfisheryboard.com)**

# Seal - Salmon Research Programme underway

With funding from the Scottish Executive, Atlantic Salmon Trust and other charities a Seal - Salmon Research Programme has been established. Managed by SMRU, the Executive, SNH, FRS, the Association of Salmon Fishery Boards and the University of Aberdeen, a three year research project began in January 2005 to:

- *Develop and test acoustic seal scarers for Management Areas;*
- *Study the behaviour of seals in rivers using satellite tracking and photo-identification;*
- *Analyse the diet and characteristics of shot seals by recovering carcasses;*
- *Monitor damage to salmon relative to seal numbers in rivers;*
- *Assess the impact of seal predation on salmon stocks.*

Research results will inform the annual review of the Moray Firth Seal Management Plan, and the resolution of conflict between seals and salmon throughout Scotland.

*If Fishery Boards or Trusts would like to contribute to the Programme, contact:*

**Dr. Isla Graham (SMRU) Tel.: 07770735229**

**Rob Harris (SMRU) Tel.: 07770735421**

## *Monitoring predator damage on the Spey*

As part of the Moray Firth Seal Management Plan, and the Seal – Salmon Research Programme, the SFB is monitoring predator damage to rod-caught salmon and sea trout. Starting in 2004 ghillies at Delfur, Carron and Castle Grant have been photographing any damage seen on fish. Meanwhile SFB Bailiffs carry out standard counts of seals at Spey Bay and these results are compared with trends in damage. Initial results suggest that damage may provide an indication of changes in seal predation. However, there are various types of damage, and these may not all be caused by seals. Examples and possible causes are shown below:

**Seal teeth?** (1 or 2 holes or scratches)



**Gill net?** (thin continuous lines over body)



**Dolphin teeth?** (more than 5 parallel scratches)



**Lamprey?** (circular hole on belly)



Copies of the **Moray Firth Seal Management Plan** are available on the SFB website ([www.speyfisheryboard.com](http://www.speyfisheryboard.com)), or from the SFB Research Office. For further information on the **Seal Management Training Course** please contact the SFB Research Office.

**The SFB is grateful to the HDH Wills 1965 Charitable Trust for supporting the Director, Dr. James Butler, to coordinate the Moray Firth Seal Management Plan.**