

Chairman's Report 2014

Report by Maurice Parkinson, Chairman of the Antrim and District Angling Association, to the Association's AGM on 27 January 2014

Introduction

The past year has been a busy as usual for the Executive Committee of the Association with much happening either directly on the river and dam or indirectly through a range of activities and actions.

It is important to point out that there are no full or part time staff and the work of the Association is undertaken on a voluntary basis. I trust members appreciate the volume of work of those from the committee and also those ordinary members outside the committee.

This has been a year where there has been much progress but the volume of work to bring the river to a good state is significant and will require much investment.

My sincere thanks to all those who have worked for the benefit of the club. There is a long list of people but I would like to give special thanks to our secretary Allen Fleming and treasurer Walter Lismore. Their work has been of the highest standard and one has only to examine the Treasurer's report to understand what I mean. During the year I have been very ably supported by the Deputy Chairman, John Mitchell.

Help from others

The Association has under its control a very significant undertaking when one considers the extent of the river holding and the Potterswall Dam. There are invariably difficulties and challenges to overcome and the Association is very fortunate in having a nucleus of people with good contacts.

Landowners in particular deserve our sincere thanks and it is important that when on their land we give their property the utmost respect.

We have been very fortunate in having the support of the local councils in Antrim and Newtownabbey both at staff and councillor level. Likewise local MLA's and MP's have greatly assisted the Association.

The Ulster Angling Federation has been at our beck and call especially during the past year. I would like to put on record our thanks to the Ballynure Anglers who have been instrumental in taking the lead on a range of issues impacting on the upper reaches of the river.

On a more local level we should not underestimate the role of local communities and associations from the Antrim Guardians to the Mallusk Residents Association to name just two.

The Six Mile River Trust

The Trust is a valuable organisation which has at its heart the welfare of the river system. The various organisations in the Trust have a significant interest in the river and during the past few years the Trust has been able to draw down funds for a range of projects from river fly monitoring to training for the control of invasive species. I am aware a number of club members participate in a range of the Trust's activities and I trust they will continue to do so.

The Trust has a very valuable political lobbying role which has brought about important changes which have indirectly benefited the river.

A river system on the mend

June 2008 does not seem that long ago especially considering the depression that set in following the horrendous fish kill at that time. Many thought the river would never recover but with the action of the Association and help of others such as personnel in the NIEA and DCAL we now have one of the best rivers and fishing clubs in the province. One had only to witness the runs of dollaghan into the river this past autumn. These runs appear to have been the best for decades but sadly the Atlantic salmon has continued to decline.

To continue to improve the river requires more much more investment especially to help overcome some of the drainage wrongs of the 1970s and earlier periods when the river was severely altered. Grant aid is extremely limited and there will be a need to look at membership fees etc in future years.

Keeping up with government initiatives, legislation and actions

The welfare of rivers is significantly determined by the actions of government both at a local level through to European level. Various departments etc produce policy and strategy documents such as the Water Framework Directive and the Biodiversity Strategy for Northern Ireland. Invariably these are complex documents but it is essential that the Association responds to these particularly with the long term in mind. Like wise there are those that occasionally have little regard for rivers when it comes to planning and development and members of the Association must take responsibility in searching for potential damage and pursuing appropriate action, for instance challenging unsatisfactory planning applications that may appear near or on any part of the river system from Lough Neagh to the smallest tributary.

Habitat, Habitat, Habitat.

More and more studies are demonstrating the need for rivers to have good quality habitat both within and along the river. Sadly, many parts of our river are severely lacking and the committee is constantly looking for funds for habitat improvement works. Unfortunately, such funds are in short supply and competition is fierce.

It is very annoying to report that the habitat along many parts of the river is declining dramatically and much of this has been brought about because current rules and regulations penalise farmers for fencing along river banks. We have made representation at various levels but it is equally annoying to report that much of this problem is due to the inability of departments to work together effectively for the common good of every one. The River Trust and the Association is continually working with local MLA's to find a satisfactory way forward out of this mess.

River Project at Templepatrick

The Association during the past year was successful in applying for and being able to draw down funds for a major habitat improvement project near Templepatrick. The project had to be undertaken within a very short time frame and a lot of credit has to go to the team assembled by Andrew McGall. Much thanks also to the landowner Ross Kenny and to Lagan Ferrovial Costain, the contractor on the A8, who provided the machinery at the company's cost. It was incredible to see fish spawning in the newly created areas within weeks of installation and proves the benefit of investment in this type of project.

Potterswall Dam

It has been very pleasing to see the progress that has been made at the dam and thanks is due to the deputy chairman who has taken this facility 'under his wing'. This is an expensive but valuable facility to have. It is stocked on a regular basis and members should make good use of it. Unfortunately, new reservoir legislation means the cost of keeping the dam will increase and the committee is in the process of creating an administration structure that will limit liability to the club and hence members.

Litter and rubbish in the river

The levels of litter in and around the river are disgraceful. When in the river these materials break down into dangerous chemicals which are very bad for the life of the river and also public health. No doubt everyone has seen the strangled birds etc. I feel the position regarding anglers depositing litter has improved significantly but it is very important that all members take the opportunity of correcting those who are depositing rubbish however small. Sadly, much of the litter in rivers comes from roadsides etc and members should attempt to extend their influence to these indirect sources of litter.

Structural work on the river

This is an never ending task on the river especially bearing in mind the extent of the fishery. Stiles and fencing etc are constantly being repaired and many thanks to the guys involved.

Work Parties

As indicated earlier there is always a lot of work to do in and around the river. Work parties are organised accordingly and it is important that members participate. When out and about on the river do take time to identify problems but in addition become part of the solution.

Access to the river at Muckamore

The trains which run near the river at this point are getting faster and faster. NIR has decided to close one of our access points due to perceived danger but in turn this has created a major problem for the Association. We are currently meeting with local politicians and NIR to try to get a resolution to this difficulty. Individual members should take the opportunity to lobby politicians on this issue bearing in mind this is one of the most valuable parts of our river.

A8 Roadworks

A major success story during the past year has been associated with the A8 roadworks. This scheme got off to a very bad start from the planning application phase to public inquiry through to construction works on site. The various tributaries at this part of the river are extremely valuable for young fish and there was a serious danger they would have been lost. The Six Mile Water Trust, The Ulster Angling Federation and Ballynure Anglers invested enormous amounts of time to ensure that the work be planned and executed properly. It is amazing to report that the construction firm Lagan Ferroviai Costain is in the process of preparing specifications on how this work ought to be carried out and this is a first for the province. A sincere thanks to all the organisations and local politicians, at councillor and assembly level, involved in bringing this about.

Bailiffing

The role of bailiffing the river is extremely valuable. There is always a small minority that fish illegally and break the rules. To make the job easier I ask all members to cooperate fully with the bailiffs.

And so to the year ahead

It really is pleasing to see the progress that has been made to what is potentially a fantastic fishing and wildlife asset and a very valuable social and economic facility. As the population increases the pressures on this type of asset increase and as an Association we need to be mindful of the actions and efforts needed to counteract the ensuing problems. I trust all members take the opportunity to do what they can to ensure that we have the river and dam in prime condition now and for years to come.

Have a good year.