

Salmon return to Renfrewshire river for first time in more than 100 years

18 February 2020

Salmon have been spotted swimming upstream in an Inverclyde river for the first time in over 100 years following the successful adaptation of a redundant industrial weir.

Work has been carried out at Gotter Water Weir, in Quarrier's Village, by the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) to lower the existing height of the weir and increase the downstream water levels by installing two pre-barrages to encourage migratory fish to travel upstream.

Installed as part of the industrial revolution over 100 years ago to control the river's flow, the now redundant weir has always been a complete barrier to migratory fish such as Atlantic salmon, denying them access to around 9km of upstream habitat.

Following the completion of the works, salmon – a declining species whose continued existence depends on being able to migrate home – were spotted swimming over the weir at the start of December much to the delight of all involved with the project.

The works have been carried out as part of the Water Environment Fund (WEF), a Scottish Government funded project managed by SEPA which aims to repair damaged urban rivers and enhance the local environment for often deprived communities. It also aims to improve fish stocks by removing barriers that have closed rivers for generations to migrating fish.

Environment Secretary Roseanna Cunningham said: "Salmon is an iconic species for Scotland and declining numbers of wild salmon returning to Scottish rivers is of great concern to the Scottish Government. So we are hugely supportive of SEPA's work through the Water Environment Fund to remove this barrier to migratory fish – and delighted to see signs of early success.

"As we celebrate Scotland's Year of Coasts and Waters in 2020, it's important to reflect not just on the beauty of Scotland's natural assets, but on the vital wildlife and biodiversity that our water environments support."

Terry A'Hearn, SEPA CEO said: "Our urban rivers are an important natural resource for communities but have a legacy of harm and many are under increased pressure during the climate emergency. Restored rivers can create new opportunities to boost recreation, tourism, active travel in areas, leading to economic opportunities for local businesses and communities.

"Every day SEPA works to protect and enhance Scotland's environment helping communities thrive within the resources of our planet – we call this One Planet Prosperity. We are delighted to see this project is already proving to

have made a positive impact on the local environment.”

Rob Mitchell, River Restoration Specialist with SEPA, said: “Rivers and wild fish stocks are a vital part of our ecology in Scotland and it is fantastic to see the benefits of the Gotter Water project in action. This marks the first time since the weir was built that migratory fish have been able to access the habitat upstream to spawn.”

The work was carried out by SEPA through the Scottish Government’s Water Environment Fund (WEF) will upgrade the Water Framework Directive classification of the water body to ‘good’ overall status, allowing salmon to spawn and will bring social and economic benefits

WEF projects aim to increase the lengths of habitat accessible to native fish, helping endangered populations to become resilient to climate change and other pressures whilst creating new opportunities for angling, tourism and recreation, bringing economic benefits and recreational opportunities to river communities.

John Blair, President of Bridge of Weir River Angling Club, said: “It has been a great pleasure to be involved in this project. It was unbelievable when I watched salmon ascending through the salmon ladder at the start of December proving what a great success this project has been.”

The Gotter Water Weir project is already having a ripple effect on the local community with the Clyde River Foundation considering the Gotter Water for inclusion in their Salmon Homecoming education initiative.

The Clyde River Foundation, an environmental charity based at The University of Glasgow, has been monitoring the fish community upstream of the Gotter Water Weir annually since 2003 and has previously found no evidence of salmon there.

Catchment Manager, Dr Willie Yeomans, said: “We are delighted to hear the news about salmon being spotted swimming upstream. The return of salmon to the River Clyde and its tributaries is one of the real good news stories of our time

“The water quality of the river has improved and the success of returning fish populations is down to initiatives such as this. Our data were used to partly make the case for improving fish passage at the weir and we look forward to using our surveys from 2020 onwards to confirm the extent of the recovery.”

ENDS

Notes to editor

The Gotter Water rises in the hills close to Muirshiel Country Park in Renfrewshire, around 13 miles east of Glasgow. It is a tributary of the River Gryffe which runs from the Gryffe Reservoirs near Wemyss to its confluence

with the Black Cart Water near Johnstone.

Water Environment Fund (WEF)

SEPA manage the Water Environment Fund of up to £7.5M annually on behalf of Scottish Government. The Fund's priorities are (a) repairing damaged urban rivers, to enhance the environment for often deprived communities and (b) improving fish stocks by removing barriers that have closed rivers for generations to migrating fish.

Together with our partners, we have completed, or are part way through, delivering 15 projects that will enhance the lives of the surrounding communities. WEF is key to delivering solutions on behalf of Scotland to respond to the system failure of fish. To date we have opened up more than 1,000km of rivers to salmon and other fish species

Everyday SEPA works to protect and enhance Scotland's environment, helping communities and businesses thrive within the resources of our planet. We call this One Planet Prosperity.

Further information about WEF can be found at www.sepa.org.uk/environment/water/water-environment-fund/

SEPA River Restoration

Rivers are a vital part of our landscape and a great asset to Scotland. They provide wildlife corridors, opportunities for recreation and wellbeing and resources for farming, drinking water, beverage production and hydroelectricity.

Like many of our natural resources our rivers are under pressure and in places, damaged. This includes historic changes, such as straightened and embanked channels which are cut off from natural flood plains, heavily concreted urban river corridors with little chance for the creation of wild habitats, a lack of attractive green spaces, and rivers made impassible to fish migration by barriers.

The Water Environment Fund enables rivers to be restored by:

1. Repairing damaged urban rivers often in deprived areas to enhance the environment for the communities that live there. We are creating attractive and accessible green river corridors within towns and cities that can be used for active travel and recreation, improving health and wellbeing. We help rivers contain flood waters and create new opportunities for local businesses and suitable development.
2. Removing and easing barriers to migrating fish and improving vital fish stocks. We are increasing the lengths of habitat accessible to native fish, helping to improve endangered populations and creating new opportunities for angling, tourism and recreation, bringing economic benefits and recreational opportunities to river communities. SEPA administers the Water Environment Fund on behalf of Scottish Government. SEPA works in partnership with local authorities, land and structure owners, fishery trusts and conservation bodies to deliver an annual

programme of projects.

SEPA uses the Water Environment Fund to:

- Directly commission the removal or easement of redundant weirs by SEPA procurement of options appraisals, designs and groundworks;
- Contribute towards a partnership with Local Authorities for the restoration of urban rivers and surrounding green space.
- Compensation: Compensation may be provided for land owners/managers for income forgone due to giving over productive land to river restoration. River restoration compensation scheme

The Water Environment Fund is targeted on projects which will derive the greatest benefit to Scotland's rivers and neighbouring communities.

1. Improving fish migration past redundant structures

Owners of dams and weirs have a duty to allow fish migration. However, Water Environment Funds may be available to help owners remove an obstacle to fish passage where the weir or dam is no longer in active use, or not a commercial asset, including dormant or 'mothballed' assets. For local authority owners the Scottish Government may provide up to 75% of the groundworks costs to improve fish passage. Funds are not available for ongoing maintenance of completed restoration projects.

2. Improving river corridors

Working in partnership with local authorities, The Water Environment Fund will be used to create a better environment for wildlife and people. We will do this by restoring damaged river corridors to enhance the ecological value of the river and improve public amenity and well-being, including the reduction of flood risk.

Salmon

Atlantic salmon live in freshwater as juveniles but migrate to sea as adults before returning up river to spawn.

Atlantic salmon return to their native river, and even the same stretch of the river from which they were born, with amazing accuracy. This means that many 'populations' of Atlantic salmon may exist within the same river.

Spawning usually occurs from November to December, but may extend from October to late February in some areas, particularly larger rivers.

The young fish begin to leave rivers for the sea in late spring, with most fish gone by June.