

Mixed Stocks Fisheries Working Group

Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) designated rivers and mixed stocks fishing.

SACs are areas designated under the European 'Habitats' Directive. Together with Special Protection Areas (SPAs), which are designated under the Wild Birds Directive, they form the Natura 2000 network of sites.

SNH advises the Scottish Government over the selection of sites. Following Ministerial approval SNH carries out a consultation on behalf of the Government which subsequently considers representations made during the consultation before deciding to submit a site as a candidate SAC to the European Commission. Once the Commission adopts a site the Scottish Government is required to designate the area as an SAC.

Part of SNH's continuing responsibility for SACs is to monitor the condition of each site. SNH also gets involved in the design, implementation and monitoring of projects that provide management support for enhancing the condition of sites and abundance of their target species. The most recent example of such a project is CASS.

Conservation of Atlantic Salmon Scotland (CASS) Project 2004 – 2008

- With a budget of £3.25m, of which £600,000 came from SNH and £1.5 from the EU, this was the single most significant investment in salmon conservation ever undertaken in Scotland.
- The overall objective of CASS was to safeguard and maintain the abundance and diversity of Atlantic Salmon in Scotland.
- The outputs of CASS were exclusively in the freshwater environment. They concentrated on improving riparian management and enhancing habitat.

The project focused on eight key Scottish salmon rivers, all of them SACs. The table below sets out the assessment by SNH of the condition of Atlantic salmon in these eight sites. Additionally, where the freshwater pearl mussel *Margaritifera margaritifera* is a qualifying interest of the SAC, I have included its status because of its dependence on salmon and sea trout (the host species) to achieve sustainability.

The SNH sitelink (available via <http://www.snh.org.uk/snhi/>) provides details of all designated special sites in Scotland (SAC, SSSI etc). To view the site's 'conservation objectives' listed as a hyperlink under 'site documents'. The conservation objectives for a site help to ensure that the obligations of the Habitats Directive are met.

For the River Tweed SAC, for example, that includes maintaining the population of the species, including the range of genetic types for salmon, as a viable component of the site. And on pearl mussel SACs we it is important to maintain the distribution and viability of freshwater pearl mussel host species.

Status of the Atlantic salmon in the eight CASS rivers

The objective for each site is to achieve 'favourable maintained' status

(NB: there are other SAC rivers such as the Naver, Moidart and the Borgie, although the Atlantic salmon is not necessarily a qualifying interest in all cases)

SAC River	Site condition Atlantic salmon status	Site Condition Freshwater mussel (FWM) status	Notes
Oykel Site code: 8363	<i>Unfavourable recovering</i>	<i>Unfavourable recovering</i>	Affected by E coast MSFs
Moriston Site code: 8361	<i>Unfavourable recovering</i>	<i>Unfavourable No change</i>	Affected by E coast MSFs
Spey Site code: 1699	<i>Unfavourable recovering</i>	<i>Unfavourable recovering</i>	Affected by E coast MSFs
Dee Site code: 8357	<i>Favourable maintained</i>	<i>Unfavourable No change</i>	FW Mussels dependent on salmon runs
South Esk Site code: 8364	<i>Unfavourable recovering</i>	<i>Unfavourable declining</i>	Affected by E coast MSFs
Tay Site code: 8366	<i>Favourable maintained</i>	<i>FWM mussel not designated</i>	The only E coast river with this status
Tweed Site code: 8369	<i>Unfavourable recovering</i>	<i>FWM not designated</i>	17 NE drift nets remain + coastal nets
Bladnoch Site code: 8355	<i>Unfavourable recovering</i>	<i>FWM not designated</i>	West coast different MSF regime.

The Atlantic s is the only salmonoid species listed on Annex II of the EC Habitats Directive which is native to Scotland. SNH undertakes a rolling programme of Site Condition Monitoring (SCM) for all Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) in accordance with common standards agreed with

other UK countryside agencies and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee. SNH advises that its condition assessment of Atlantic salmon SACs is based on data from a variety of sources including the FRS, SEPA, Fisheries trusts and the Scottish Fisheries Co-ordination Centre. SNH also commissions further data collection from other parties where necessary.

The Atlantic Salmon Trust View

In agreement with NASCO and the Strategic Framework for Scottish Freshwater Fisheries (2008), the Atlantic Salmon Trust takes the view that any form of mixed stocks coastal exploitation should be phased out. We recommend that immediate action is taken in locations where exploitation is likely to impact negatively on SAC rivers with 'unfavourable' site condition status for Atlantic salmon. We should also be aware of inter-species dependencies in cases where the qualifying interest of an SAC is directly affected by the presence of healthy populations of migratory salmonids. The best example is the freshwater pearl mussel, the parasitic larva of which is disseminated by migrating salmon and sea trout.

By failing to take action now, in a period when the full data set to enable accurate intervention to take place is still not available, we are likely to exacerbate damage to specific genetic groups to a point where they could become unsustainable. In certain cases it is possible that this form of exploitation could render a population extinct. The AST recognizes that there are a small number of highly exploitative coastal locations which affect a number of SAC rivers. It should be a priority to eliminate the damage being done to salmon and sea trout stocks by these net fisheries.

This risk should be avoided because, in the longer term, destruction of a genetic group could have economic, social and cultural implications, as well as the obvious detrimental impact on biodiversity. Also, by failing to meet reasonable standards of management, and demonstrating due care for the qualifying interest of the SAC, we could open ourselves to international criticism, and possibly even punitive measures from the European Commission.

Tony Andrews
Atlantic Salmon Trust
February 2009