

Profile of the Helmsdale River Board Fishings and Their Economic Role in the Strath of Kildonan.

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The Helmsdale River is a famous angling water running for 24 miles west to east in central Sutherland. Long ago the owners built a fisheries dam allowing the retention of water and permitting angling to continue even in dry summers. The dam also allows for the better conservation of the riverine environment. For this, and the reason of its natural fecundity for salmon, the Helmsdale is known throughout the world of rod angling.

The Board has 3 full-time employees in water bailiffing, and one part-time river manager. There are 7 full-time ghillies employed on the river.

The fishing is let including accommodation in sporting lodges. These are fully staffed. The lodge employment in the Strath runs to 17 local people.

In the Strath of Kildonan's population of some 75 persons those that are not employed directly by the River Board or privately in work attached to sport angling are employed in sheep farming and game-keeping. Sheep farming on the periphery of the Highlands is non-economic. There is no commercial game-shooting in the Kildonan Strath so all game-keeping concerns deer management and deer-stalking. Stalking, also, is run at a loss. Therefore the river fishings underpin the other outdoor jobs in the Strath; without fishing there would be neither any significant farming nor any significant sport stalking.

There is one non-estate business in the Strath being the Kinbrace Garage. This employs 4 full time people. The Garage relies on a significant amount of work from the 7 estates, and also from the River Board.

There are only 4 individuals, all retired, and 3 individuals in full-time work, of the residents in the Strath, who are not engaged directly or indirectly with the River Helmsdale sport fishings.

It is true to say that without salmon in the River Helmsdale the Strath would be empty of full-time inhabitants barring one or two isolated exceptions. It would close down as a residential glen and turn into a ghosted landscape only of practical use for summer holidays.

The power of angling to stimulate the local economy is exemplified in the Open Days which start the fishing season on the River Helmsdale. The start-date is January 11th. Anyone may fish on the Open Days anywhere on the river after signing in. There is no charge and no limit on angler numbers. In 2009 the first salmon in Scotland was caught 7 minutes after the Opening Ceremony.

The Open Day Ceremony, now part of the Helmsdale calendar, involves the full 26-piece Sutherland Schools Pipe Band marching down the High Street, after which a

senior angler opens the fishing season with a cast at the Old Bridge. Between 150 and 200 anglers visit Helmsdale for the Open Days and the partying lasts well into the small hours. Some come from afar; in 2009 one angler travelled from Kuala Lumpur.

It is calculated that the Open Days and the festival-like atmosphere which characterise them contribute some £30,000 to the local economy at a time when no other visitor income is conceivable.

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