

West Sutherland Fisheries Trust



Kylesku Bridge and Quinag (S. Marshall)

2026 Annual Review

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Chairman's Foreword

It is my pleasure to present this year's Chairman's Foreword for the West Sutherland Fisheries Trust.

The past year has once again demonstrated the strength of commitment to our rivers, lochs and coastal waters across West Sutherland. The work of the West Sutherland Fisheries Trust continues to be rooted in sound science, practical conservation, and strong local partnerships and it is only through collective effort that we are able to achieve so much.

A particular highlight of last year was our online auction. What began as a practical fundraising initiative is growing into a potentially, important annual event in our calendar, raising essential funds to support fisheries research, habitat restoration and educational outreach. The generosity shown was truly remarkable. I would like to extend my sincere thanks to every individual and business who donated lots to the auction, and to everyone who placed bids and helped spread the word. Your contributions make a direct and meaningful difference to the sustainability of our fisheries.

Our progress over the past year would not have been possible without the dedication of many people. I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to our partners across the public, private and charitable sectors who continue to collaborate with us in protecting and enhancing our aquatic environments. We are fortunate to work alongside organisations and estates that share our long-term vision for resilient fish populations and healthy ecosystems.

To our volunteers, who give their time so willingly in all weather conditions, thank you. Your enthusiasm and practical support, from fieldwork to events, remain invaluable.

I also wish to recognise the commitment and governance provided by my fellow trustees. Their guidance, insight and stewardship ensure that the Trust remains focused, accountable and forward-looking.

Finally, my sincere thanks go to our staff, whose professionalism, scientific expertise and day-to-day hard work drive the Trust's activities. Their dedication underpins everything we accomplish.

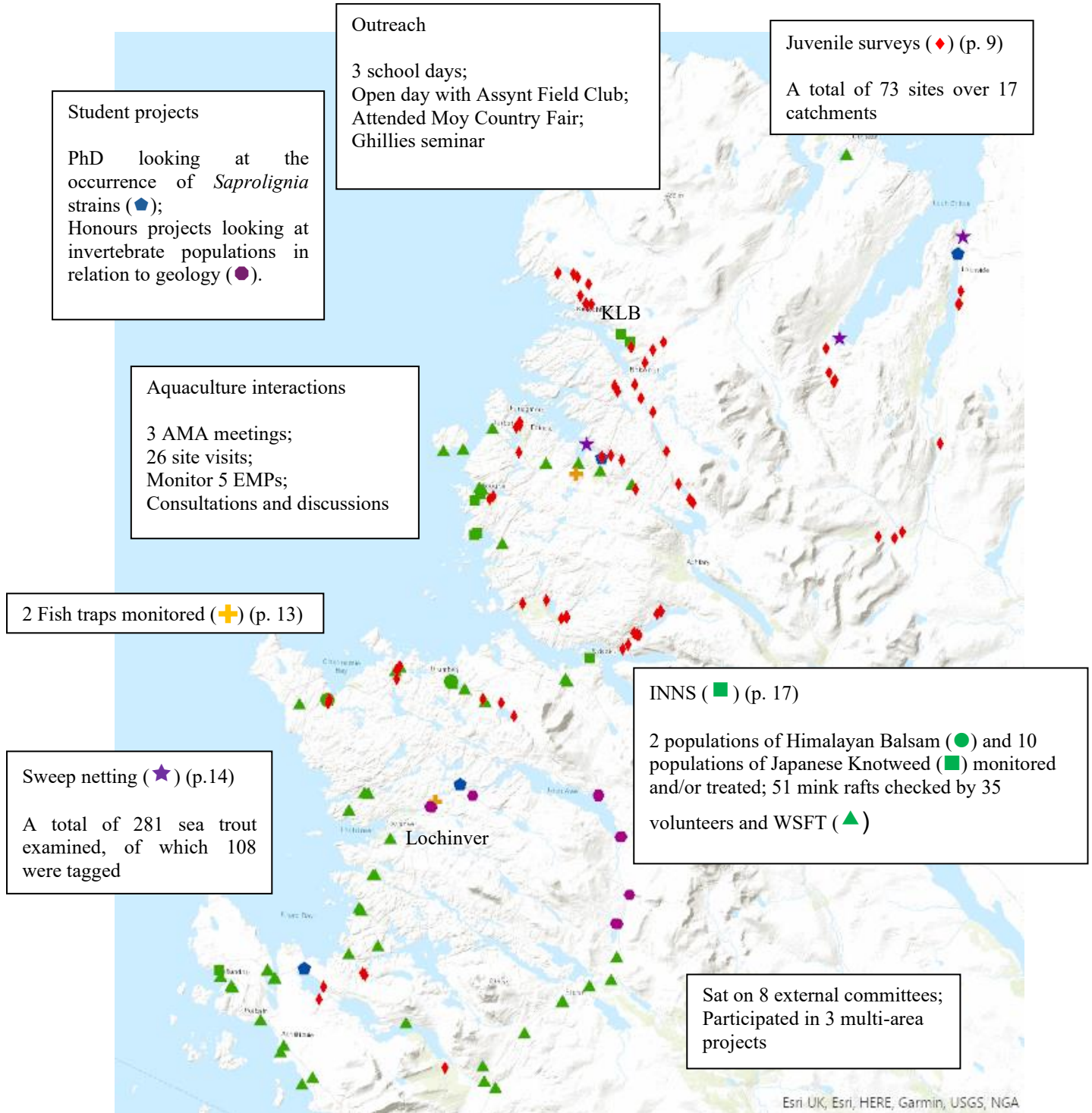
As we look ahead, challenges remain, from climate pressures to changing marine and freshwater conditions but so too does our determination. With continued collaboration and community support, I am confident that the West Sutherland Fisheries Trust will remain at the forefront of fisheries conservation in the region.

Here's to a productive and successful year ahead.

Andy Johnson

A summary of 2025

WSFT undertook a range of field work during 2025. In addition, we participated in a number of meetings and outreach events. Further details of the different projects are available in the rest of the document or from the Biologist.



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Introduction

The **West Sutherland Fisheries Trust** continues to work towards the conservation and restoration of fish populations. Now entering its thirtieth year, the information database for the Trust area continues to grow and provide useful data for owners, managers and policy makers. In addition, the Trust retains strong links with a variety of organisations and individuals throughout Scotland and looks forward to cementing these links in the coming years. These links enable the Trust to move towards the integration of management within the Trust area.

Within the Trust area we are developing projects and educational opportunities with a variety of local organisations, including Angling Clubs, the Highlife Highland Ranger Service, the school system, estates and community groups. These collaborative projects not only assist the Trust with its work but also further integrate it into the local communities, while taking us into a range of different habitats. It is to be hoped that the Trust will continue to be seen as a valuable resource within the community – both to managers and the general public – providing helpful advice and educational opportunities that can be called upon at any point.

2025 saw our participation in a wide range of activities, many detailed in this report. It was an exceptionally dry year, although thankfully not too warm, enabling us to complete most of the planned surveys.

The mink initiative, now part of the Scottish Invasive Species Initiative, continues to operate under the management of the Trust and we are extremely grateful to all our volunteers for making this possible. As part of SISI we have also undertaken the management of mink in Wester Ross, with Greg employed as project manager for that area. There have been a number of captures, particularly in Wester Ross, and it is important that everyone remains vigilant. The volunteers always rally, increasing efforts following sightings and it is to their credit that we remain a relatively mink free area (see p. 17).

The Trust would like to take this opportunity to thank the many individuals who have given time and effort to assist with the work programme. Without these committed individuals we would not have the range of information and data currently existing and would therefore not be in the present position of offering advice and guidance to the many owners and managers within the area. In addition, much of the restoration work and biosecurity actions currently in progress would be much further behind.

Partnerships

The Trust continues to maintain a close relationship with partner organisations in Fisheries Management Scotland (FMS) and the Scottish Fisheries Co-ordination Centre (SFCC), and national organisations such as the Marine Directorate (MD), Scottish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) and Nature Scot (NS). This allows the Trust to access a vast wealth of expertise and information as well as enabling the targeting of research to better further our aims.

The Trust also works closely with the North & West District Salmon Fishery Board, and estates, assisting with the management of the area. By providing advice on local issues, as well as assisting with any statutory consultations that arise, we hope to ensure that the fish and their environment are supported and protected. Amongst others, we have provided advice and guidance on stocking, fish farm applications and the Conservation Limits, as well as habitat improvements within the area.

Project Laxford, a collaborative project between Atlantic Salmon Trust and Reay Forest Estate, started in 2021 (see p. 20). This long-term project hopes to establish an index river, testing the impacts of management actions and linking to a network of similar rivers world-wide. The Trust is pleased to support this project, together with the Marine Directorate, and look forward to seeing the results of the many interesting work streams.

The Future

The WSFT will continue with its current work, maintaining and developing the many datasets and using the data to inform management decisions. It is hoped that we can enlarge the research programme and enhance the many links currently in existence with individuals and organisations. In order to do this, it is reliant on the generosity, both in terms of time and financial aid, of its many supporters, enabling the Trust to move forward with the development of management policies within the area.

Biosecurity remains an important issue for the Trust, in an area that remains relatively free of invasive non-native species (INNS). Through our association with the Scottish Invasive Species Initiative, a Nature Restoration Fund funded programme of work managed by NS and involving a number of Trusts throughout Scotland, we will continue to work towards the eradication of many of these species (see p.17). In addition, we continue to promote the practice of biosecurity measures throughout the area by residents and visitors alike.

The Trust will continue to assist community groups and land managers with practical fisheries management and advice. It is hoped that restoration programmes, as laid out in the Catchment Management Plans, will be developed and progressed. The Trust is always available for discussion and should be contacted if you have any queries or suggestions.

The Trust would also like to further develop the educational aspects of our remit through talks, demonstrations and small “hands on” projects. As in previous years this is likely to involve the Ranger Service and schools, although it is hoped that other groups and individuals will also access this service.

Shona is a Science and Engineering Ambassador and therefore can also be accessed through the STEMpoint network. This has the potential to extend our educational remit, and information about the Trust, beyond the local area.

The emphasis will continue to be the wellbeing of native wild fish in the West Sutherland area and the Trust will represent them where required and defend their interests where it is felt that these are being ignored. The WSFT and its representatives feel that all populations are important, irrespective of size, and that their protection and enhancement are vital to the survival of these magnificent species.



Getting ready to electrofish (S. Marshall)

Catches within the West Sutherland area

While catch statistics are generally used to determine the trends in salmonid populations, it must be recognised that there are a number of potential inaccuracies and inconsistencies inherent within this method. These include the following:

- The numbers of fish noted within the tables relate only to those fish recorded within the books. If anglers fail to report all or part of their catch, then the figures will be an under-estimate of the total.
- Angling effort varies between years and is not recorded. A change in effort, either number of anglers, experience or time spent fishing, will be reflected in changes in the catch statistics.
- Weather and river conditions affect the number of fish within the systems and their catchability. Thus a low catch in a dry year may not reflect a poor adult run, simply the timing of the run and the ability of the angler to catch fish.

This leads to the view that the relationship between catches and stocks is complex. Catch records do not reflect the number or quality of fish in the system, but rather the angler ability to catch them under the conditions experienced at that time. Catch figures are therefore most valuable when it comes to expressing long-term trends.

2024

The official catch statistics for salmon and sea trout in Scotland have been published (<https://data.marine.gov.scot/dataset/salmon-and-sea-trout-fishery-statistics-1952-2024-season-reported-catch-and-effort-0#{}>) and the data for the West Sutherland area are summarised below (Table 1). These statistics are frequently used to indicate long term trends in populations, by region. By extracting the data relevant to the WSFT area, we can gain a greater understanding of the situation, as represented within this area. The data are given as an amalgamation of several rivers, as previously reported by Marine Scotland (Fig. 1). This is the result of a requirement of the Marine Directorate to mask the catches from individual systems in order to retain the confidential nature of the data.

Table 1 The number of wild fish caught by rod and line, by Fishery district

Fishery Board		Salmon & Grilse	Sea Trout
Hope & Grudie	2024	373	747
	(2023)	(213)	(752)
	5 yr. ave.	255.6	846.0
Inchard – Kirkaig	2024	478	311
	(2023)	(371)	(143)
	5 yr. ave.	363.8	232.2



Fig. 1 Map showing the location of the WSFT area and the 2 areas described in the table (pale grey = Hope & Grudie; darker grey = Inchard – Kirkaig)

Catches across the area, with the exception of salmon in the Inchard – Kirkaig area, were higher than the 5-year average.

Total salmon catches within the area showed an increase from the 2023 catches. When examined against the long-term trend, it had the 21st lowest value since 1952 (Fig. 2).

The release rate of salmon within the area was high, at 99.8%. There was a 100% release rate from the Hope & Grudie area, while only 2 fish were retained in the southern area. While it is known that released fish can be re-captured on several occasions, thus influencing the suitability of catch returns to estimate adult runs, it is important at this time of low marine survival to release fish in order to increase the spawning stock. Remember, the fish in the freezer or on the table cannot breed!

Sea trout catches within the area also showed an increase compared to 2023 (Table 1). No sea trout were retained in the Hope & Grudie area, while only 1 was retained in the Inchard – Kirkaig area. Sea trout catches remain

historically low, as the 12th lowest catch since 1952. There is, however, the question of how many now fish for sea trout compared to historic patterns, particularly in the Inchard – Kirkaig area.

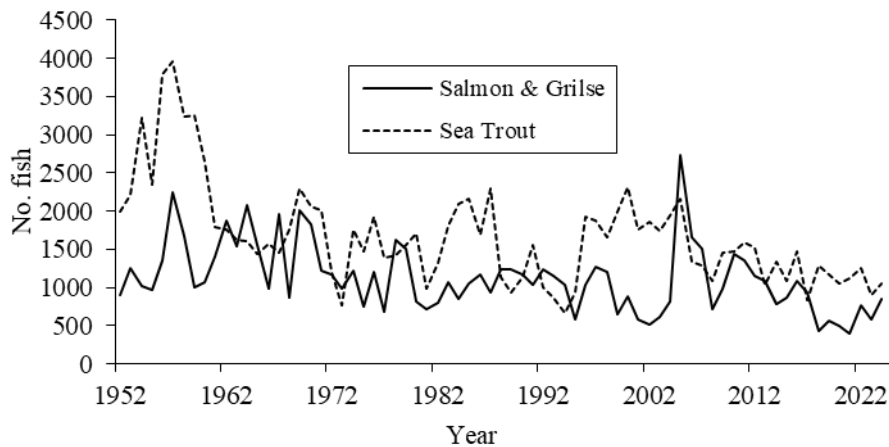


Fig. 2 Rod and line catches within the West Sutherland area, 1952 – 2024

2025

Catch data for the 2025 season are being compiled and will be produced by the Marine Directorate in 2026. However, some information is available from angler logs and fishing books. Reports indicate that catches for the year were poor. This is likely to be the result of the exceptionally dry conditions experienced throughout the season.

Catch and release continues to be an important fisheries management technique within the area and has been adopted by a number of estates. It is to be hoped that this continues to be used, and hopefully increased, by the various estates and their angling clients, adding as it does to efforts throughout the area to improve the situation for fish populations through biosecurity, removal of non-native species and habitat improvements amongst others. Fisheries Management Scotland have produced new catch and release guidelines, and these can be found at <https://fms.scot/catch-and-release/>.

The new conservation limits for the area have been produced, with all catchments maintaining the same category (see p. 21). The model has not been altered since 2020, so movement should reflect alterations in catches and a better understanding of the underlying figures within the model. While sea trout are not affected by this legislation, the continuing low levels of catches would suggest that catch and release is of equal importance to this species.

All information on the fish populations within lochs and rivers is important when undertaking fisheries management. Any further information that can be provided will be gratefully received, particularly on the brown trout lochs within the area.



Salmon release (A. Johnson)

A survey of juvenile abundance

Electrofishing surveys are designed to assess the juvenile populations within a system. The equipment operates by creating an electrical field within the water that at first attracts and subsequently stuns them for a brief period, at which point the fish can be netted out and examined under anaesthetic. During 2025 West Sutherland Fisheries Trust undertook surveys within several of the catchments as either contract surveys or as part of the routine monitoring programme.

The average densities of fish within each catchment are summarised (Table 2). ‘This allows comparison between the catchments, although it should be noted that temporal changes in density throughout the summer months and habitat differences between catchments are not considered in this table. The timing of sampling is important, with fish moving within the tributaries as a result of water height and temperature, food availability and size. Thus, sampling after a spate may give a low density due to washout, whilst drought may decrease density as fish move into deeper water to avoid predation or desiccation or may increase density as a result of concentration in severe cases. Similarly, densities will be greater shortly after hatching, reducing with time as the fish grow and require a larger territory for survival.

Table 2: Average densities of salmonids per catchment surveyed

	Number of fish per 100m ²			
	Salmon Fry	Salmon Parr	Trout Fry	Trout Parr
Hope	8.43	12.05	7.66	7.88
Polla	13.94	16.54	12.11	6.10
Oldshoremore	2.44	2.42	9.30	4.95
Loch Innis na Ba Buidhe	0.00	0.00	15.94	7.64
Achriesgill	3.27	1.96	3.20	3.04
Rhichonich	34.84	11.40	0.49	0.97
Loch na Thull	15.24	4.80	5.81	2.05
Laxford	17.34	6.67	1.52	2.42
Loch nam Brac	0.00	0.00	32.43	13.11
Loch a'Bhadaidh Daraich	0.00	0.00	4.30	7.07
Duart	14.93	8.62	8.16	11.00
Maldie	0.00	0.00	11.24	14.59
Gleann Leireag	0.00	0.00	48.67	20.33
Oldany	0.00	0.29	4.42	11.53
Clashnessie	0.00	0.00	7.34	23.05
Polly	14.97	12.94	3.64	0.00
Garvie	8.62	0.00	19.81	15.41
WSFT Area	7.88	4.57	11.53	8.89
WSFT Migratory Catchments Only	12.40	7.12	6.62	5.86

There is a good distribution of salmonids throughout the West Sutherland area, with trout present in every catchment surveyed. Salmon were not present in Loch Innis, Loch nam Brac, Loch a'Bhadaidh Daraich, Maldie, Gleann Leireag, or Clashnessie, as these are all known trout systems. The Maldie occasionally has salmon parr present in the lowest site, but none were seen this year.

Salmon and trout fry were found in greater densities than parr in most catchments, as expected. This wasn't the case for salmon in the Hope or Polla, or for trout in multiple catchments, but this is likely due to the habitats surveyed, as parr will disperse far from the redds they hatched from, and prefer faster flowing water with larger substrate than fry.

An assessment of all sites against the SFCC classification scheme demonstrates that 24.66% of all sites support good and excellent densities of salmon fry, with parr classified as good and excellent in 20.55% of sites surveyed. Trout fry were found in good and excellent densities in 39.73% of sites, and

54.79% of sites were seen to have good and excellent densities of trout parr. As so many non-migratory catchments were surveyed in 2025, the juvenile salmon classifications in the migratory catchment have also been graphed, showing 37.50% of sites had good and excellent densities of fry, and parr were seen in good and excellent densities in 31.25%.

During the catchment surveys other species were found; eels being the most widespread of these (Fig. 3). Eels were observed in 16 of the 17 catchments fished, but only present in all sites in 5 systems. Eels are known to be present in the Garvie, but were not observed on this occasion. Minnows were caught in 7 catchments, though were only seen in a few sites in each. One stickleback was caught whilst surveying the Oldshoremore system. There was also a flounder observed in the Oldany system, in the bottom site.

Trout were caught in every surveyed catchment, present in every site in 11 systems. Salmon were not quite as widely distributed, only present in every site in 11 of the 17 catchments they were present in.

Whilst overall instream habitat is favourable for salmonids in the West Sutherland area, it could benefit from strategic planting of broadleaf trees in riparian zones, which would improve cover, food availability, and bankside stability – overall providing great benefits to fish populations.

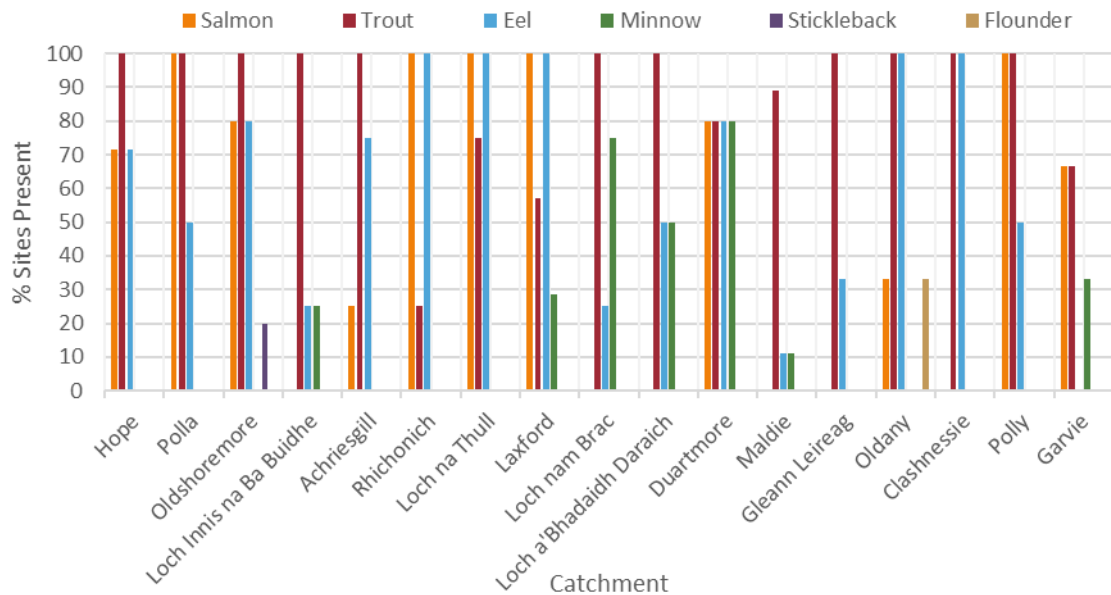


Fig. 3 Species composition and distribution per catchment



Pulling the net (R. Petersen)



Tree enclosures (S. Marshall)



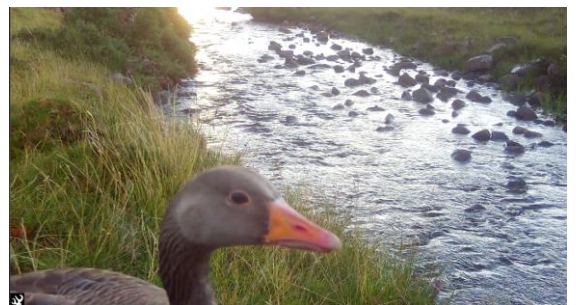
Keeping watch (S. Marshall)



A net full of sea trout (J. Chantry)



Fatherlasher (S. Marshall)



Who are you looking at? (SISI Trail Cam)



Additional habitat? (S. Marshall)



Did they see me? (SISI Trail Cam)



A lone, twisted tree (S. Marshall)



Pulling the net (D. Reid)



Invertebrate sampling in action (S. Marshall)



Pine Marten (SISI Trail Cam)

Smolt Traps

Counting the number of smolts leaving the river is a good way of determining the composition and health of the salmon and sea trout populations. Additional information can also be gained on the timing of the run and changes in the size composition.

During 2025 we operated a rotary screw trap (RST) within the River Inver from 9.4.25 to 20.5.25 and a box trap in Badna Bay from 5.4.25 to 13.5.25. A temperature recorder was placed in each trap, set to record hourly while the trap was installed. All fish captured were removed and the species recorded.

Inver

There were very few trout taken within the trap, so all analyses were completed on salmon only.

The water temperature increased over the survey period, with a slight decrease to the middle before increasing again (Fig. 4). Salmonids require a temperature of about 7 °C before starting to move, and this temperature was exceeded at most points over this period. However, there was a dip in temperature such that the night-time temperature was less than 10 °C, which coincided with a decrease in the number of fish running.

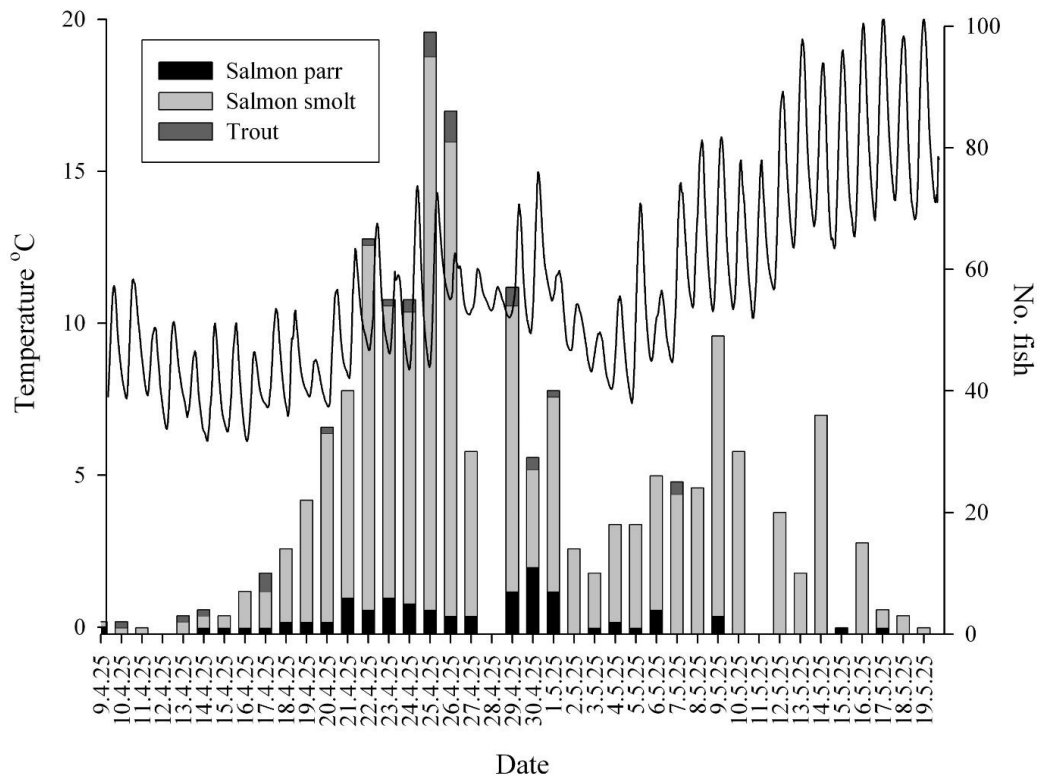


Fig. 4 Showing the temperature regime within the river (line) and no. of fish caught on each day (bar)

We would like to thank Professor Colin Adams and SCENE for the loan of the screw trap and all advice provided in its operation and the analysis of the data. Thanks also to the Inver & Kirkaig estate staff for all of their help.

Badna Bay

As a result of the dry spring, the trap failed to run for much of the period. There was one spate where the trap was opened to for fish welfare. While the trap was running, there were more trout than salmon captured, agreeing with our understanding of this being primarily a sea trout system.

Monitoring of sea trout post-smolts

Introduction

Started in 1997, this project was originally designed to give an indication of the migrations and growth of sea trout within the area. In addition to these data, the numbers of sea lice were also assessed. This has now progressed, such that sea lice counts are the most important part of the project.

Materials & Methods

Three estuaries, Laxford Bay, Polla estuary and Hope estuary were sampled monthly where possible from April to September, at low tide. A total of 281 fish were individually measured and scale samples taken. The fish were also examined for the presence of sea lice, which were counted and staged, and visually examined for gill condition.

Results and Discussion

The fish caught were of varied age and length, reflecting a mixed population structure. The age structure in the estuaries was similar, with a predominant smolt age of 2 years (S2), although the Hope was predominantly S3's. In addition, a small number of S1s were observed in the Polla. A greater range of lengths was observed within the Hope, but in general the size range was similar for all 3 estuaries.

The presence of post-smolts at all sites throughout the year indicates a heavy usage of estuaries by this group, presumably for feeding and shelter.

The by-catch from the netting in each area was as expected from previous years, with few species and low numbers observed. The exception to this was the large number of sprat captured in the Polla in September and the salmon taken in the Polla (July) and Laxford (September).

Recaptures

There were 2 recaptures during 2025, all within the Polla estuary. All were tagged and re-captured in the same location. This pattern is common to the sampling programme over the past 28 years and demonstrates that the majority of sea trout do not stray far from their home rivers.

Sea Lice Infestations

Sea lice were present to a varying degree in all 3 populations. All estuaries showed a mixture of lice stages. The highest numbers were seen in the Laxford during May. However, the total lice number per sample is dependent on sample size and the use of abundance and intensity data give a better assessment of the situation.

Laxford

Lice were present on each sampling occasion, with the exception of August when only 1 fish was caught, with abundance peaking in May. *Caligus* were present in May and September on a small number of fish.

The neighbouring cages were fallowed in June 2025. Prior to this, *Lepeophtheirus* numbers were above code of good practice levels. *Caligus* were also present in high numbers.

Polla

Lice were present throughout the year, with the highest abundance found in September. *Caligus* were also present in July, August and September.

Within the neighbouring cages, Sian was stocked in January, while Kempie remained fallow throughout the year. Numbers of adult females remained low, being below 0.5 throughout the survey period.

Hope

Lice were present throughout the year, with the highest abundance found in July. *Caligus* were also present in July and September.

There are no cages within outer Loch Eriboll, so the nearest aquaculture site is Sian Bay. Numbers of adult lice at this site are low.

Gill condition

Gill health, primarily Amoebic Gill Disease, and gill damage are becoming increasingly problematic within the aquaculture industry. However, from papers and discussions with professionals it appears that wild fish are not a significant reservoir for *Paramoeba perurans*. This pathogen seems key in driving gill disease outbreaks in farms, even if other pathogens will also contribute to poor gill health, so its absence in wild fish may reduce vulnerability to gill disease. Further, wild fish are at a lower density and can avoid the environmental conditions likely to trigger poor gill health, i.e. plankton blooms and poor water quality. Thus, gill disease is not seen as a concern within wild fish populations although the need for more information is noted. As part of this the decision was taken to visually assess the gills during this survey.

Gill health issues were identified in all estuaries on a small number of fish. Within the Polla AGD was identified in 7 fish, while non-AGD related damage was identified in a further 7. Within the Laxford, no fish were identified with AGD but 2 did show short and scarred gill filaments. The Hope also had AGD identified in 10 fish, while a further 3 had non-AGD related damage. In all cases of AGD the levels were recorded as 1 on the 1 – 5 scale used by the neighbouring fish farm. Non-AGD damage was primarily recorded as 1 on this scale, with the exception of 1 in the Polla and 1 in the Hope, both of which recorded a level 2.

A risk assessment of the lice numbers present within the wild trout

Taranger, *et al.* (2014) gives a method to assess the increased mortality risk to salmonid populations based on the number of lice present per gram of fish. This is based on physiological effects determined from laboratory experiments taken from literature, and the use of sentinel cages within fjords.

The data are treated differently depending on fish size and give a potential increased risk of mortality to each fish, with increasing risk as the number of lice increase. To determine the likely population effect, the proportion of fish within the population appearing in each band is calculated and a population risk determined. Fig. 5 gives the results by year for each estuary, with the banding indicating whether the risk is low (green), moderate (yellow) or high (red). Within the green zone it can be taken that there is minimal risk to the population, while the yellow and red zones show potentially population altering impacts.

From this, the potential risk of increased mortality in the Laxford, at 32.16, is high while the Polla, at 16.55, is medium. The Hope, at 2.63 shows low risk. In the case of the Polla, malfunctioning of the weigh scales in August resulted in those fish not being included within the analysis.

The Laxford and Polla data continue to show a biennial pattern in risk, reflecting the stage of production within the farm in the main. There is an exception from this year, when the Polla showed an increase in risk, but the cages are within the 1st year of production.

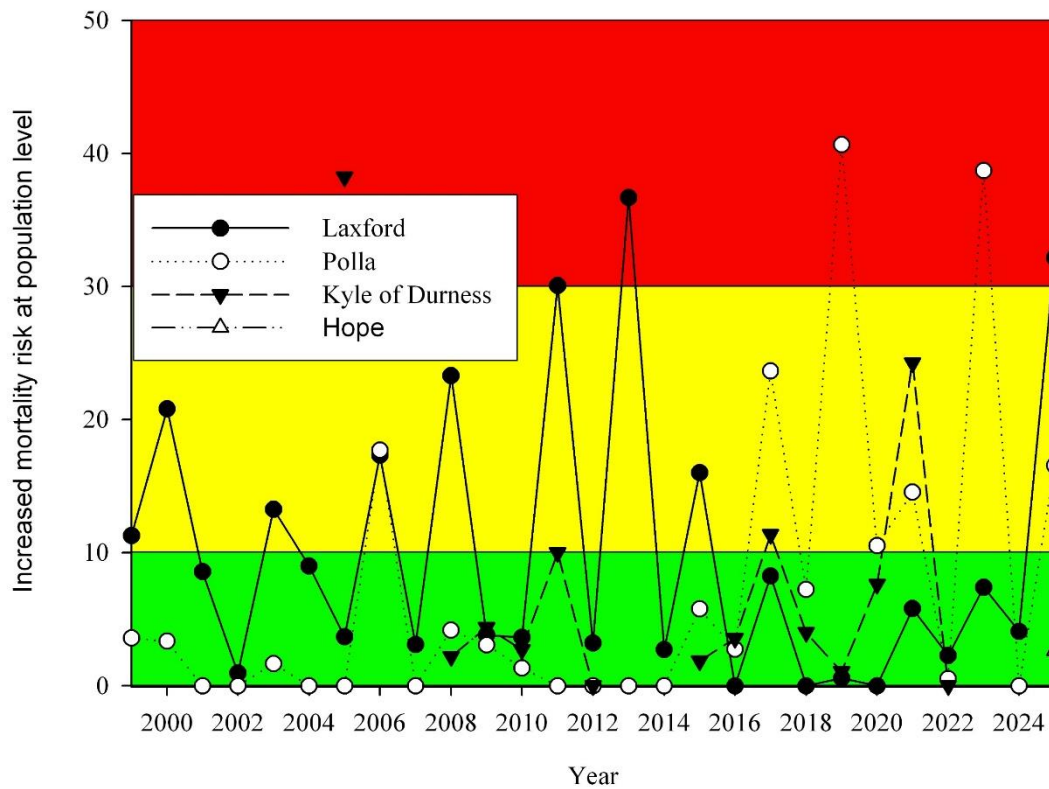


Fig. 5 Showing the increased mortality risk at population level created by sea lice.

The full report of this project can be downloaded from the website or obtained by contacting the Biologist. Videos of the sweep netting process are also available to view on the website, Facebook or Youtube (<https://www.youtube.com/user/WSFTrust>).

This work would not be capable of completion without the assistance of the Reay Forest Estate and Wildland Ltd. Also to the staff of Loch Duart Plc and the Naver Fisheries Board.

Funding for this work comes from a variety of sources. The North & West District Salmon Fishery Board, SEPA and estates.



Fish release (S. Marshall)

Biosecurity Management

The Trust are partners in the Scottish Invasive Species Initiative (SISI), a partnership project covering an area of over 29,500 km² and involving 10 fisheries trusts and boards. Funding of the Scottish Invasive Species Initiative Phase 2 by the Nature Restoration Fund, is gratefully acknowledged. Thanks also to Nature Scot for their management of the project.

Full details of the project can be found at <https://www.invasivespecies.scot/>.

Awareness Raising

Most awareness raising of Biosecurity was undertaken through social media, raised at the Ghillies Seminar and at the District Salmon Fishery Board meetings and promoted it at the Moy Country Fair. Biosecurity includes the use of the simple ‘Check, Clean, Dry’ method by anglers, walkers and other water users, something that everyone can practice.

Biosecurity is an important issue within Sutherland as there are few non-native species compared to many other areas within the UK. This can make people blasé to the risks posed and the need for care and vigilance. It is important to prevent the spread of non-native species into the area, and it is incumbent on all residents and water users to play their part. Gardens, ponds, fishing tackle and water sports equipment are all routes of infection and ones that should be easy to block if care is taken.

American Mink

A network of rafts and tunnels within the Trust area are monitored by volunteers and Trust staff. During 2023, as part of Phase 2, this has been expanded into Wester Ross with the help of Greg Miller. This will hopefully act as a buffer to west Sutherland. There have been a few sightings reported, with a number of individuals dispatched in Wester Ross – which is very encouraging.

WSFT is extremely grateful to all our volunteers for their assistance with this project. Without the time and commitment donated by these individuals we would be less able to protect this area against this invasive species. If you would be able to look after a mink raft, then please contact the Biologist and we’ll get you set up. Any mink sightings, or potential sightings, should be reported to the Biologist. This information will then be passed on to the relevant volunteers.

Himalayan Balsam and Japanese Knotweed

2025 saw the Biologists once again descend on Clashnessie to remove any Balsam plants found within the catchment. Unfortunately, there is still a substantial amount present, although we are gaining control in some areas. This area has been treated since 2010 and it has been good to see the population declining, although there remain difficulties with accessing the ‘starter garden’.

Japanese knotweed populations were once again monitored, with declining populations observed. It is unfortunate that some of the areas are grazed, which makes spraying unsuitable, but currently the populations remain small, so we continue with a monitoring stance.

Plans for 2026

We are pleased to report that the SISI project has managed to secure funding for a further 2 years, which will enable the project to continue. Funding for Phase 3 is gratefully received from the Scottish Government Nature Restoration Fund and the Ossian Offshore Wind Project.

We will continue to promote the importance of biosecurity and the need for everyone to play their part in the prevention of the spread of non-native species. At the same time, we will be monitoring the area for the presence of non-native species and would welcome reports from members of the public.

The mink monitoring network is an important part of the INNS work, and the Trust and our team of volunteers will continue to monitor rafts and respond to sightings. The Trust is a contact point for any new sightings or the collection of carcasses and is happy to respond to any calls.

With the help of Greg, we will continue to extend the mink network within Wester Ross, an integral part of the SISI programme. Volunteer assistance with all of the INNS work would be gratefully received. If you feel that you could help, then please contact the Biologist.

The Check, Clean and Dry Campaign

Principles

- Non-native species could be spread in any water or material. If you are visiting a water body there is a real risk that you could spread harmful organisms unless you follow good biosecurity practice.
- Biosecurity means taking steps to make sure that good hygiene practices are in place to reduce and minimise the risk of spreading invasive non-native species. A good biosecurity routine is always essential, even if invasive non-native species are not always apparent.

Check, Clean, Dry disinfection procedure

- **Check** - All clothing and equipment should be thoroughly inspected and any visible debris (mud, plant or animal matter) should be removed and left at the water body where it was found. Particular attention must be paid to the seams and seals of boots and waders. Any pockets of pooled water should be emptied.
- **Clean** - Equipment should be hosed down or pressure-washed on site. If facilities are not available equipment should be carefully contained, e.g. in plastic bags, until they can be found. Washings should be left at the water body where the equipment was used or contained and not allowed to enter any other watercourse or drainage system (i.e. do not put them down the drain or sink). Where possible, clean equipment should be dipped in disinfectant solution (e.g. Virkon) to kill diseases, but note this is unlikely to kill non-native species.
- **Dry** - Thoroughly drying is the best method for disinfecting clothing and equipment. Boots and nets should be hung-up to dry. Equipment should be thoroughly dry for 48 hours before it is used elsewhere. Some non-native species can survive for as many as 15 days in damp conditions and up to 2 days in dry conditions, so the drying process must be thorough.

Further details from: <https://secure.fera.defra.gov.uk/nonnativespecies/checkcleandry/>



Himalayan balsam amid the garden plants (S. Marshall)

Education

Education forms a large part of our remit and the WSFT are particularly keen to get involved with schools and colleges within the area, as well as giving talks and demonstration to adult groups. This is an important tool in fish conservation and a link between the Trust, the general public, nature groups and the local community. It is a medium whereby scientific research data can be available to those interested in it.

Ghillies Seminar

The Ghillies Seminar provides an opportunity for the Ghillies, managers and interested anglers within the area to meet and discuss what's happening in their rivers as well as question some experts in the fields of fisheries management and salmonid biology. A platform for those working in the field to discuss issues that affects them directly, it is also a two-way process not only moving information to the workers but also taking suggestions and ideas to the scientists and policy makers.

This year's seminar was a mix of different topics, together with an interactive session on catchment management. Morven started us off with an update on catch and release. We then split into groups where we were presented with catchments featuring a number of issues and a limited budget, with the instructions to assess and manage the catchment as a group. Borrowed from FMS, this was an interesting exercise, where both groups went down different lines. However, it was well received and has been requested again for 2026.

After lunch there was an update talk about Loch Duart, some of the challenges faced and the different solutions explored. This was followed by Chris Conroy, giving an update on Project Laxford, before Shona rounded things off with a talk about biosecurity, the why's and how's.

There was keen participation and a genuine desire to address issues particular to this area. The discussion was lively, moving through the talks to plans and advice on translating the information into a practical, local, situation.

School days

2025 was a particularly busy one with regards to school activities, with field trips organised with Kinlochbervie High School, Kinlochbervie Primary School and Scourie Primary School. These involved taking the children out to the riverbank, demonstrating electrofishing and kick sampling. We had a good discussion about the fish and their life cycles before the children and their nets got in the water and surveyed the invertebrates. Looking at the samples and learning how to identify the different invertebrates rounded off the days.

Public events

In August we ran an invertebrate sampling and ID day with the Assynt Field Club. A very interesting day, sampling the burn and identifying the different organisms. We were fortunate to have some of the samples further studied by experts and now have a comprehensive list of species from that system.

Other Open Events

As in previous years, the Trust had a stall at the Moy Country Fair. A great opportunity to meet and talk to members of the public – as well as partners from Police Scotland and the Spey Catchment Initiative to name but a couple – and promote the area and the work of the Trust. Thanks must go to the individuals who assisted on the day - manning the stall, putting up tents and organising the merchandise. These events are good fun to do and help in the promotion of the Trust and its works to the wider public.

Project Laxford

A partnership between Reay Forest Estate and the Atlantic Salmon Trust, with support from the Marine Directorate, Project Laxford is a 10-year project aimed at restoring wild fish populations through habitat improvement. Starting in October 2021, the project has initiated a number of exciting programmes, all with the aim of establishing restoration projects then monitoring the restoration actions and their impacts on the fish and the environment.

There has been a significant amount of work undertaken within the catchment, aimed at getting a better understanding of the status of the catchment and its fish populations and determining the most appropriate restoration plan. To date, this has included the production of a catchment audit as well as the development of a comprehensive monitoring network. The latter will allow the effects of any restoration activities to be assessed.

Interventions

A number of potential issues were identified during the catchment audit, and a series of interventions proposed. Actions have now started with regards to some of these, including:

1 Reduction in grazing pressure.

Grazing, primarily by deer, limits natural woodland regeneration and damages other habitats. The reduction in grazing pressure will therefore provide habitat and biodiversity benefits. Sustainable deer numbers are being achieved through enhanced management, based on data-based evidence, with positive impacts already being witnessed.

2 Restore native riverside woodland

Riparian woodland is a natural function of the environment. It provides a number of benefits to the river – shading to stabilise and reduce temperatures; roots provide bank stability and shelter; falling leaf litter and invertebrates provide food and nutrients – as well as providing additional habitat for other species.

While natural regeneration is a long-term aim of this project, planting is seen as a key requirement in establishing riparian woodland. To this end, they aim to plant up to 1 million native trees. This will be focused on 3 large enclosures, covering a total area of over 25 km². This is approximately a quarter of the catchment and will lead to the recovery of a wide range of species and habitats – not just woodlands - through the removal of deer grazing.

To date, one enclosure has been established and planting undertaken, around the Kinloch burn. This area was previously a commercial plantation.

3 Install wood structures

Woody debris is a natural part of riparian woodland – falling into the burn and creating complex instream structures such as pools, riffles and back waters; providing shelter and feeding; trapping sediment and improving water quality – but is reliant on more mature trees. As such, the decision was made to kick-start the process by installing structures into the burns.

This has started in the Kinloch, with the installation of 8 structures along the length of the lower tributary, altering flow and providing bank protection. Installed in autumn 2025, we look forward to seeing the effectiveness or otherwise of these structures.



Large woody structures in situ (S. Marshall)

For further details on the project visit <https://atlanticsalmontrust.org/project-laxford/>

Salmon conservation regulations

This policy was introduced during the 2016 season. It implemented a variety of measures, including:

- A ban on the taking of any salmon, by rod or net, before 1 April;
- A ban on fishing outwith estuary limits;
- The classification of rivers based on a model of population estimates, exploitation rates and biological recruitment. (Further information can be found at:

<http://www.gov.scot/Topics/marine/Salmon-Trout-Coarse/fishreform/licence/status>)

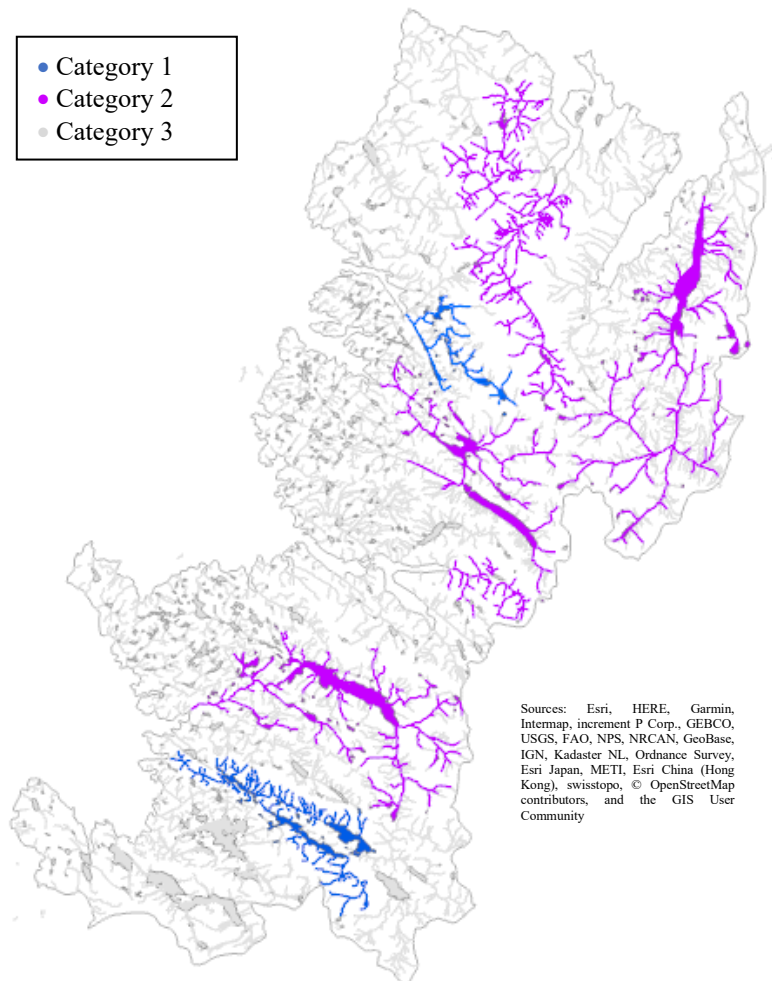
The categories denote the conservation measures required such that, for West Sutherland during 2026:

Category 1 – (Rivers Rhiconich and Kirkaig) where the conservation limit has been met on 4 of the last 5 years, exploitation is sustainable and therefore no additional management action is required.

Category 2 – (Rivers Hope, Grudie, Dionard, Daill, Laxford, Gleann Dubh and Inver) where the conservation limit has been met on 3 out of the past 5 years, meaning that management action is necessary to reduce exploitation. While mandatory catch and release will not be required in the first instance, this will be reviewed annually.

Category 3 – (Rivers Polla, Strath Shinary, Oldshoremore, Duartmore, Polly and Osgaig) where the conservation limit has not been met on 3 out of the past 5 years, meaning that exploitation is unsustainable, and management actions are required to reduce exploitation for 1 year i.e. mandatory catch and release (all methods).

All systems not listed above have insufficient data and therefore will be classed as Category 3.



The following Charitable Trusts, Foundations, Estates and organisations have kindly donated funds or provided grant funding towards the West Sutherland Fisheries Trust. Our sincere thanks to all listed, and to the many individuals who will remain anonymous but have donated time and money to the Trust and its activities. The Trust operated with an army of volunteers and without all of this support we would not be able to operate.

During 2025 we held a fundraising auction. Our sincere thanks to everyone that donated lots for this and the many that placed bids.

Trusts & Organisations

- Atlantic Salmon Trust
- Nature Restoration Fund
- North & West District Salmon Fishery Board
- Scourie & District Angling Club

Estates

- Reay Forest Estate
- Scourie Estate
- Wildland Ltd

Businesses

- Loch Duart Ltd

