

PORTGLENONE GETS NEW MARINA

Mr Danny McNeil, Under Secretary, Department of Agriculture, officially opened the spectacular new Marina on the River Bann at Portglenone on 27 June 1998.

Ballymena Borough Council funded the new 18 berth Marina with additional funding support from the Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation Water Based Tourism Measure administered by Rivers Agency, Department of Agriculture. This project, in addition to the floating pontoon berths, has provided a trailer park, slipway, rigging area, car parks and picnic areas overlooking the river. This is the first marina along the Lower Bann to have an on-site water and electricity supply. All 14 available berths at the marina are rented and a waiting list is in operation. There are four berths left free for day-trippers and a separate berth for the Maid of Antrim.

On the day of the official opening the marina hosted the first Boat Rally held in the area for over 20 years. This was organised by the River Bann and Lough Neagh Association and attracted over thirty boats from all parts of the Lower Bann and Lough Neagh waterway. The weather was excellent and as a finale to a very enjoyable day there was a fireworks display on a sand barge on the river.

This new facility is certainly a welcome asset to the village of Portglenone and will encourage more people to use the River Bann for leisure activities. In response to demand the Council will be applying for further funding in the near future for additional berths at the marina.

The marina looks spectacular day or night and is certainly worth a visit by land or water.

For further information contact Kerry Brady, Portglenone Enterprise Group, 01266 820150.

LOUGH NEAGH RESCUE IN ACTION

Once again in 1998 Lough Neagh Rescue (LNR) saw its lifeboats in action both on Lough Neagh and its tributary rivers. There was a total of 24 call-outs to a variety of craft and for a variety of reasons. This year, for the first time, no commercial craft required any assistance. Perhaps the safety message is getting through to some people after all.

Unfortunately, 1998 saw one fatality on the River Blackwater. LNR attended and were able to recover the body, bringing the incident to a speedy conclusion.

As we are all aware, LNR not only sees its responsibilities in providing a first response lifeboat service but also in promoting measures which enhance and facilitate safer boating. Just recently we have seen the conclusion of an extended programme of navigation mark replacement on Lough Neagh. This was brought about LNR's active membership of and participation in the Lough Neagh Advisory Committee and its working group on safety and navigation. The replacement programme has seen the original 26 marks being either upgraded or replaced with a further suite of 22 marks being added as a direct result of lobbying by LNR.

Plans for a £350,000 lifeboat station in Kinnego have been drawn up and negotiation with various funding agencies is now at an advanced stage. Running in parallel with this project, the proposed relocating of the Ardboe station has had funding approved and with a little luck building will commence in the spring of 1999. It is our belief that both of these projects have been successful because long ago LNR recognised that its aims and goals would best be achieved in partnership with other like minded groupings.

Future plans for 1999 include a new lifeboat to replace the now ageing 'David Gray' based at Ardboe. This will cost £60,000 and will bring LNR investment in the preservation of life to approximately £500,000; a long way from our early days when crew attended call-outs dressed in donkey jackets and balaclavas.

NEW SAND DREDGER FOR LOUGH NEAGH

Norman Emerson & Sons have recently acquired an addition to their sand dredger fleet – a 152 foot long, 135 ton Dutch cargo barge, named the 'Wandering'.

The journey to Lough Neagh involved a route from the Hook of Holland, across the North Sea to the coast of England, up to Scotland and across the Caledonian Canal to the Irish Sea, across to Belfast and then around to Derry. From Derry the boat was transferred by road to Toome where it was launched in Lough Neagh and made its final journey towards its destination at Ardmore.

The boat will be renamed 'The Norman' after Norman Emerson, the original founder of the family business.

CONY'S NEW ISLANDER

Coney Island, situated in the south west corner of Lough Neagh, became home to the new Warden, Peter McClelland.

Peter's home is the recently renovated Coney Cottage, built in 1895 by Lord Charlemont. The island and cottage are owned by the National Trust who carried out renovations with welcome financial assistance from the Loughshores Area Based Strategy and Landfill Tax. Craigavon Borough Council manages the island, which is important historically as well as for its wildlife, through an agreement with the National Trust.

Peter, who comes from Aghagallon near Lurgan, has a background in engineering and a lifetime's experience as a Scout leader and is enjoying the challenge of his new lifestyle.

For further information on visiting Coney Island, please contact the Lough Neagh Discovery Centre on 01762 322205.

RESTORING ULSTER'S WATERWAYS

Imagine a restored Ulster Canal making it possible to link from Lough Neagh through the Shannon/Erne waterway to Limerick, Dublin or Waterford. A pipe dream? – Maybe not.

A joint Rivers Agency and Office of Public Works Feasibility Study on the practical aspects of re-opening the Ulster Canal has found that the project is technically feasible and has estimated costs. The Study recommends that the canal and locks be designed to a specification for modern, larger boats but that the remnants of the old locks and canal structures be retained for historical reasons.

The Ulster Waterways Group recently commissioned a different study to look at the economic benefits of restoring Ulster's Waterway network which, in addition to the Ulster Canal, includes the Lagan Navigation, the Newry Canal and Coalisland Canal, and launched this at their first annual conference in September 1998. Their study found that a restored waterway network, costing around £110 million would generate enough additional activity to cover the initial capital cost of restoration within 20 years of re-opening, and that within 50 years the project would earn a net additional economic return of more than £45 million. The bulk of the annual economic return from the operation of such a network, estimated at an average of £6 million a year, would come from tourism, and more than half of that would be from cruiser hire operations. But there would be additional benefits from related tourism activities, amenity improvement and enhanced property values, all contributing to widespread rural and urban regeneration, particularly in some of the more disadvantaged border areas of Northern Ireland.

Securing money for such large projects will be a difficult and long term task. Although bids to secure money to re-open the Lagan navigation and the Newry canal have failed in the recent past efforts will continue to be made to restore all the waterways linking Lough Neagh, the Lower Bann and the rest of Ireland.

LOWER BANN ENVIRONMENTAL STRATEGY

A draft Lower Bann Environmental Strategy has been produced by a working group set up by the Lower Bann Advisory Committee.

The Strategy sets out a vision for managing the Lower Bann in an environmentally sustainable way under the headings of:

- Habitats and biodiversity,
- Fisheries,
- Landscapes,
- Natural physical features,
- Water quality,
- Water levels and river flows,
- Recreation,
- Archaeology,
- Education and public awareness, and
- Public participation.

The Advisory Committee is very keen to hear the views of as many people and organisations as possible and to that end the draft Environmental Strategy is being circulated to community groups, sporting clubs, local councils, relevant Government departments and those with an interest in the Lower Bann.

A series of meetings focusing on different aspects of the Environmental Strategy will be held through the winter with a view to producing the final strategy in the spring.

If you would like to be consulted on the Lower Bann Environmental Strategy please contact the Liaison Officer on 01648 301289 for further details.

ANGLING DEVELOPMENT OFFICER FOR THE LOWER BANN AND MOYOLA RIVER CATCHMENT

Tom Maguire has been appointed to the post of Angling Development Officer for the Lower Ban and Moyola River catchments. Tom is a very well known personality within angling and tourism circles, particularly in the Moyola Valley, where he is also Chairman of Moyola and District Angling Club.

This post, which last for one year, has been created through the EU funded LEADER II Programme for the regeneration of rural areas in the Province.

Tom's appointment is seen as a unique opportunity for the creation of an overall game/coarse angling and tourism development strategy for the area. This will pull together local accommodation providers, angling clubs and community groups, as well as statutory bodies, such as the NITB, DANI Fisheries Division, Fisheries Conservancy Board and local Councils, in working more closely for the benefit of the local economy.

LOUGH NEAGH ADVISORY COMMITTEE

COMMITTEE UPDATE

The last issue of Eel Express was published in May 1997 when the Lough Neagh and Lower Bann Advisory Committees had reached the end of their first three-year term. Since then both Advisory Committees have been re-established for a further three years with some new faces in the membership. We sadly note that two of the Advisory Committees' members have died this year. Short tributes to both James Gillespie and Geoff Boddie are made on page 8 of this newsletter.

Apart from issues reported in this issue of Eel Express, the Advisory Committees have been active in a number of other areas. Detailed responses were made to the consultation documents, 'Shaping our Future' and the new Water Order. Following a series of public consultation meetings during last winter, a Lower Bann Watersports Action Plan had been produced to co-ordinate action between the various councils and other organisations involved in managing water skiing and jet skiing on the river in a way that minimises conflict with other users and environmental impact.

On World Wetlands Day (2 February) the Lough Neagh Advisory Committee hosted the formal launch of the Lough Neagh Tourism and Recreation Study at the Lough Neagh Discovery Centre. This will provide valuable guidance to local councils and others in developing and promoting sustainable tourism and recreation on Lough Neagh.

In April of this year the Lough Neagh Advisory Committee was represented at a public hearing by the Water Appeals Commission held to hear objections to a Water Service proposal to abstract an additional 130 million litres of water per day from Lough Neagh to supply Belfast and the eastern area. The Commission found no case to oppose the proposed abstraction but stressed on the need for a proper catchment management plan for Lough Neagh. LNAC will be pressing for such a plan.

SHALLOW LAKES CONFERENCE

The Shallow Lakes Conference held in Craigavon in September 1997 proved very successful with 137 people attending from 11 different countries. The conference was organised to attract the broadest possible spectrum of people with an interest in lakes to reflect the complexity of lake management. A detailed report of this Conference is available from the Liaison Officer at Sperrin House.

NEW UPDATE FROM LOUGHSHORES AREA BASED STRATEGY

The Area Based Strategy is continuing to make progress towards the environmental, economic and social regeneration of the western and southern shores of Lough Neagh.

PROJECT FUNDING BUDGET

We work with local community groups, public bodies and the private sector in the implementation of lough shore focused projects. By March 1999 we will have granted over £250,000, and projects with a total cost of over £2 million will be well on the way to implementation. The following are examples of the type of projects we are involved with.

Walk the Right Path

Muintirevlin Historical Society are opening up moss walks in Kinturk and producing an interpretation leaflet.

Shore Milk Bar

Traad and Ballyronan Development Association are building a community facility in Ballyronan which will serve as a focus for community activity, local services and regeneration.

Worm Factory

A business has been given a start up grant for producing worms for the Lough Neagh eel fishing industry.

STRATEGIC LEVEL

The Action Group also steer the development of projects of a more strategic nature. The following are examples of such projects.

Enhancement of fishing and recreational quays

We are working towards the provision of better facilities for the local fishermen and recreational users at a number of quays in the area. The first of these projects, at the Battery, will shortly be entering the detailed design stage.

Upper Bann and Blackwater River Crossings

We have funded the production of a feasibility study and economic appraisal on these river crossings to steer future actions.

Lough Neagh Cycle Way

The Strategy is leading the development of a cycle route around the Lough. The statutory, community and public sectors are all keen on this project and working together towards implementation.

If you would like further information on the Strategy, contact: - Caroline Marshall on 016487 36667.

LOWER BANN PROJECTS

The following projects have all been supported through the Leader II Fund on the Lower Bann.

Leader II projects in the Coleraine area

- Boat hoist and infrastructure improvements at Seaton's Marina
- Boat park and pontoon facilities at Loughan Boat Park
- Self catering apartments in Coolbreen House
- Access Officer for the Lower Bann
- Angling Development Officer

Leader II projects in the Ballymoney area

- New ski boat for the Edge Water-ski School.

COMMUNITY ACTION

The South Lough Neagh Regeneration Association continue to actively engage in improving life in the South Lough Neagh wetlands. Projects underway include:

- Business Units, Maghery
- Bannfoot/Charlestown enhancement scheme
- Wetlands Schools Project – creation of school wetland gardens.

The Community Group are working with the Rural Development Council, Craigavon Borough Council Conservation Department and the Loughshores Area Based Strategy.

DUCKS, FISH AND CREEPY CRAWLIES

In winter the Lough Neagh wetlands can support up to one hundred thousand wetland birds with internationally important numbers of whooper swan, bewick's swan, teal, Pochard, tufted duck, scaup and Goldeneye. The last four of these are ducks that dive to the lake bottom to get their food. These diving ducks occur in large numbers – on average each winter there are 23,500 tufted duck, 2,500 scaup, 12,000 goldeneye and 32,000 pochard. We know these birds find the bed of Lough Neagh a rich feeding area with an abundance of Lough Neagh fly larvae, snails and other invertebrates. The fish, including of course eels, also feed on these items but, whilst a little is known about how all this fits together. Do fish and birds compete against other for food? Does this affect their populations, movements and behaviour? Three University of Ulster post graduate research students are involved in projects to try and better understand these complex interrelationships.

Interactions between Lough Neagh Animals – Ewan Bigsby

In order to gain a greater understanding, not just of individual species but how the animals in Lough Neagh interact with one another Ewan Bigsby is examining the distribution and abundance of both the fish and the overwintering diving ducks on the lough. He is also monitoring the prey of fish and ducks – the macro-invertebrates (Lough Neagh flies, snails, etc) that live in or on the sediment at the bottom of the lough. The macro-invertebrates comprise the bulk of the food for the larger fish, but are of less importance to the smaller fish, which tend to feed on zooplankton (small animals living in suspension in the water column).

From earlier research it is known that pollan predominantly consume mysis (opossum shrimp), particularly over winter, which chironomids and molluscs are the main food for roach. The diet of large roach is very similar to the diet of the tufted ducks and scaup (chironomids and molluscs), so there appears to be the potential for competition to occur between these two species. It has been suggested that such competition for food was taking place between the roach and the tufted duck populations in previous years; roach were reportedly out competing the tufted ducks, resulting in a reduced overwintering tufted duck population on the lough. However, the impact of roach on both the fish and duck species in the lough is unclear.

In the coming years, the diets, distributions and abundance of the fish and diving ducks on the lough will be examined. With this information it should be possible to better explain the interactions of the inhabitants of the lough and their impacts on one another.

Diving Ducks – Darren Evans

Darren is studying factors affecting the behaviour and distribution of ducks together with long-term trends dating back to 1960s. Darren has also been able to study what the birds have been eating by examining the contents of duck stomachs that have been kindly provided by local wildfowlers and fishermen. Tufted Duck, pochard and scaup are all nocturnal feeders and many cold evenings have been spent trying to locate these birds using a night-time telescope.

Most of Darren's work is concerned with diving duck species, however, he has been looking at other wetland birds as well. For example, he has been investigating which birds make use of the no-shooting wildfowl refuges on the lough. It would seem that dabbling duck (for example mallard and teal) and coot are the most reliant on them. Diving ducks are able to flock together in large rafts away from any shooting disturbance, and because the Lough is only 9 metres deep on average are able to feed away from disturbance too.

It is hoped that once there is a better understanding of these birds on Lough Neagh, the users of the lough will be able to develop policies that ensure that the populations are sustained into the next millennium.

The biology of the pollan in Lough Neagh – Chris Harrod

The pollan (a relative of salmon and trout) has been fished for by countless generations of Lough Neagh fisherman and is one of Europe's most fascinating species of fish. The pollan is a glacial relict, this means that pollan once lived on the ice sheets that once covered Europe during the last ice age. As the world warmed, and the ice retreated, pollan were trapped in meltwater lakes and have remained isolated from other populations for approximately 10,000 years. Although related species are found in the upland areas of Northern England, Scotland and Wales, studies have demonstrated that the pollan is actually identical to a species of fish typically found in far-off Siberia and Arctic North America. The species is now considered endangered and Lough Neagh is considered to represent the last bastion of the pollan in Europe.

Pollan numbers have been known to fluctuate from year to year but during 1995 and 1996 larger, older fish became increasingly rare, overall catches fell, whilst the average size of spawning fish dropped markedly from those found in previous years. Chris Harrod's doctoral research aims to provide up-to-date scientific information on pollan in Lough Neagh and also to identify threats to its continued survival.

Questions or comments are welcome:
University of Ulster Freshwater Laboratory
Traad Point
Ballyronan
BT45 6LR
Tel: 01648 418 264

IMPROVEMENTS TO MAGHERY SLIPWAY

Craigavon Borough Council are very appreciative of the excellent improvement work carried out to Maghery slipway by Rivers Agency this summer. The gradient of the slipway has been altered and two new jetties installed on either side. The new design makes boat launching a lot easier.

CRAIGAVON BOROUGH COUNCIL NATURE CONSERVATION STRATEGY

Craigavon Borough Council adopted a Nature Conservation Strategy in June this year.

The aim of the strategy is to protect and enhance the natural environment of the Craigavon area and to promote its appreciation by the public. In achieving many of the objectives in the strategy the Council will seek the co-operation of the local community and other agencies.

For further details contact:

Phil Davidson

Head of Conservation

Lough Neagh Discovery Centre

Oxford Island

Craigavon

BT66 6NJ

Tel: 01762 322205

NEW FISHERIES PATROL BOAT FOR LOUGH NEAGH

Fisheries Conservancy Board launched their new state-of-the-art patrol boat at Oxford Island on 15 June 1998. Mr Bill Smith, Chief Executive of Fisheries Conservancy Board said that the new 31 foot, rigid hull, inflatable boat powered by 360 horsepower inboard diesel engines with jet drive and a top speed of 30 knots provided them with an invaluable asset in patrolling the Lough Neagh system. In addition to radar and sonar the boat has night vision equipment to assist with anti-poaching patrols during the hours of darkness. As well as helping towards the purchase of the boat, the 50% funding from the European Regional Development Fund will enable Fisheries Conservancy Board to install an efficient and effective radio/telephone communication system and a computer network to provide a comprehensive data source on pollution, licenses, offenders, etc. on both sides of the border.

Mr Smith said that, whilst the Lough Neagh system had a great potential for both game and coarse tourist angling, Lough Neagh had an immensely important commercial eel fishery and for this reason he felt it was very fitting to call the new boat 'Anguilla' from the scientific term for eel *Anguilla anguilla*.

GEOFF BODDIE

Geoff Boddie died on 28 September 1998. Geoff represented the River Bann and Lough Neagh Association on the Lower Bann Advisory Committee. He brought a wealth of knowledge of the river to the Committee through his activity as a water-ski instructor and contact with many people. He had a significant input into the production of the Lower Bann Users Code. His contribution at LBAC meetings will be missed. We offer our sympathy and condolences to his wife and young family.

JAMES GILLESPIE

James Gillespie died on 18 March 1998. James sat on the Lough Neagh Advisory Committee as a Craigavon Borough Council elected representative. He came from a farming background but had trained as an engineer. James had a quiet but very practical and commonsense approach and his views were thus highly respected. He will be missed by others on the Advisory Committee. We offer our sympathy and condolences to his family.