

LAUNCH OF LOWER BANN TOURISM AND RECREATION STUDY REPORT

The “Lower Bann Tourism and Recreation Study” Report was officially launched last month at Portneal Lodge by the Department of Agriculture Permanent Secretary, Mr John Murray.

Mr Murray told representatives of the local community, statutory bodies and local councils attending the launch that the Report “sets out a vision for the future and a strategic framework in which to build”.

In summary, the conclusions and recommendations of the Report are:

- The Report concludes that the Lower Bann River should be maintained as a high quality environment, developed and enhanced as a navigable water way with good visitor facilities, provided with managed public access and supported by local communities who would be encouraged to play an active role in helping to develop and enhance the river.
- Strategic action should be taken to encourage the development of activity holiday packages and short breaks, to set up tourism promotion campaigns specifically for the Lower Bann corridor and to encourage private interests to develop new accommodation and activity opportunities such as guest houses, bed and breakfast businesses, self catering establishments and activity holiday centre.
- One of the river’s main attractions at present is as a water recreational resource. It has good quality coarse and game angling stretches, and it is also a major pleasure area for water skiers, jet skiers and canoeists. The Report concludes that if these potentially conflicting sports are to continue to co-exist on the river, some form of controls will be necessary. It recommends that the river should be zoned for recreational purposes and public access should be managed.
- The opportunity for cruising on the river is currently unrealised although to progress this a number of constraints would have to be overcome. The Report recommends initiatives to improve cruising including encouraging a limited number of cruise hire operations, the construction of appropriate landing facilities and visitor attractions, the introduction of better navigation signs and publication of a good navigation chart.
- The Report identifies scope for further land-based recreation through the development of riverside paths, provision of interpretative information explaining

the many features of interest along the corridor and, in the longer-term, there could be merit in developing a Lower Bann scenic route.

- The Report highlights that for future development to be sustainable in the longer-term, new facilities will need to be carefully planned with regard to levels of provision, siting and their impact on the environment. The Report includes an Environmental Priorities Plan as a guide for future planning and development in an environmentally sympathetic manner.
- The Report highlights 18 locations along the river corridor which have potential for further development.

The Lower Bann Advisory Committee will be examining the recommendations closely with the various statutory bodies which have responsibility for management of the Lower Bann as a tourism and recreation source.

The full report is available for reference in the Sperrin House library or can be purchased from Margaret Kane at Watercourse Management Division on 01232 253380 for £25. A summary report, which includes details of all the conclusions and recommendations, is available from Margaret at £10. A 9-page executive summary is available free from Watercourse Management Division or Sperrin House.

HYDRO ELECTRIC PROPOSAL AT CUTTS

The Lower Bann Advisory Committee looked at a proposal to build a hydro electric station capable of generating 6,640 megawatt hours per year at the Cutts, Coleraine.

There would be considerable benefits in this development; it is a “green” source of energy and the structure would be built on a salmon trap structure taking it permanently out of commission. An unknown factor is the damage that might be done to migrating salmon. The proposed fishery protection measures are said to be “state of the art” but it is very difficult to predict how effective these would be.

The developer has submitted a planning application with an Environmental Statement and further technical assessment has to be carried out so no decision has yet been made to go ahead with the proposal.

NEW FISHERY PROTECTION VESSEL

Fisheries Conservancy Board has purchased a new fishery protection vessel in Lough Neagh.

The new boat is a 17 ft Bayliner which will be used to support the Board's main boat "Task Force" to help protect the crops of perch, eels and pollen. The Board has already this year seized substantial yardage of illegal nets on the Lough.

LOUGH NEAGH SPECIAL PROTECTION AREA

The importance of Lough Neagh, Lough Beg and Portmore Lough for birds has been recognised in a European context.

In April this year Environment Minister, Malcolm Moss, declared the three Loughs a Special Protection Area under the EC Wild Birds Directive. "The SPA will be one of the largest in the UK," he said. "It is renowned for the internationally important numbers and range of waterfowl which it supports, both during the winter months when it is visited by many birds from many other countries and in the summer when it provides breeding grounds for many resident species."

He went on to say, "Lough Neagh is also very important to the people who live on its shores and for those who use it for work and recreation."

The site qualifies as an SPA because it regularly supports nationally or internationally numbers of the following species: Little grebe, Great Crested Grebe, Cormorant, Mute Swan, Bewick's Swan, Whooper Swan, Greylag Goose, Shelduck, Wigeon, Gadwall, Teal, Mallard, Shoveller, Pochard, Tufted Duck, Scaup, Goldeneye, Coot, Snipe, Redshank, Black-headed Gull, Lesser Black-Backed Gull and Common Tern. Numbers are highest in winter when it is not unusual to count over 80 thousand wetland birds. In summer large numbers of ducks migrate to countries further north to breed but nationally important numbers of many species remain to breed.

The SPA boundary follows the existing boundary of the Area of Special Scientific Interest covering an area of 41,188 hectares. SPA designation will give additional protection to the three Loughs and their shoreline habitats but will not affect activities that have traditionally been carried on such as shoreline grazing, fishing, wildfowl, sand extraction, water sports etc.

However, any change in the scale of existing activities or new proposals that would damage the wetland birds or their habitats will not be permitted unless there are "imperative reasons of overriding public interests, including those of a social or economic nature".

SUSPENSION OF SALMON TRAPING AT CUTTS

For the 1996 season no salmon will be caught in the salmon traps at the Cutts, Coleraine.

In recent years up to 3000 salmon annually have been trapped at the Cutts on a commercial basis. This year the managers of the fishery, Bann System Limited, have entered an agreement to suspend trapping for a year. This has been achieved through agreement with DANI Fisheries Division under the Salmonid Enhancement Programme.

Almost all of the fish that might otherwise have been caught will be free to continue their journey to the head waters of the rivers of the Lough Neagh and Lower Bann catchment to spawn. Fisheries Division have retained the right to occasionally use the traps to collect fish for spawning purposes. Commander Campbell of Bann System Limited welcomed the opportunity to monitor how the system is affected by the discontinuation of the commercial fishery and the move has also been welcomed by the game angling community.

CRAIGAVON HABITAT SURVEY 1995

Craigavon Borough Council has repeated a habitat survey first carried out in 1983. Last year, with grant aid from Environment and Heritage Service, a survey worker, Sue Mullinger, mapped the wildlife habitats at 26 of the most ecologically important sites in the Borough.

The sites fell into three broad categories:

- Lough Neagh shore (8 sites)
- Open water and associated fringe vegetation (5 sites)
- Modified bog and fen habitats (13 sites)

Apart from the lough shore the cut-over bogs were identified as the most common and important habitat in the Borough and these occurred mainly within the Ramsar site between the M1 and the Lough Neagh shore. These are very important relics of a habitat type which once covered much of the southern shores and over the years has declined.

Although the major drainage works on Lough Neagh and Upper Bann over the last century caused the most dramatic reduction in the extent of bogs in the area more recent habitat losses can be attributed to agriculture improvement, dumping and tipping, encroachment of woodland and scrub and peat extraction for horticultural purposes. Some areas showed an extensive decrease since the 1983 survey. For example five sites have lost areas of birch woodland which have been converted to species poor grassland;

two bog sites have lost, open bog communities and five bogs have been affected by dumping causing direct loss of habitat and visual blight.

The survey has provided excellent detailed information on the habitats of the Borough including their type, location and extent. This information will be of great value to planners and other public bodies in the formulation of landuse policies and to Craigavon Borough Council in the preparation of a Nature Conservation Strategy to be written over the course of the next few months.

Phil Davidson
Senior Conservation Officer
Craigavon Borough Council

LOUGH NEAGH TOURISM AND RECREATION STUDY

A major review of tourism and recreation on Lough Neagh is currently under way in a study commissioned by the six local councils around Lough Neagh; NITB; DOE Environment and Heritage Service; DANI Watercourse Management Division and the Sports Council for Northern Ireland.

The principle objective of the study is to identify the sustainable tourism development potential of the Lough and to increase the popularity of the resource as a “Lough to use, not to look at”.

The study is being undertaken by Scott Wilson Resource Consultants in association with MENTOR Enterprise Development Limited and the consultants have already commenced an extensive consultation with public and private sector, agency and local organisations who have an interest in the strategic development of Lough Neagh as a tourism and recreation resource. Furthermore a visitor survey has commenced at strategic points around the Lough to identify visitor profile and attitudes to the Lough and this survey will continue over the summer months and will be complemented by surveys of local residents around the Lough shore catchment area.

The study is due to be completed early next year and further information can be provided by the Lough Neagh Liaison Office (Bob Davidson) on 01648 301289.

The consultants would welcome any views or comments relating to the tourism and recreation development potential of the Lough and these can be directed to Kenneth Glass of Scott Wilson Resource Consultants on 0131 6620308.

LOUGHSHORES AREA BASED STRATEGY

The Loughshores Area Based Strategy is responsible for the delivery of a Department of Agriculture administered funding programme for the Western and Southern shores of Lough Neagh.

The development of the Strategy is in the early stages and information on the needs of the study area is being gleaned from active community groups and the statutory agencies in the Western and Southern shores area. It is envisaged that the Strategy will be in place by summer 1996. It will set out the subject areas which funding is available for, and for the procedures for application.

It can be assumed that most of the funding will be given for projects which have a Loughshore focus and which will be economically viable and sustainable. Projects with a strong community input and benefit will be favoured, although private concerns will be considered.

More information will be available on the actual criteria for project selection nearer the launch of the Strategy at the end of June.

Meanwhile, if you have any questions or useful information, please contact the Strategy Manager at the following address:

Caroline Marshall
Loughshores Area Based Strategy
Unit 5
Ardboe Business Park
Kilmascally Road
Dungannon
BT71 5BJ

Tel: 016487 36667

CALMING THE WATERS

Newferry and the Lower Bann has been the site of increasing conflict between anglers, jet skiers and water skiers.

Newferry Water Ski Club have their base here and there are public slips for launching boats on both the Magherafelt and Ballymena Council sides of the river.

At times, especially on summer weekends, the river is very busy with boats and jet skiers. This same stretch of river, just downstream of Lough Beg, is also exceptionally good for coarse fishing.

Inevitably there has been conflict between anglers seeking undisturbed fishing on the banks and people using powered craft on the water. In the confined space of the river there is also considerable danger of craft colliding and people getting hurt. It is an unfortunate fact that some of the people using powered craft from the public slips are unaware of, or ignore, basic water safety rules such as keeping to the right and wearing life jackets.

The Lower Bann Tourism and Recreation Study Report made some general recommendations on how these difficulties might be resolved and the Lower Bann Advisory Committee has been working with both councils, Newferry Waterski Club and the Sports Council to find a way to safely accommodate all interests.

The following measures have been proposed:

- Boat access to the water should be controlled at peak periods;
- Users of boats and jet skis should demonstrate that they carry insurance;
- Users of boats and jet skis should follow a code of safe practice;
- Users of boats and jet skis should carry a registration number;
- Separate water-ski and jet ski zones will be defined;
- Anglers should have undisturbed fishing at all times at Glenone Forest and during weekend mornings between Lough Beg and Newferry.

At the time of going to press the two councils are sorting out the details of how the scheme will work. The slip will have to be named at weekends to manage access to the water and a charge will be levied. Signs will be put in place at both car parks and a leaflet will soon be available to explain the arrangements.

The Lower Bann Advisory Committee will review the effectiveness of the arrangements at the end of the summer and work closely with both Councils and other parties involved to ensure that the reasonable needs of people who use the river are met.

A NEW SOURCE OF WATER FOR BELFAST

Water Service (DOE) is making plans to extract additional water from Lough Neagh to meet a growing demand for water in the Belfast and eastern area of the province.

Their preferred proposal is to abstract water at Hog Park Point with treatment at a new works located on suitable land at the Point.

Treated water would then be pumped to a new reservoir at White Mountain to gravitate to Purdysburn reservoir for distribution. The scheme was chosen from an initial list of seven options on the basis that it will be the most economic and cause the least environmental impact.

At the moment Water Service can abstract up to 253 million litres per day from Lough Neagh through water treatment works at Moyola, Dunore and Castor Bay. The new plant at Hog Park Point would have an abstraction limit of 130 million litres per day phased in two stages, the first with a 65 million litres capacity due early next century with the second stage expected around the year 2015 depending on demand. This sounds like, and is, an awful lot of water but in the context of the total volume in Lough Neagh it is very small.

There is some concern about the possible impact this may have on the water levels in the Lough. At times of high water level the impact is insignificant but there would be an impact at times when the water levels are otherwise naturally low. It has been calculated that during dry summers the additional abstraction would, on average, draw down the Lough an extra 40mm (1.5") for short periods of a few days.

Water Service has completed a study to examine the possible environmental impact of the proposal and the Advisory Committees will be looking closely at this and keeping in touch with the Water Service to ensure that the Lough Neagh environment is not damaged and that user groups are not disadvantaged because of the scheme. Liaison with the Water Service has indicated that they are progressing the project with similar objectives.

LOUGH NEAGH TOURISM UPDATE

Since November Lough Neagh Tourism has been undertaking a whole series of marketing initiatives aimed at building up a higher profile of Lough Neagh as a tourism destination for a day break, short break, activity break or extended stay.

New promotional literature branded "Lough Neagh, discover its secrets" highlights the areas strongest selling points – its attractions, heritage, culture, events, as well as promoting details on angling, golfing, watersports and birdwatching. Included in the main guide is a detailed map of the area and details on 113 accommodation providers. Supporting promotional literature includes an "Explorers Guide" to Lough Neagh giving specific details on the main attractions on the area. Lough Neagh Tourism is currently embarking on a direct mail campaign aimed at Special Interest Visitors.

The new literature is being widely distributed at holiday exhibitions throughout Southern Ireland, Tourist Information Centres in Northern Ireland and main Information Centres in Scotland and England and through advertising and direct mail campaigns.

As part of the consultation process with the tourism trade in the area, Lough Neagh Tourism arranged a Trade Open Day at the end of March. A second Trade Open Day is now planned for September which will provide an opportunity for tourism providers to input into the 1997 marketing campaign.

For further information on any of the activities of Lough Neagh Tourism contact:

Mary Jo McCanny
Lough Neagh Tourism
The Steeple
Antrim
BT45 1BJ

Tel: 01849 481312

RESPONSE TO EU SALMONID ENHANCEMENT SCHEME EXCEEDS EXPECTATIONS

Fisheries Minister Baroness Denton announced in May that the Salmonid Enhancement Programme, funded under the EU's Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation, had met with a tremendous response from angling interests and community organisations throughout Northern Ireland.

The programme is intended to foster reconciliation and promote prosperity by encouraging communities to exploit one of Northern Ireland's prime resources – its salmon and trout rivers. It will provide some £2m up to the end of 1997 to enhance salmon and trout stocks, and already since its launch in December 1995, eighty-one applications have been received from angling clubs and other organisations.

Commenting on the response to the Programme the Minister said it was an indication of the interest in angling in the Province. She added:

“The funding provided by the EU allows us to take an important step in support of this interest. I am delighted there is the willingness to co-operate in a common project which will enhance angling throughout the Province and improve life in rural areas.

We will be seeking increased funding and time to allow the community to derive the maximum benefit from the Support Programme.

Editor's Note:

Many of the proposals lie within the Lough Neagh and Lower Bann catchments and should make a real contribution to improving salmon and trout stocks locally.

NEW VISION FOR TOOME

TIDAL (Toome Industrial Development and Leisure) are developing plans to build a new resource and tourist centre in Toome.

There are promising signs that Leader II, Peace and Reconciliation and CRISP funding will be available for these and other improvements. It is expected too that a new by-pass will be built in a few years time to relieve traffic pressure through the centre of the town. With its strategic position on the Lower Bann Toome is ideally placed to provide for tourists travelling by boat or car. (For further information contact Cahal Boyd at 01648 50899.

WATER LEVELS WORKING GROUP

Watercourse Management Division of the Department of Agriculture is responsible for managing the water levels on Lough Neagh within a range of six inches using sluice gates on the Lower Bann.

In practice, at times of heavy rain, five times as much water flows into Lough Neagh as can leave it with the sluice gates fully open so the water level rises above the maximum.

At times of low rainfall the inflow into Lough Neagh is too small to “top up” the Lough without totally stopping the flow down the Lower Bann and the lake level falls below the minimum. Within these extremes Watercourse Management Division can exert considerable control on water levels and has been working towards accommodating as many interests as possible.

The Advisory Committees have formed a small working group to look at issues such as fish migration, flooding of farmland, navigation, water abstraction and nature conservation.

The Water Levels Working Group will be looking to see if further flexibility towards users needs can be incorporated into the operational procedures for the sluice gates. Look out for the next issue of Eel Express at the end of the year for an update on these issues.

LOUGH NEAGH RESCUE

Lough Neagh Rescue provides a permanent day and night lifeboat service on Lough Neagh and its tributary rivers.

This service is only possible because of the education of volunteers who man the rescue boats and the efforts of behind the scenes workers who raise funds to buy and maintain boats and equipment. Even though all the people involved in LNR are volunteers running costs are significant. When LNR was formed it received a generous grant from government and all six of the Lough Neagh District Councils make generous outgoing contributions towards running costs. Recently LNR have been given support from the Peace and Reconciliation Funding Package to buy a replacement boat but it will remain a struggle to meet running costs.

Lough Neagh Rescue uses two rigid hull inflatable boats with powerful outboard engines. The "Bungy" is based at Kinnego, Lurgan, "The David Gray" at the Battery Harbour "The Gary Breen" is a support boat kept at Kinnego to be available when needed.

A team of 20 people train at each base and a crew of five man the boat in each call-out. These crews are highly trained in the necessary skills in boat handling, navigation, first aid and lifesaving. To develop and maintain their skills the lifeboat crews train every Tuesday night on the first Saturday of each month. Training includes co-operative exercises with H.M. Coastguard, Police, Fire Authority, Ambulance Service, British Red Cross and RAF.

The RUC has overall responsibility for co-ordinating reaction to emergencies and search and rescue operations in Northern Ireland. However, H.M. Coastguard plays a key role in that it keeps a constant radio watch for distress calls on Channel 16, the Maritime Distress Channel used by all craft in Lough Neagh with a radio, and acts as co-ordinator for the boat based search and rescue operations.

If the coastguard receive a distress call on the radio or a 999 call from Lough Neagh they page the crew of the lifeboat (or several lifeboats, depending on the situation). LNR are able to respond extremely quickly to call-outs and can normally reach each point anywhere on the Lough within 20 minutes of a distress call. On average LNR has 46 call-outs each year. Over the five year period 1990 to 1995 LNR assisted 143 people in difficulty, rescued 35 people from the water and recovered 12 bodies.

LNR gave a talk to the Lough Neagh Advisory Committee in March and the Committee felt strongly that LNR provided a very valuable service and commended LNR for their commitment and professional approach to search and rescue.

EEL EXPRESS

Eel Express is produced by the Lough Neagh Advisory Committee and the Lower Bann Advisory Committee.

The role of the two committees is to:

- **Advise on the protection of the natural and man-made heritage;**
- **Advise on drainage and navigation;**
- **Advise on the management and development of countryside and open air recreation.**

Eel Express is produced twice per year and is targeted at people with a working involvement on Lough Neagh and the Lower Bann. Its aim is to keep people informed of the issues relating to the two areas and to encourage users and policy makers to express their views to the advisory committees.

Contributions or details of events for the back page are welcome. The next newsletter will be issued in December 1996.

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Any opinions expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily those of the editor or the advisory committees.