



## The rise and fall of sea angling in Scotland.

Before 1960 sea angling with rod and line was essentially unknown in Scotland and most 'angling' was simply fish 'for the pot' caught using a hand-line using either baited or feathered hooks (darrahs) on a simple paternoster set-up.

However in the early 1960's, a combination of increased leisure time and disposable wealth along with the reduced costs of mass manufactured rods and reels saw a tremendous uptake in the sport.



Early in 1961, representatives of what we would now call SportScotland and VisitScotland met to discuss the possibilities of using Scotland's sea angling potential as a means of attracting tourists and subsequently lengthening the tourist season by running festivals at the beginning and end of the recognised season. It was even envisaged that such events could also help breathe some life back into those coastal villages which had 'died' due to the consolidation of the commercial fishing fleets.

To facilitate these bold ideas, the Scottish Federation of Sea Anglers (SFSA) was formed in late 1961 as the governing body of the sport throughout Scotland. It was charged with the advancement of sea angling in Scotland by providing technical advice, organising festivals and competitions etc., disseminating information on fishing opportunities and providing advice and assistance to all.

The first ever fishing festival was a three-day event which took place in 1962 on the Isle of Arran over a Whit weekend, it drew 302 entries, mainly from England. By 1970, there were 25 festivals being run annually, each averaging around 500 anglers and weighing in around 1500lb of fish.

In 1965, Scotland hosted the European Championships which were held out of Ullapool which, according to contemporary reports, required a "Dunkirk" type armada of boats ranging from from 70 ft trawlers to small ones of all shapes and sizes to support the 200 International Anglers.

Such was the success of the development activities that sea angling clubs began to be formed all over Scotland; to support them and visiting anglers, a handbook was created by 'VisitScotland' providing detailed information on sea angling centres, types of fish, boat hire, tackle shops, bait suppliers etc., and the contact details of the SFSA representatives for each area.

All these advances, along with the festivals, encouraged an author in the introduction to his book on Scottish sea angling, written in 1970, to say in the introduction;

*“ The reader will thus be able to see how sea angling, "one of the fastest growing sports in Scotland", has now reached the stage when it can rightly be said that Scottish potential in this field of angling is the equal of anything in Europe.”*

*“Sea angling is now accepted as part of Scottish angling by Tourist Boards, hoteliers, boatmen and all who in any way make a living from this sport in its many branches.”*

For two decades, Scottish and visiting sea anglers enjoyed unparalleled sport - spectacular catches of a tremendous variety of fish were taken throughout the year and such was the state of cod stocks in the inner Clyde that the “European Cod Festival” was successfully held there on three occasions.

But then it all went wrong around the mid 1980's – poor fisheries policies and practices combined with political ineptitude, resulted in the removal of many gear and access restrictions; this along with incredible levels of discard depleted the stocks of many inshore species and resulted in areas becoming uneconomic for all but nephrops or shellfish and the quality of sea angling drastically declined.

### **Euro-cod festival**

The 1979 European Boat Cod Festival, to be held in the Firth of Clyde on February 17 and 18 should see anglers competing from many countries including Belgium, Denmark, France, West Germany, Sweden and Norway.

The competition is being organised by the Scottish section of the European Federation of Sea Anglers, and is sponsored by Abu. The prizes in various categories are together worth more than £9,000 and Abu have also guaranteed a £5,000 cash prize to any angler breaking the current Scottish cod record of 46 lb ½ oz.

A week before the actual contest local anglers plan to catch and tag 50 cod. Any angler catching one of their fish during the festival will receive a £50 tackle voucher.

Because of the possible limitations on boat availability, this year's total entry will be restricted to 350 each day, so places will be awarded on a first come, first served, basis. Entry forms can be obtained from Mrs Jean Lambert, the secretary for the event. Write, enclosing an SAE, to 7 Lever Road, Helensburgh, Scotland.





As catches steadily declined, most major competitions and festivals ceased – prominent examples of which were the White Horse Whisky shore angling competition off Saltcoats (1986) and the boat fishing Lamlash Bay festival (1998).

In their prime, these festivals attracted up to 1300 entrants. At the same time the number of pleasure and visiting anglers dropped rapidly - this was even noted in a 'VisitScotland' report where many Area Tourist Boards reported diminished returns for their members.

Thousands of jobs were lost due to the depleted stocks - 100+ charter boats went out of business, tackle shops closed, bait diggers were no longer required. The allied service industries such as accommodation, food, etc were hit equally hard and most of these were in coastal locations with very fragile economies.

Thus the “golden age” of Clyde Sea Angling died and with it went a terrific infrastructure, many sea angling clubs and jobs in the supporting service industries.

Although Scottish sea angling is a faint shadow of what it was in those golden years, in certain locations it continues to attract anglers who are seeking a variety of species or to catch 'high status' fish like Shark, Tope, Skate etc. as we see during our Sharkatag and Tagathon Events.

Typical of comments from a Sharkatag exit survey was :

*Since I was first introduced to Scottish sea fishing I have caught 11 new species and it seems that every time I go my personal bests get larger. Currently standing at 185 lb from Crinan Bay.*

*There is no fishing like it in the British Isles based on the variety of species, their size and the pure tranquillity and scenic beauty.*

He and his group of friends visit Scotland around 10 times a year. They alone contribute more than £20,000 to the Crinnan and Luce Bays economies.

Anglers today are willing to spend significant amounts of their disposable income in pursuit of their particular goals, around which they may also arrange other vacation activities.

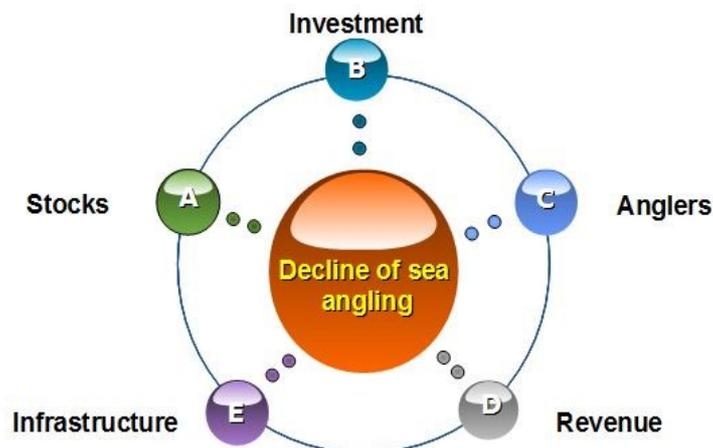
However, they also have high expectations of the quality of the catch, the angling service businesses, the supporting service industries and the overall local supporting infrastructure.

Unfortunately the gap between those expectations and the actual experience is continually widening due to the constant depletion of stocks and lack of investment which has caused many facilities (generally outdated) to be closed down and not replaced.

This situation is almost the opposite of the Government's approach to the commercial sectors where millions of pounds are made available for them to update their catching and processing equipment.

What little investment there is indicates a failure to understand the complex integration of sea angling as a sport the funding is perceived as strictly performance related. This has led to a focus on competition and elite performance, essentially disenfranchising 95%+ of the recreational sea angling community.

## What's lacking in sea angling ?





## 2020 - Vision for the future

### So what needs to happen ?

All concerned with sea angling - the Scottish Government, fisheries managers, Tourism and Enterprise bodies and the sea angling sector - need to take a lead from those early pioneers and address the decades of inshore stock mismanagement and introduce bold, innovative initiatives which will regenerate our inshore stocks and once again make Scotland a major European sea angling destination.

#### **If we get it right then :**

- Sea anglers will have access to more and bigger fish.
- There will be a greater participation in sea angling, providing increased social and economic returns to Scotland PLC.
- There will be an increased fleet of angling charter boats, tackle shops, bait suppliers and other supporting service industries.
- Sea anglers will have unparalleled access to fishing opportunities.
- There will be a renewed interest in competitions and festivals – Sharktag & Tagathon show the interest is there if the fish are.
- Anglers will regularly catch fish of a size that would have been regarded as a fish of a lifetime in the early 2000's.
- Diverse participation opportunities will be offered to young and inexperienced anglers.
- Scotland will have an increasing reputation for offering a world class sea fishing opportunity.
- Increasing numbers of touring anglers will visit Scotland to enjoy those opportunities and many fragile coastal economies will directly benefit eg: Sharktag alone generates £50K direct spend in the Solway region in a single weekend.
- There will be adequate finance available, both for the development of the sector and for businesses and organisations that service the sector.
- Anglers will be aware of restrictions, and their responsibilities towards the environment.
- If Scotland were to achieve a 50% increase in sea angling activity levels this would secure a minimum of 1,675 FTEs and could possibly add a further 840 FTEs.
- The restoration of Scottish sea angling will be studied worldwide by economists, scientists and the media as an example of best practice.

#### **If not :**

All concerned will have failed.

The interests of Scotland's sea anglers (and inshore stocks), will once again have been largely ignored, the current contribution of £150 million per year will dwindle accordingly and Scotland will have squandered a terrific natural resource, missed a huge opportunity to develop tourism and failed to increase the social benefits derived from sea angling.

