

A Fishy Tale to Catch Them Young

It was a very cold and very wet day in Assynt on May 4th this year. But that wasn't enough to prevent a party of hardy youngsters (accompanied by their teachers) from joining staff from the Highland Council Ranger Service and the West Highland Fisheries Trust by Loch Leitir Easaidh, Assynt, for a spot of outdoor education.

This was one event in a series called *An Eel Story* was a series of events put on by these two bodies for local schoolchildren from Stoer, Lochinver and Achiltibuie schools. The session was designed to educate local young people about one of the less publicised fish in the Assynt and West Sutherland area, the eel.



The outdoor classroom was the Little Assynt estate, now owned by the Culag Community Woodland Trust, a charitable body that owns and manages woodlands in Lochinver and on the Little Assynt Estate. Unlike many of the hill lochs in the area, access here is exceptional. It is designed that way. A few years ago, the CCWT built an 'all abilities path' complete with disabled access toilet and even accessible boat facilities so that those less able can access a couple of the wonderful lochs in Assynt (see www.culagwoods.org.uk).

Much is heard of the trout and salmon populations in the area – something that has been written about for hundreds of years. People travel for miles to fish for the renowned ferox; and targeting char in places such as Loch Assynt is well documented.

But less is known about the eel, whose populations have been plummeting in the UK for years, but whom nonetheless form an important part of the area's ecosystem and natural history. Recent estimates suggest as much as 95% of the UK's eel population has gone – a result of pollution, predation (legal and otherwise) and, some think, global warming.

So it is important that awareness is raised. And this programme of events was designed to do just that with local schoolchildren. Catching them young, you might say.

This most outdoor of classroom sessions sought to get local kids interested in the biodiversity and natural history of their local area; raise issues as far ranging as pollution and global warming to water acidity; and link all this up with the school curriculum, giving one of a number of alternative routes to education and making the

most of the local landscape. Not that you could see a whole lot of it – the mountains were shrouded in wet cloud and gusts of misty rain swept across the loch.

The children were split into four groups, each attending one of four sessions in turn, and we attached ourselves to one group which we followed round.

First up was Shona Marshall of the West Sutherland Fisheries Trust a body that works to safeguard the fish populations of this northwest corner of Scotland. Shona had lugged up to the loch a contraption that looked better suited to an episode of Dr Who (1970s version) in order to show the young students electro fishing – a means by which the population of burns and lochs can be identified without harming them.



Walking up and down the burn that joins Loch Leitir Easaidh with Loch na h-Inse Fraioch as the pupils watched from a small footbridge, Shona used the electro equipment to stun small fish residing there. The fascination of the kids at the process was only heightened when Shona returned with her bucket of small fishy samples. These included small trout – no surprise there – but also what looked like a tiny salmon (although difficult to tell at this early stage), which helped Shona illustrate the differences between the two.



There were also a couple of minnows. Now minnows aren't native in these parts and can play a destructive role, especially in relation to young trout. It is pretty certain that

they were introduced by anglers using them as livebait. Talk about self defeating short term thinking! It goes to show that for all the good many anglers do in relation to the environment, that can be quickly undermined by other less responsible fishers.



Moving on is Lindsey Duncan from the Highland Council Rangers Service in Wester Ross doing kick sampling for invertebrates. Nothing intrigues young people like a few bugs from under rocks, gravel and silt and despite the rain and wind the same is true here with boys and girls equalled enthralled. As they wandered about the safe shallow water collecting samples in their nets, it was tempting to think it was drier in the loch than out of it! They returned with a wide range of wriggling trout food illuminating the sheer variety of life a small patch of water up here can contain.

Chris Daphne – ‘the eel man’ as the project timetable described him - is from the WSFT and is a self-confessed eel nut. He’s been conducting research on the eel in West Sutherland for a couple of years. Having pre-set some eel traps in the lochs, he decided that given the weather it was a case of if you can’t beat it join it and donned his wetsuit, plunging into the peaty depths at the edge of the loch. Nothing engages kids like an adult doing something frankly a bit daft – but Chris skilfully uses this to enthuse them about the eel’s life cycle, habitat and feeding. There’s nothing in the net this time, but the message has hit home.



Last but not least is Andy Summers, the Highland Council's Head Ranger in Sutherland, a linchpin in the excellent service the rangers provide for locals and visitors alike in Assynt. The rangers have huts at Achmelvich and Clachtoll beach for people to learn more about the marine environment as well as record sightings; have displays and live camera feeds in the Lochinver Assynt Visitor Centre and hold regular walks and talks on everything from geology to flora and fauna, as well as wildlife spotting events – alongside this kind of work with schools.

Andy conducts a loch-side interactive session with (waterproof) white board, sampling syringes, test tubes, thermometers and acidity charts. Andy gets the youngsters to remember what they have learned from a previous indoor session about factors affecting the eel's population – from global warming, to available food, to man's predation. The water proves to be surprisingly alkaline from a peaty, supposedly acidic environment (it's 7.1 and 10.4 degrees, considerably warmer than the air temperature). There's no shortage of input from the schoolchildren proving there is nothing like getting your hands dirty – or in this case, wet – to understand complex issues, however young.



I'm impressed by the organisation of it all – a true multi-agency approach of fisheries trust, council services and schools – and I'm impressed by the ability of the providers to captivate the young peoples' interests. But most of all I'm impressed by the schoolchildren's attention to a complex subject in testing conditions. One lad, dressed in a hoodie, sums it up: when asked where his coat is he replies 'I don't like coats, they make me too warm!' They make 'em tough up here.

The ranger service and CCWT are conducting a research project on the bio-diversity of Little Assynt and the Assynt Angling Research project is hoping to link up with that work – providing more information to anglers about range of issues affecting angling in the area.