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The Social and Community Benefits of Angling

Research Task 3

Angling and Rural Areas:
The Assynt Angling Study
Interim Report

Adam Brown
December 2009



substance.

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Angling and Rural Areas- The Assynt Angling Study

Executive Summary

1. Status of the Report

This is one of 3 constituent interim reports for the *Social and Community Benefits of Angling* project, undertaken by Substance. It addresses Research Task 3 which focuses on Angling and Rural Areas and it is based on a detailed case study of angling in Assynt, Sutherland in the far North West of Scotland.

The study addresses a number of key issues in relation to the development of angling for wider community benefit in rural areas.

- What *role* does and can angling play in rural communities?
- How can rural communities and groups *benefit* from angling?
- What is the role of angling *tourism* and how can community benefits be increased?
- How can *research help* organisational development around angling?

The purpose of this element of the research is fourfold:

- To inform the *wider project* about the positive role angling can play
- To inform the *local community and angling organisations* about angling in the Assynt area
- To help improve *benefits* from angling tourism in the area.
- To understand the *individual benefits* anglers receive or perceive from angling.

2. The Assynt Context

Assynt is a remote rural area and a fascinating context to explore these issues for a number of reasons. These include:

- Its rich history, including its status as an angling destination dating back centuries.
- Its varied land and angling ownership structure which includes several different forms of collective land ownership as well as more traditional ownership.
- Specific initiatives that have sought to promote and protect angling in Assynt which provide an interesting context for the research.
- A range of new and ongoing developments in which to situate angling research.
- A range of social issues - housing, employment, the retention of young people, crofting/farming - that have important resonance elsewhere.

Assynt also has a fabulously wealthy angling resource, including one of Europe's premier wild brown trout fisheries with literally hundreds of lochs and lochans; salmon and sea trout fishing; rarer fish such as char and ferox; and sea fish. This angling offer is set in a wild and dramatic landscape, with landmark mountains, hillsides and water.

3. Research Approach

We have adopted a multi-method approach to this research combining both qualitative and quantitative methods as well as action research elements in which we have developed new tools (notably online) and will assess their effectiveness in generating data useful for the local communities. This has involved:

- Review of historical literature and documents and wider research literature
- Qualitative interviews with those involved in local angling and community organisations
- Qualitative interviews with anglers

- iv) An online questionnaire survey
- v) A postcode survey of visiting anglers
- vi) An online mapping and data gathering tool as well as other online data collection

We have aimed to take a responsible approach to our research. This included consultation with local organisations at all stages of the research and agreement with them on the approach being taken. We are extremely grateful for the cooperation and input of a large number of people in the undertaking of this research.

4. The Organisation of Angling in Assynt

We have conducted interviews and consultation with all the principal angling-related organisations in Assynt. This has helped inform the research of the varied approaches taken to the organisation of angling in Assynt and its existing and potential contribution to the wider community.

The Assynt Crofters' Trust

The Assynt Crofters' Trust (ACT) is a cooperative organisation of crofters that owns the North Assynt Estate consisting of 21,000 acres. The ACT made history in 1993 when they won a long battle to buy the land on which they lived and worked, undertaking the first ever crofters' buy-out. The ACT owns the rights to fish on around 200 lochs and representatives reported that angling is of key strategic importance as it the single largest source of external income (i.e. excluding rentals) to the Trust, earning around £5000 per year. The ACT is seeking to increase revenue from angling, whilst 'keeping it wild'.

The Assynt Angling Association (known as the Assynt Angling Group)

Assynt Angling Group is a collection of local organisations and landowners that have come together to jointly organise and market angling on several hundred lochs. It includes the fishing of Assynt Angling Club, the Assynt Foundation (a collective community organisation that owns the 44,000 acre Drumrunie and Glencanisp estate), the Culag Community Woodland Trust, and the Assynt Estate amongst others. It earns around £7,000 from the sale of permits, oversees the provision and upkeep of over 20 boats and has been involved in angling based tourism promotion and a Brown Trout Protection Order. The Assynt Angling Club is involved in work with local residents and young people to develop and promote angling. The AF sees angling as important in order to generate visitors, engage local people and encourage people to stay in Assynt. The CCWT has developed an all abilities path to two of its lochs and provided wheelchair-friendly boats. The income from angling supports all these developments.

The Assynt Estate

The Assynt Estate is owned by the Vestey family, the historic landowner in the area. It owns the rights to the rights to salmon and sea trout fishing on the Rivers Inver and Kirkaig and permits for these are sold via the Inverlodge Hotel with preference given to hotel residents.

Other Organisations

Alongside the relatively new development of a rainbow trout fishery - the Lagg Fishery - there are also a number of other community-based organisations which have a relationship to angling development. These include: West Sutherland Fisheries Trust,

Assynt Tourism Group, Assynt Ranger Service, Historic Assynt and Assynt Historical Society. This represents part of a rich and diverse community commitment and engagement in the area

Sea Angling

We have also discussed sea angling with a number of locals, visitors and potential boat service providers.

5. Initial Findings

Online Data Gathering and Tools

We developed a bespoke project website, www.assynt.anglingresearch.org.uk in order to both publicise the research as well as provide information and online tools in order to generate research data. This included a unique map tool based on Ordnance Survey OpenSpace software that has been widely praised. It provides interactive information on 75 lochs, as well as on salmon and sea trout fishing and sea fishing. It also allows anglers to feedback comments on lochs fished, generating information useful to local organisations. We reached agreement to provide a PC in the Lochinver Visitor Centre so visitors could access the information and tools locally.

Questionnaire and Postcode Survey

We conducted an open, online questionnaire for visiting anglers which has generated new information about who fishes in Assynt (generally middle aged or older people); their visits and spending (average of £580); their catch returns; and their motivations and benefits. Although essentially a pilot phase which will be developed further in 2010, this is the first time this sort of information on visiting anglers has been provided, which will inform feedback to local organisations. This was supplemented by a Postcode Survey which provides information about where anglers come from to visit Assynt.

Qualitative Interviews

We also have begun a series of qualitative interviews with anglers that will be ongoing throughout 2010. This work emphasises that: many anglers undertake repeat visits to the area; the angling experience is focused on wild brown trout fishing but motivations also include scenery, landscape, wildlife and flora and fauna; and that angling opportunities include both significant physical activity as well as provision for accessible means for participation. The wild nature of the fishing and the ability to go fishing and not meet other anglers is one of the aspects that anglers value most.

6. Emerging Issues

Angling Organisation and Community Benefit

It is clear that angling has a close relationship to wider community development in Assynt. It is a key source of income for both angling specific organisations as well as wider community ones through tourism. Organisations that benefit from angling in Assynt include collective ownership of land and resources. This means that there is a direct relationship between visiting angler numbers and the benefit the community receives.

It is important to also recognise the important role that angling plays within the community of Assynt, as one way in which people connect to the land and environment and in terms of the contribution that local people make to its sustenance and development. This includes an enormous amount of voluntary effort from local people and angling forms part of the fabric of community in Assynt in very important ways.

Angling Development, Tourism and Angling 'Pressure'

There is clearly a balance to be struck between increasing angling numbers, and therefore generating wider community benefit, and maintaining the delicate

ecological balance and natural resources in the area. There is concern among some visitors that 'too many anglers' will mean that the 'special' nature of angling in Assynt will be lost. This is mostly in relation to the remote and 'isolated' experience many value.

However, there is also unanimity amongst those involved in angling locally that the area could increase numbers of anglers without affecting its uniqueness adversely.

Angling Promotion, Services and Information

Linked to this, there is a relative dearth of information about visiting anglers in Assynt which this research starts to address. None of the trout angling organisations receive catch returns from visitors or locals; and little is known about the real economic impact of angling in Assynt. Assynt provides a wide range of angling opportunities, including both difficult to access and easily accessible lochs.

The web based mapping tool we have developed is one means by which data on what is going on can be generated. Further survey work, questionnaires and other data gathering in this project will also seek to address this issue. A number of people have said that the provision of new services would help increase angling participation, especially to newcomers and the young. This might include tuition and guiding services, something that could aid local employment. There are also a series of local developments the research will seek to inform.

There is clearly demand for more information and boat trip services in relation to sea angling. We will also explore the feasibility of this in future research.

7. Ongoing Research

We will be undertaking further development of the research website site in the coming months in light of useful feedback we have had. We will also:

- Continue our interviews with visiting anglers
- Improve postcode and angler email collection
- Improve catch information and tools
- Undertake a more robust economic analysis of the impact of angling
- Improve website usage
- Conduct more work with non angling visitors

The project continues for three years.

Introduction

Purpose and Status of this Report

This report forms part of the feedback from the first year of *The Social and Community Benefits of Angling* research project, funded by the Big Lottery Fund and undertaken by Substance.

This is a national project that has three elements:

- i. The nature of angling participation and its individual and community benefits
- ii. The benefits of angling for young people, particularly those at risk of exclusion
- iii. How can angling help create sustainable rural communities?

This is one of 3 constituent interim reports for that national project and relates to *Research Task 3: Angling and Rural Areas*, which is focused on a case study of Assynt, Sutherland in the far North West of Scotland. There are two other constituent interim reports - *Angling Participation* (Research Task 1) and *Angling and Young People* (Research Task 2) - as well as an overall summary *Interim Report*.

It should be noted that this is an *interim* report only and provides initial feedback from our work in Assynt in the first year, including quantitative, qualitative and action research elements. Whilst this will present some findings and it also serves to highlight emerging issues and the focus for the project in the coming year.

The report is structured as follows:

1. An outline of the project aims, structure and approach taken
2. A description of angling in Assynt based largely on interviews with those involved in the organisation of angling
3. Initial findings from research to date with visiting anglers including questionnaire and postcode surveys, as well as qualitative data
4. A discussion of emerging themes from the research
5. 'Recommendations' in order to develop the research in its second year.

The website for this element of the project is: www.assynt.anglingresearch.org.uk

The website for the *Social and Community Benefits of Angling* project is: www.anglingresearch.org.uk

Substance is a social research cooperative based in Manchester.
www.substance.coop

1. Project Aims, Purpose and Approach

1.1 Research Aims

Although angling is a hugely popular activity, estimated by some to be the UK's most popular, it is one that has been under-researched in comparison to other sports and activities. This is despite the fact that some big claims are made about angling's potential societal benefit, including that:

- i. Fisheries are among our most valuable natural assets
- ii. Angling participation is good for people – by, for example, providing health and well being benefits, relaxation, skills and in some cases physical activity
- iii. Angling can be good for local communities, for instance through angling club's work improving the environmental state of rivers and lakes
- iv. Angling is good for young people and can help address social problems such as youth offending whilst providing education and other benefits
- v. Angling is good for rural communities, providing income and jobs as well as visitors and tourism

The Assynt case study in the *Social and Community Benefits of Angling* research project principally seeks to address the last of these, namely:

How can angling help create sustainable rural communities?

The basis of the study in Assynt is to use it as a research case study to provide evidence of the positive role that angling can play in a rural community as well as to inform local organisations and development. This will involve understanding more about angling's impact in a particular rural setting, the different ways in which it involves local people and visitors, how people benefit from it and the ways in which sustainable communities can be helped by its development.

As such the research seeks to address a series of **key questions and research aims**.

- What *role* does and can angling play in rural communities?
- How can rural communities and groups *benefit* from angling?
- What is the role of angling *tourism* and how can community benefits be increased from it?
- How can *research help* organisational development around angling?

The purpose of this element of the research is fourfold:

- v. To inform the *wider project* about the positive role angling can play
- vi. To inform the *local community and angling organisations* about angling in the Assynt area
- vii. To help improve *benefits* from angling tourism in the area
- viii. To understand the *individual benefits* anglers receive or perceive from angling in Assynt

1.2 The Assynt Case Study

Assynt provides a great case study for a number of reasons that raise important issues in relation to the research aims. These include:

- i. Assynt is a fairly easily defined rural area, with accepted boundaries.
- ii. It has a long recorded history of angling and of attracting angling visitors and its fishing opportunities remains one of its main attractions to visitors.
- iii. The area has a range of important community organisations involved in angling involving different organisational types and different land ownership

- structures. Each of these, in their own ways, has the further development of angling, and generating wider community benefit from it, as aims.
- iv. There are a variety of approaches within the different local organisations, each with their own historical and social background, which include some unique forms of communal ownership.
 - v. From 2007-2009 there was a specific initiative focused on promoting angling tourism to Assynt, in particular its wild brown trout fishing, funded by the Country Sports Tourism Group for Scotland.
 - vi. Parts of Assynt have also been the subject of a Brown Trout Protection Order in recent years.

Assynt has also achieved a national profile in the UK media which also makes it an interesting case for study.

Furthermore, several of the organisations involved indicated a willingness to work with the research. It has been of enormous benefit to the research that it has been able to engage with a range of organisations in the area and the contribution by people involved in those bodies has been invaluable. These organisations include:

Assynt Crofters' Trust	The Inverlodge Hotel
Assynt Angling Company (trading as Assynt Angling Group)	West Sutherland Fisheries Trust
Assynt Angling Association	Country Sports Tourism Group for Scotland
Assynt Foundation	Visit Scotland
Assynt Tourism Group	Assynt Ranger Service
Lochinver Tourist Information Centre	Historic Assynt

We will consider the context of angling in Assynt in more detail in the next section. However, there are some overarching questions that we are exploring with the cooperation of these organisations.

- What is the strategic role for angling in Assynt and how does it relate to other activities and wider community development?
- Who fishes in Assynt, why, and what is their experience?
- To what extent do visitors to Assynt come *for* angling?
- How important is angling to the local economy?
- How can support and information services - such as online tools and mapping - be developed to further angling development locally as well as contribute to research?
- How can new technology be used to monitor initiatives and developments?
- How are local young people involved and how do they benefit from angling?
- What other funding, developments and support can be generated?
- How could angling fit into wider community developments, such as education?
- How can initiatives such as that funded by CSTG help?

Assynt is an area of outstanding natural beauty, dramatic landscape, landmark mountains, a hugely rich history, extensive flora and fauna, diverse wildlife and extensive fisheries. Freshwater fish populations are dominated by wild brown trout, but also include salmon, sea trout, char, ferox and eels. Sea fish include Pollack, coley, mackerel, a range of flatfish, conger, wrasse and at times sea bass.

1.3 The Research and Policy Context

The Environment Agency in England and Wales, as well as recent Scottish Executive reports have calculated that expenditure from participation in angling has particular benefits for rural areas, which can suffer forms of social exclusion that are less often recognised by policy initiatives. Yet little is known about angling's impact in particular

rural settings, the different ways in which it involves local people and visitors and the ways in which sustainable communities can be helped by its development.

1.3.1 Rural Tourism and Development

One of the oft-cited social and economic benefits of angling is that it helps sustain rural communities, providing a source of income and jobs as well as tourists. Rural tourism, into which angling based tourism and rural angling development initiatives most often fit, has been difficult to define, given the difficulty of defining 'rural' through 'objective' measurements¹. However, on almost any basis, Assynt can be defined as rural, reflected not only in the perceptions of both residents and visitors but also on measures such as land use population density.

Interest in the issues associated with rural tourism gained impetus in the UK following the foot and mouth outbreak in 2001, which itself followed a decline in the importance of agriculture to rural economies. Defra's *Review of the Rural White Paper* in 2004 said that:

'The experience [of foot and mouth] clearly demonstrated how much people value the countryside and the relationship between agriculture and other economic activities, especially tourism and recreation. In fact, the wider economic and social impacts were found to be more significant than the direct costs to the farming industry.'²

However, Sharpley and Craven (2001) warn that 'the scope of tourism in rural areas remains largely unrecognised, manifest in the continuing bias within national rural policy towards the agricultural sector'. Despite this, attitudes have been changing:

'Tourism was seen as a key issue by many stakeholders during the scoping phase of the Review, because of its role as an economic activity, but also because elements of the sector capitalise on the quality of the rural landscape.'³

The importance of angling both economically and the ways in which it capitalises on the landscape are key features of the study in Assynt.

1.3.2 Ecotourism

'Eco-tourism' has been defined as having characteristics (Honey 1999), which suggest a framework for assessment guided by the principles of environmental, economic and social/cultural sustainability, notably that it:

- Involves travel to natural sites
- Minimises impact on rural areas
- Builds environmental awareness
- Provides direct financial benefits for conservation
- Provides financial benefits and empowerment for local communities
- Respects local cultures
- Is sensitive to the host's political, environment and social climate⁴.

¹ Sharpley, R. and Roberts, L. (2004) 'Rural Tourism - 10 Years On' International Journal Of Tourism Research, 6, 119–124: 119

² DEFRA (2004) Review of the Rural White Paper: Our countryside: the future: 22

³ Defra (2004): 57

⁴ Honey, M. (1999) Ecotourism and Sustainable Development: Who Owns Paradise? Washington, DC: Island Press quoted in Zwirn, M., Pinsky, M., and Rahr, G. (2005) 'Angling Ecotourism: Issues, Guidelines and Experience from Kamchatka', Journal of Ecotourism, 4:1, 16-31: 22

Although angling tourism may be seen within this 'ecotourism' context, it is an important issue as to the extent to which it can be exploited without harming the environment in which it takes place. Over-exploitation can not only harm the ecosystem, but undermine the resource on which angling tourism is based as Zwirn *et al* (2005) argue:

'When angling tourists reach threatened freshwater ecosystems, however, there is a risk of degrading the very fishery and landscapes that attracted them, thwarting long-term economic development prospects and reducing biodiversity. Following the emergence of catch-and release recreational fishing, we believe that angling can be legitimately considered a form of ecotourism that contributes positively to conservation, science, and local or regional economic development.⁵

The extent to which angling tourism can be developed in Assynt without having a negative impact on ecosystems, is an important element of this study. Whilst this is a social study and not one that can undertake biodiversity scientific research itself, it is one that can canvass a range of perspectives as well as suggest where further research might be necessary.

1.3.3 Angling Tourism Initiatives in the UK

State supported initiatives around angling tourism have grown in the UK, particularly in Wales, but also in Scotland and some English regions⁶. These include:

- *Fishing Wales*, a partnership between the Environment Agency Wales and Wales Tourist Board which seeks to promote Wales as 'the premiere destination for game, sea and coarse fishing'.
- The promotion of angling within a broader portfolio of 'country sports' by the Country Sports Tourism Group in Scotland, including an initiative to promote wild brown trout angling in Assynt, Sutherland.
- The promotion within English regions of angling tourism that includes work in Northumberland where the angling offer is situated within 'a plethora of wonderful accommodation, restaurants and pubs'; a new angling festival in the Lake District; and the South West of England⁷.

The CSTG project is of interest to this study as it was focused on trout fishing in Assynt. This was based on research by CSTG in 2004 that said the value of country sports in Scotland was around £200m and 67% of the value of game and coarse angling was attributable to visiting anglers⁸.

However, it is also important to note two other studies on angling in Scotland which are pertinent to understanding the broader role it can play in sustainable development.

- One report in 2004⁹ said that expenditure by game and coarse anglers in Scotland in 2004 was calculated to be £131 million per year.
- A more recent study in 2009 estimated there were 125,188 resident sea anglers in Scotland (and an additional 23,445 juveniles), with total expenditure on sea angling estimated to be approximately £140 million per year.

⁵ Zwirn *et al* (2005) *op cit*.

⁶ www.fishing.visitwales.com, www.countrysportscotland.com, www.northumberlandfishing.co.uk

⁷ <http://www.gethooked.co.uk>

⁸ TNS (2004) *Country Sports Tourism In Scotland: Final Report*, Country Sports Tourism Group, October 2004: 2; see also http://www.countrysportscotland.com/news_item.asp?item_id=17

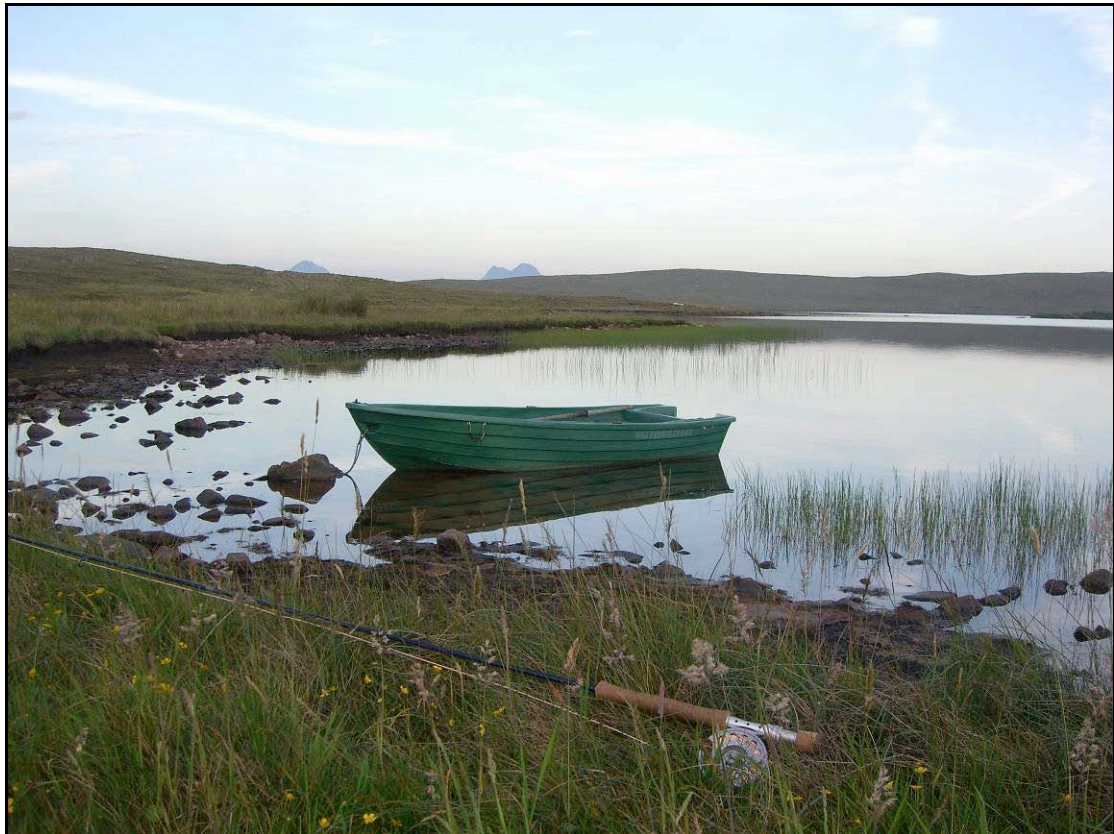
⁹ Radford, A. and Riddington, G. (2004) *The Economic Impact of Game and Coarse Fishing in Scotland*. For SEERAD, November 2004.

1.3.4 Key Questions

Key research questions in relation to angling tourism include:

- The potential roles of angling tourism in rural social and economic development and the potential positive and negative impacts of this
- The often overlooked benefits to visitors in terms of welfare debates; and
- The ways in which questions about angling tourism resonate within wider (global) experiences of development-led tourism:
- Providing evidence of angling's role within the wider social and cultural aspects of rural communities, including more qualitative research about angling cultures and practices;
- Explore ways in which angling can have a positive impact on issues of particular concern for rural communities - education, training, volunteering and employment.

Finally, generating a more participatory approach to research, in which both visiting anglers as well as local inhabitants in rural areas can take part, need to be explored. Experiments in using new technologies have been an important aspect of this research in this respect, especially given the remote and dispersed nature of angling in rural areas and limited research resources. It is to the approach that this project has taken that we now turn.



Loch Cul Fraoich, North Assynt

2. Research Approach and Progress

2.1 Methodology and Approach

We have adopted a multi-method approach to this research combining both qualitative and quantitative methods as well as action research elements in which we have developed new tools (notably online) and will assess their effectiveness in generating data useful for the local communities. This has involved:

- vii) Review of historical literature and documents and wider research literature
- viii) Qualitative interviews with those involved in local angling and community organisations
- ix) Qualitative interviews with anglers
- x) An online questionnaire survey
- xi) A postcode survey of visiting anglers
- xii) An online mapping and data gathering tool

2.2 Overcoming Problems Researching in Remote Rural Area: Using Innovative Web Based Research Tools

Undertaking research with visiting anglers in a remote rural area poses its own methodological problems. In Assynt most anglers spend a considerable proportion of their time in the hills fishing, most will stay in a scattering of self-catering cottages and other properties rather than at a central hotel and most stay only for relatively short periods (a week or fortnight).

Added to this are a lack of internet or mobile coverage in many areas and at most self catering properties and (despite the efforts of local organisations) the almost complete absence of record keeping that one might find at more commercial fisheries - personal or contact details of permit buyers and catch returns in particular.

Whereas some aspects of the research process – interviews with those who organise and own angling locally and with local anglers – can be approached in fairly traditional ways (recorded interviews), research with visiting anglers requires more distinctive and active methods. We did this in a number of ways:

- i) We agreed an approach with angling and community organisations locally in January 2009
- ii) We established a project website – **Assynt Angling Information and Research**, www.assynt.anglingresearch.org.uk – as a portal for the research. The provision of useful information alongside tools by which we could generate feedback and research data allowed us to engage visiting anglers before, during and after their visit.
- iii) The website allowed us to:
 - Post information about the research
 - Host a questionnaire of visiting anglers
 - Develop a map-based web tool (see below) in order to both provide information and generate feedback from anglers about particular angling sites
 - Conduct a postcode survey online and present a ‘Visitors’ Map’ showing where anglers came from to fish in Assynt.
 - Provide a means by which anglers who were willing to be interviewed for the project could contact us.
- iv) The mapping tool in particular is both a means to gather research data as well as an action research tool by which we can test whether the provision of more detailed information on loch fishing (and subsequently sea fishing) improved angling for

visitors. This has received widespread recognition, notably for its innovative use of Ordnance Surveys' OpeSpace map software¹⁰.

v) Due to the relative absence of access to the internet in Assynt itself, we also did three things:

- a) Distributed forms to those selling permits to collect the postcodes of visiting anglers as well as names and email addresses
- b) Distributed information about the research in print format – (1000 leaflets and 50 posters – throughout Assynt to permit sellers, shops, B+Bs, the YHA and hotels. This was supplemented by an article in the local newsletter, Assynt News.
- c) Reached an agreement with Visit Scotland, centre staff and local tourist groups to install a PC in the Lochinver Tourist Centre that allowed visitors to access the website and tools on it.

vi) During the year we also added new features to the site including a historical section to post literature, film and photos relating to angling; and a section developed after consultation with the Assynt Ranger Service whereby anglers could feedback wildlife sightings and also get advice on matters such as rare black throated divers. We will be adding functionality to the website in the coming year in light of ongoing feedback from users and local organisations (2010).

2.3 Responsible Research

It was important that, as a cooperative research body and one undertaking research for community benefit, we aimed to take a responsible approach to our research. This included consultation with local organisations at all stages of the research and agreement with them on the approach being taken.

The provision of information via the website included:

- Providing links to all the organisations with angling rights
- Providing links to the businesses selling permits for angling who were also collecting data for us via postcode and email forms
- Provision of information that would assist organisations locally. For example, placing a PC in the Visitor Centre allowed centre staff to refer people to the information on the site and thus helped reduce their need to explain matters.

The Country Sports Tourism Group initiative to promote trout fishing in the area, included a planned production of a booklet - *Trout Fishing in Assynt: A guide to 30 lochs* by Cathel Macleod, Treasurer of the Assynt Angling Club. However, its planned production had stalled at the time the research began. The booklet was to be a revenue generator for the Assynt Angling Group and as a research team we were anxious that the provision of information via the website did not undermine the validity of the booklet.

The research team cooperated with CSTG and local organisations in the production and publicity for the booklet in a number of ways:

- Helping to facilitate meetings about the booklet's production with CSTG, AAG, Assynt Tourism, Achins bookshop and others.
- Some proof reading and checking of grid references against our data.
- Assisting with its launch in July 2009.
- Withholding detail of the 30 lochs featured in the booklet on our map based tool so as not to devalue the booklet and using the website to direct readers to the booklet for that information, as well as instructions for ordering it (see <http://www.assynt.anglingresearch.org.uk/?q=book>)

¹⁰ 'New Users Harness the Power of OpenSpace'

<http://www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/oswebsite/media/news/2009/october/osopenspace.html>

- Assisting to a small degree with the booklet's finance by paying for advertising for the research website on the back cover (which will also help publicise the research site in the future).

We have also been keen to embrace suggestions from local people and organisations in the ongoing development of the site and its features. This has included:

- Adding a sea fishing map tool (which will also generate research data on sea angling) http://www.assynt.anglingresearch.org.uk/?q=mapstraction_sea
- Working with the Assynt Ranger Service to include a Wildlife Section (<http://www.assynt.anglingresearch.org.uk/?q=wildlife>) where anglers could report wildlife sightings and posting their advice leaflet on advice for anglers near nesting sites for black throated divers.

2.4 Progress and Research Timeline

Announcement of Funding	October 2008
Initial Meeting with Assynt Crofters' Trust, Assynt Angling Group, Assynt Foundation	January 2009
Interviews with Angling Organisations in Assynt	April - September 2009
Agreement on PC in Visitor Centre	May 2009
Development of website	March - August 2009
Distribution of postcode survey forms and initial publicity	May 2009
Soft launch of website	June 2009
Online Questionnaire	June - October 2009
Installation of PC in Visitor Centre	June 2009
Installation of display in Visitor Centre	June 2009
Launch of booklet and Website	July 2009
Collation of historical material	July - August 2009
Qualitative Interviews with Anglers	July -November 2009
Write up Interim Report	November 2009

2.5 Publicising Research

In order to engage anglers with the web based tools and the research project in general we:

- Distributed 100 leaflets and 50 posters in Assynt
- Issued a press release concerning the research and organised a launch for the website in conjunction with the *Trout Fishing in Assynt* booklet.
- Published an article in *Assynt News*
- Reached an agreement with the Fly Forums website, one of the largest online forums for anglers, to have a section on research based in Assynt.
- Developed a PR plan for the publicising the refined website in 2010.

In Section 5 we outline some of the ongoing developments and approaches for the research for 2010 and 2011.

3. Assynt and The Organisation of Angling

3.1 Population

Assynt is an area of 475km² (187 square miles¹¹) in Sutherland in North West Scotland. Lying north of the Coigach area, its principal town is the port of Lochinver and comprises a series of small hamlets or townships. Its population at the 2001 census was 953, a decline of nearly 10% from 1991 (1,047)¹².

	Scotland	Highland	Assynt
Population	5,062,011	208,914	953
Male	2,432,296	102,297	510
Female	2,629,715	106,617	489
1991 pop	4,998,567	203,803	1,047
% change since 1991	1.3	2.4	- 9.9
		<i>Scottish</i>	<i>NW Sutherland</i>
Not born in Scotland	12.9	17.8	30.5
Economically active (% of 16-74)	65.0	68.1	66.9
Self employed (% of 16-74)	6.6	10.2	18.9
Limiting long term illness	20.3	18.4	19.7

Assynt is a significant tourist destination, and whilst this is a major economic driver for the area, like many rural areas it has suffered from an increase in holiday housing and second home ownership, creating a lack of opportunities and housing especially for local people, especially young people.

A huge amount of housing is second homes - 36.1% compared to a national average of 1.3% and in some parts this is particularly pronounced – Kirsty Macleod of the Assynt Crofters Trust reported that in the townships of Stoer and Clachtoll holiday and second homes accounted for over 50% of all properties.

	Scotland	Highland	Assynt
No of Households	2,192,246	89,533	466
% of households that are:			
Owner occupied	62.6	65.7	65.0
Council/Scottish Homes	23.5	18.0	12.0
Housing Association	5.9	3.6	5.2
Private rental	6.8	8.5	8.8
Other/rent free	1.2	4.2	8.8
% of Housing stock			
Second homes	1.3	6.2	36.1
Vacant	3.8	4.0	2.4

Table showing household data from the 2001 Census

66.9% of the population are economically active, which is slightly over the national average for Scotland of 65%, and has a much higher proportion of self employment (18.8% compared to 6.6% nationally). This in part reflects the amount of employment in crofting and in agriculture, with double the national average, and in fishing and fish farming - 10.6% (compared to 0.3% nationally).

¹¹ <http://www.brisc.org.uk/newsletters/newsl68.pdf>

¹² We are extremely grateful to Kirsty Macleod of the Assynt Crofters Trust for the supply of this summary data. [REF KM report]

	Scotland	Highland	Assynt
Employment %			
Agriculture/hunting/forestry	2.1	3.7	4.9
Fishing/fish farming	0.3	1.4	10.6
Mining/quarrying	1.2	1.3	0.8
Manufacturing	13.2	9.1	9.9
Electricity/gas/water supply	1.0	1.0	-
construction	7.5	9.2	7.0
Wholesale/retail/motor vehicle repair	14.4	14.7	11.3
Hotels/catering	5.7	9.3	17.4
Transport/storage/communication	6.7	7.1	5.2
Financial	4.6	2.0	1.3
Real estate/renting/business	11.2	9.9	6.6
Public administration/defence	7.0	6.8	4.4
Education	7.3	6.6	6.4
Health/social work	12.4	12.4	10.0
Other	5.3	5.3	4.4

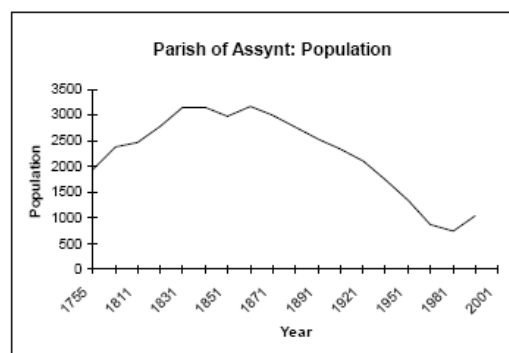
Table showing employment data from the 2001 Census

3.2 Land Ownership and Development

Historically Assynt, like much of the Highlands, was the subject of inter-clan rivalry and warfare. In the mid-18th century it passed into the hands of the House of Sutherland and it was under the Duke of Sutherland's ownership that, in the first part of the 19th century, it was the subject of well documented and notorious clearances (largely between 1811 and 1823¹³). Families were forcibly removed from the land as much was depopulated of tenant farmers to make way for sheep farming. The effects of the clearances, which blighted much of the Highlands, was dramatic, forcing many people to leave the area altogether and those that remained to find a living near the coast through crofting and fishing.

In the parish of Assynt some fifty townships were cleared and coastal settlements overcrowded by the relocation of cleared tenants. During the 19th century there were a number of riots or disturbances in reaction to the policy of Clearance.¹⁴

This also contributed to a depopulation of the area as the image below illustrates¹⁵:



Most of Assynt - known as the Assynt Estate - was bought by the Vestey family in 1935 who owned it virtually in its entirety until 1989, when it sold the northern part of the estate (and since the Gelncanisp and Drumrunie Estate).

¹³ <http://www.caledonia.org.uk/socialland/assynt.htm>

¹⁴ *North Assynt Area Profile*, p.4

<http://www.cvsnorth.co.uk/Downloads/Area%20profiles/AssyntAreaProfile.pdf>

¹⁵ *Ibid*: p7. Source: West Highland Survey and Highland Council Statistics

Whilst there is not space to discuss this in detail here the historical background is important to understanding angling in Assynt in a number of respects:

- Although there is a long history of angling in Assynt – accounts date back to at least the mid-19th century - the Vestey family in particular developed the area as a sporting estate, based on deer hunting and angling.
- Its history created an area in which much of the land is unoccupied by people, where historically it had been, and where land use was focused on sheep farming, hunting and fishing, but also included other activities such as cattle farming, peat cutting and some arable farming.
- The description of it as a ‘wilderness’ by many anglers (and others) who visit the area needs to be seen within this historical context.

The landmark land buy-out of by crofters on the North Assynt estate in 1993 has led more general trends in Scotland toward communal ownership of land, including land reform laws. Within the district there are large areas under different forms of collective land ownership – the Assynt Crofters’ Trust and the Assynt Foundation – as well as a smaller collective holdings with the Culag Community Woodland Trust and John Muir Trust. These exist alongside the more traditional large single ownership landlord, the remaining Assynt Estate owned by the Vestey family.

3.2.1 The Assynt Crofters Trust

The Assynt Crofters’ Trust (ACT) is a cooperative organisation of crofters that owns the North Assynt Estate consisting of 21,000 acres. It includes the Townships of Torbreck, Achmelvich (part), Clachtoll, Stoer, Balchladich, Clashmore/Raffin, Culkein Stoer, Achnacharnin, Clashnessie, Culkein Drumbeg, Drumbeg and Nedd.

The ACT made history when, in February 1993, they won a long battle to buy the land their families had worked for generations, undertaking the first ever crofters’ buy-out. The events around this are described in detail in the book, *We Have Won the Land*¹⁶, and attracted international media attention and widespread public support. The buy-out followed the sale of the north area of Assynt in 1989 by the Vestey family who had owned it as part of its wider ownership of Assynt. Having passed to a Swedish speculator who then went into liquidation, the estate was in danger of being broken up in the early 1990s, with ‘no concern being shown for the impact of this process on the crafting activity of the inhabitants.’

Crofters raised half of the required £300,000 by themselves and in public donations, and the remaining amount from the Sutherland District Council and Highland Regional Council. The ACT established itself as a democratic community organisation and the 13 townships elect its directors that hold board meetings every two months which are open to the public. It has an executive of chairman, Vice Chairman, Secretary and Crofting Administrator and about 120 members. It is widely credited with paving the way for community land ownership in Scotland and community land reforms that have followed devolution.

Key developments for the ACT include:

- The Assynt Hydro scheme, which in 2010 is expected to start providing a return on investment made
- The development of Assynt Sport and Game, which includes the sale of angling permits as well as deer stalking.
- The development of small scale affordable housing.

¹⁶ J Macaskill (1999) *We Have Won the Land: The Story of the Purchase by the Assynt Crofters’ Trust of the North Lochinver Estate*, Acair Ltd.

- The planned development of an Office and Information centre in Stoer, scheduled for 2010.
- In 2009, the ACT reported a balance in its accounts of £100,000.

3.2.2 The Assynt Foundation

The Assynt Foundation (AF) is a charitable body, limited by guarantee and was established following a community land buy-out of the 44,000 acre Glencanisp and Drumrunie Estates, from the Vestey family in June 2005 under the provisions of the 2003 Scottish Land Reform Act. The AF has a membership of over 260, roughly a quarter of the population of Assynt, in which members pay a one off fee for life membership. It is a democratic body in that its directors are elected and has two principal staff, Mark Lazzeri, Development Manager, and Adam Pellant, Project Officer.

With recognised local social issues of an ageing population, a lack of affordable housing and the need for more sustainable employment, the AF's principal aim are to help ensure sustainability of the community through creation of a more diverse economy and employment, creating more business opportunities and encouraging more young people to stay and live in the area.

It has two major development projects:

- i) The renovation of the Glencanisp Lodge, a large, listed former hunting lodge which has attracted significant grant income and will provide a source of income to the estate (due to reopen in 2010).
- ii) Exploration of renewable energy sources.

Other initiatives include: a ceramic studio, a music studio, potential incubation units for small businesses, promoting local food production and start up help for businesses. Its rights to angling come under the joint selling of the Assynt Angling Group and it is also exploring ways in which it might develop its angling offer further as well as other 'eco-tourism' possibilities¹⁷.

3.2.3 Assynt Estate

Assynt Estate is still owned by the Vestey family and comprises much of the rest of Assynt, around 40,000 acres. Its trout fishing comes under the auspices of the Assynt Angling Association and it retains the rights to salmon fishing on the Rivers Inver and Kirkaig, which are sold through the Inverlodge Hotel in Lochinver which it also owns. We are hope to discuss this research with the Assynt Estate in early 2010 although we have interviewed the Inverlodge Hotel Manager, Nick Gorton, who manage its fishing.

3.2.4 Culag Community Woodland Trust

Culag Community Woodland Trust (CCWT) was formed in 1995 to manage the Culag Wood, near Lochinver, in an agreement with Highland Council and Assynt Estates, under a 50 year lease. In 2000 it bought the 3,000 acre Little Assynt Estate, which is adjacent to Loch Assynt.

Its aims include:

- Employment and training of local people
- Improvements in well-being for locals and visitors

¹⁷ *The Observer*, Sunday 14 June 2009

- Encouraging education about the area's natural environments¹⁸

It has a commercial arm, Culag Enterprises, formed in 2008 and has undertaken renovation work on a trail on the Little Assynt estate, the church at Inchnadamph, and pathways on the Quinag mountain (owned by the John Muir Trust). The CCWT says that:

'This is providing sustainable local employment with opportunities to learn new land-based skills to recognised national standards. The long term aim of this innovative initial project will be that the company will go on to win other land-based contracts for a range of clients.'¹⁹

3.2.5 John Muir Trust – Quinag

The John Muir trust owns the 8,400 acres which contains the Quinag mountain, to the north west of Assynt²⁰. This was bought in 2005 from the Filmer-Sankey family with the help of an anonymous donation of £500,000 towards the purchase price of £600,000. The JMT is a member of the Assynt Foundation with whom it shares ownership of the northern part of Loch Assynt. The estate also includes a number of lochs and lochans. The Trust says its aims are the 'protection of this stunning landscape' and that it allows them to 'oversee a land management strategy for the Assynt area'²¹.

This varied structure of land ownership provides a fairly unique basis on which to investigate the place of angling within a rural community, including a variety of communal and trust ownership structures as well as more traditional landowning. It is now necessary to describe the organisation of angling in Assynt within that context, and the key objectives of organisations responsible for angling with regard to its development.

3.3 The Organisation of Freshwater Angling in Assynt

We have conducted initial interviews in relation to understanding more fully the organisation and aims of those involved in freshwater angling in Assynt, with the following:

- Kirsty Macleod, Administration (Sport and Game) Assynt Crofters' Trust
- Ian Colston, Secretary, Assynt Crofters' Trust
- Ray Mackay, Director (Sport and Game), Assynt Crofters' Trust
- Allan Macrae, Chair, Assynt Crofters' Trust
- Cathel Macleod, Treasurer, Assynt Angling Club
- Scott Taylor, Secretary, Assynt Angling Club
- Peter Hendrick, Secretary, Assynt Angling Company
- Mark Lazzeri, Development Manager, Assynt Foundation
- Adam Pellant, Project Officer, Assynt Foundation
- Nick Gorton, Manager, Inverlodge Hotel
- Shona Marshall West Highlands Fisheries Trust
- Roger Glover, Chair, Assynt Tourism
- Andy Summers, Assynt Ranger Service
- Gordon Sleight, Historic Assynt

¹⁸ <http://www.culagwoods.org.uk/>

¹⁹ <http://www.culagwoods.org.uk/page16.html>

²⁰ <http://www.jmt.org/cuineag-quinag-estate.asp>

²¹ <http://www.jmt.org/cuineag-quinag-estate.asp>

We have not, to date, interviewed representatives of the Assynt Estate, Culag Community Woodland Trust and John Muir Trust although we intend to do this as soon as practicable in 2010.

3.3.1 Historical Background

Assynt has been described as one of Europe's premier wild brown trout fisheries, with hundreds of lochs and lochans containing wild brown trout. It also has a number of rivers that contain salmon and sea trout, notably the Inver, Kirkaig, Culag and Manse loch and burn system.

Fishing for food has been part of the history of Assynt, as elsewhere, for many centuries and this has embraced sea as well as freshwater fishing. Assynt was the subject of John Home's mapping survey of the farms of Assynt in 1774 and this includes details several of the principal lochs in the area²².

However, recreational fishing, or angling, also dates back centuries. There are several accounts from the mid-late 19th century onwards that describe the experiences of visiting anglers:

- Tom Stoddart (1847) *The Anglers Companion to the Rivers and Lochs of Scotland*
- J Hicks (1855) *Wandering by the Lochs and Streams of Assynt* - which describes part of the experience as 'wet, boggy and extremely irksome'.
- T Satchell (1880) *The Angler's Note Book And Naturalist's Record*
- Andrew Lang (1895) *Angling Sketches* which reflects an experience many today would share

The best lochs for yellow trout are decidedly those of Sutherland. There are no railways, and there are two hundred lochs and more in the Parish of Assynt. There, in June, the angler who is a good pedestrian may actually enjoy solitude, sometimes.

From that date there are regular accounts of visiting and angling in Assynt that mark it out as a distinctive angling destination. It is notable that on the whole these accounts relate the experiences of angling visitors, rather than Assynt residents, but they emphasise the long history of angling as an attraction for visitors to the area.

- RC Bridget (1926) *Tight Lines: Angling Sketches*, London: Herbert Jenkins (Chapter: 'In Inverpolly Forest')
- Wm Robertson (1933) *The Angling Resorts of Scotland*, Edinburgh: William Hodge and Company
- J Inglis Kerr (1926) *Scotland for the Motorist*, London: AA
- R Macdonald Robertson (1935) *In Scotland with A Fishing Rod*, London: Herbert Jenkins
- R Macdonald Robertson (1936) *Angling in Wildest Scotland*, London: Herbert Jenkins
- V Carron Wellington (1952) *The Adventures of a Sporting Angler*, London: Oliver and Boyd
- John Beer (2003) *The Trout and I* London: Aurum Press (Chapter – 'Posted to the Highlands')
- Stan Headley (2008) *The Loch Fisher's Bible* Hale
- Bruce Sandison (2009) *Angling Lines: Fishing in Scotland* Black and White Publishing

²² You can access all the maps online at: <http://www.nls.uk/maps/estates/assynt/index.html>

Extract from T Satchell (1880) *The Angler's Note Book And Naturalist's Record*

Assynt contains salmon, sea- trout, char and S, ferox, very fine specimens of the last being got by trolling. The trout in Loch Awe do not generally exceed herring size, but as a free rising loch he knows of no equal in the county. Fifty pounds of trout have been taken by one rod in a day. The trout in Mulach Corrie are " highly esteemed for their fatness and flavour, the result of feeding upon the fresh-water shrimp, which is said to abound in the loch. Thirteen miles from Inchnadamph and forty-six from Lairg is Loch Inver, where there is a large and commodious hotel. The hotel keeper lets two rods on the river at los. Each per day to parties residing at his house. The Inver is a late river, but in June and July affords excellent angling during a wet season. The whole country hereabouts is honey-combed with lochs " in many of which a fly has never been cast." Upwards of fifty lochs all abounding in trout and free to the public, are within a four mile radius of the village of Loch Inver.

As part of our research we have begun compiling a bibliography of historical literature, photographs and film relating to angling in Assynt. Where possible we are making this publicly available through the website and this includes Hicks' book as well as footage of anglers and salmon net fishermen in the 1950s²³.

Accounts of angling are also found in local guides and pamphlets, including for instance:

- Assynt Angling Club leaflet from the late 1950s advertising permits for visitors
- *Guide to Lochinver and Assynt* from the late 1950s
- *Guide to Sea Angling in Scotland*, 1964

There are also a range of angling records dating back to the 19th century. These include records from the Inchnadamph Hotel and Altnacealgach Inn. We are indebted to George Morrison (whose family used to own the Inchnadamph) for kindly giving us access to these. We will be making more images of these available via the website in early 2010.

1903.										
Date	By whom Caught	Name of Water	Species		Gross		Net		Tare	
			No.	Weight Lbs.	No.	Lbs.	No.	Lbs.	No.	Lbs.
ABSTRACT N°1										
		May yielded	-	-	-	-	-	-	466	1115
		June "	-	-	-	4	18	372	1721	
		July "	-	-	-	1	2 1/2	475	1040	
		August "	-	-	-	3	12 1/2	3475	1260	
		September "	-	-	-	1	2 1/2	463	246	
		Total for season	-	-	-	9	35 1/2	6606	2872	
ABSTRACT N°2										
		Loch Eama yielded	-	-	-	5	16 1/2	494	772	
		Loch Urquill "	-	-	-	-	-	485	1036	
		Loch Veigie "	-	-	-	4	19 1/2	3192	810	
		Loch Borlan "	-	-	-	-	-	124	665	
		Other waters	-	-	-	-	-	22	323	
		Total for season	-	-	-	9	35 1/2	6606	2872	
RETROSPECT.										
		Total Fish - all kinds	15	19 1/2	Aggregating	5	2	8	18 1/2	
1899		" " " "	15	19 1/2	"	2	1	0	12 1/2	
1901		" " " "	4	4 9/16	"	2	1	3	12 1/2	
1902		" " " "	13	7 1/2	"	2	0	3	10	
1903		" " " "	16	6 1/2	"	2	3	0	2 1/2	
		Total for the past five years	74	94 1/4	"	10	10	0	62 1/2	

Image of Angling Record from Altnacealgach Inn 1903

Relevant scientific research includes a Bathymetric study of Loch Assynt as part of a wider investigation into lochs in Scotland from the early 20th century as well as a more recent study of brown trout.

²³ http://www.assynt.anglingresearch.org.uk/?q=angling_history

- John Murray (1904) *Map of Loch Assynt and Loch Leitir Easaich (Inver Basin) from the Bathymetrical Survey of the Freshwater Lochs of Scotland*
- A B Murray (1986) *Assynt Brown Trout Project 1986*, Assynt Estates and Highland and Islands Development Board

However, it is to the current organisation of angling that we now turn.

3.3.2 Assynt Crofters' Trust

The ACT owns the rights to fish on around 200 lochs in North Assynt as well as the 'Manse system' which has runs of sea trout. As with the rest of Assynt, the fishing is enormously varied, including lochs of considerable size (e.g. Loch Poll) to the smallest of hill lochans. Accessibility ranges from the very easy roadside lochs (e.g. Maiden Loch) to lochs requiring several hours walking over rough terrain.

Permits are sold at a range of outlets in the area and those selling permits take 10% of the cost of sale. Local people and children (under 16) fish for free, and permit charges for visitors are:

- Day (£5); Week (£25); Season (£45)

A number of the lochs have boats, which are hired at £10 per day, including:

- | | |
|--------------------|--|
| • Loch a'Bhraighe | • Loch Leathed a'Bhaile Fhoghair (Lexy's Loch) |
| • Loch an Tuirc | • Loch Na Claise |
| • Loch Crocach | • Loch Na Loinne |
| • Loch Cul Fraoich | • The Manse Loch |
| • Loch Drumbeg | |

Income

Kirsty Macleod reported that angling is of key strategic importance to the ACT as it is the single largest source of external income (i.e. excluding rentals) to the Trust. Whilst stalking has a larger turnover, the cost of servicing deer shooting means that angling is a larger net generator. In 2008 angling permit sales brought in around £5,000 to the Trust and initial indications suggested that this would increase for 2009. Income from angling is used 'for the benefit of the trust and the crafting community as a whole' (Kirsty Macleod) and helps support the sustainability of the trust as an organisation whose mission is:

'To manage the Estate in such a way as to conserve and advance the social and economic livelihood of the communities, and to foster, preserve and improve the natural environment.'

It should also be noted that angling income has wider community benefits, notably as a key driver for tourism in Assynt. The ACT estimated that in 2006 around 800 bed nights were due to angling visitors although it was difficult to quantify.

However, although in financial terms there is a considerable net income (after permit vendors' stakes and advertising) there is considerable volunteer input in maintaining angling, which is not costed. Ray Mackay is the ACT's Director responsible for angling and oversees the checking and maintenance of boats, which have to be brought in from lochs every October and then taken out again in March. It was recognised both in 2006 and in 2009 that this burden required additional help alongside the job of responding to email inquiries and major capital work, including the voluntary renewal of the path to Loch Crocach.

The huge input of voluntary labour is a common feature of the maintenance of angling in Assynt. Indeed, the Trust estimates that across all its work it includes 'an average of 4,800 hours of voluntary time... committed each year: equivalent to 2 full-time jobs.'²⁴

Angling Development

Angling income had declined from 2002 to 2004 which was put down 'partly due to the ageing of longstanding, regular visitors and the limited facilities available', but began to increase again from 2005. Much of the increase in revenue was due to the new impetus on angling outlined in the ACT's *Sport and Game Development Plan 2006* which included an increase in the number of permit vendors, increased marketing, a new website specifically for Sport and Game (<http://www.sportingassynt.co.uk/>), new information leaflets and the purchase of some new boats. This fitted within a broader strategy which says that the ACT:

'is constantly looking at possibilities for generating income from its assets, which do not involve a negative impact on either its people or the landscape.'

This is particularly pertinent for angling in such an environment, as the *Development Plan* stated:

'part of the attraction of fishing in North Assynt is the unspoilt landscape and its "wildness". Efforts should be concentrated on increased marketing and adding facilities in such a way as to maintain the wildness of the place, to attract new anglers – particularly younger ones.'

The issue of 'wilderness' is a problematic one – especially given the human history of the area - and a theme the research will return to, but the remote nature of angling in Assynt, the fact that many anglers do not meet anyone else whilst out fishing and the relative absence of people or roads near a majority of the lochs are all key attractions for visiting anglers.

As part of this research we have discussed with ACT representatives how the research might support ongoing angling development aims. Among a range of suggestions the following have been highlighted:

- Better knowledge about who comes to fish in Assynt
- Where anglers come from
- How long they stay
- How much they spend
- Feedback on the angling experience
- Information on what is being caught (catch returns).

It is hoped that this *Interim Report* provides *some* of the initial feedback on *some* of these issues although we seek to develop this further in the coming year of the research.

It should be noted in relation to angling development that the ACT did not take part in two initiatives that were adopted by other angling organisations. These are:

- The ACT chose to not be part of the Brown Trout Protection Order that covers the rest of Assynt (and north west coast)
- It also chose not to participate in the Country Sports Tourism Group work.

Ray Mackay said that this 'reflects a more 'laissez faire' attitude to angling development that the ACT, and a 'different approach' it has in comparison to other

²⁴ Assynt Crofters Trust (2006) *Sport and Game Development Plan 2006*: 5

providers. In part this reflects a desire to remain outside of some more formal frameworks and to 'not act like previous landlords' in placing too many restrictions (or in the case of a Protection Order, legal requirements) on anglers. 'The motto,' said Kirsty Macleod, 'is "keep it wild"'.

Allan Macrae, the ACT chair argued forcibly that the ACT didn't want to be imposing a legal requirement on anglers to buy a permit – and that it wasn't necessary anyway as almost all visitors complied with the request to have one. Protection Orders were, he said, 'brought in by the landlord system. We don't want that culture. We don't want to criminalise people for going fishing and the vast majority are very happy to pay for a permit and put something back in. Even Vestey didn't stop people trout fishing.'

This reflects a philosophy that sees the land as a resource that is to be utilised for the benefit of local people, without harming the delicate ecology and unique selling point it has for anglers. 'We don't want coach loads of anglers coming up here, but we do want more people to enjoy what is on offer,' says Allan Macrae. This is a balance familiar to a range of ecotourism studies and initiatives.

Despite not participating in the Protection Order, the importance of maintaining the uniqueness of the angling offer is not ignored or underestimated by the Trust. The ACT is developing a new office and information centre in Stoer and wishes to increase information to anglers as part of this development, something that we hope to be able to support through the research project. It is also exploring options to take up its right of having two boats on Loch Assynt which was part of the original buy-out agreement that has never been enacted. This would add boat fishing on one of Assynt's premier lochs, with runs of sea trout and salmon, to its portfolio. The ACT is also keen to explore how angling, as well as the wider sporting offer, can be developed to help young people in the area: 'employment is a big problem - young people need a future' (Allan Macrae).



ACT Lochan near Clashnessie

3.3.3 Assynt Angling Association/Assynt Angling Group (AAG)

The Assynt Angling Association is made up of the Assynt Angling Club and the Assynt Estate together with other organisations and landowners more widely known by the trading/marketing name of the Assynt Angling Group (AAG). It is a 'unique partnership of local anglers and local landowners who have come together in order to market and sell the rights to wild brown trout, salmon and sea trout angling'.

It includes a huge array of lochs including famous large lochs such as Assynt, Cam, Veyatie and Fionn as well as literally hundreds of others ranging from the very small remote mountain lochs to limestone based 'corrie' lochs above Inchnadamph.

Several of their lochs have salmon and sea trout but the majority contain only wild brown trout.

The organisations involved with the AAG are:

- Assynt Angling Club
- Assynt Foundation
- Assynt Estate
- Culag Community Woodlands Trust (Little Assynt lochs)

AS with the ACT, permit sellers take a small percentage of sales. Covering a huge area, the AAG fishing is divided into three zones - East, West and South – and permits are sold on the following basis:

- Daily Permit: £5 Single Zone only
- Weekly: £25 Single Zone only
- Weekly: £30 Roving (All Zones)
- Season: (Bank only) £50 Roving (All Zones)
- Season: £100 - Bank and Boat Inclusive (All Zones)

The formation of the Assynt Angling Group has allowed an improvement in the provision of boats in the area with boats available on the following lochs:

- Cam Loch
- Fionn Loch
- Loch a Choin (The Dog Loch)
- Loch a Ghlinnen
- Loch Ailsh
- Loch an Arbhair
- Loch an Leothaid
- Loch an Ruighean
- Loch Assynt
- Loch Awe
- Loch Bad an Sluic
- Loch Bad na Murichinn
- Loch Bad nan Aighean
- Loch Beannach
- Loch Culag (The School Loch)
- Loch Druim Suardalain (The Glen Loch)
- Loch Feith an Leothaid
- Loch Leitir Easidh
- Loch na h-Innse Fraoich
- Loch Veyatie

Boat permits are sold by Peter Hendrick (secretary) and the Altnacealgach Inn. It is expected that in 2010 this will change, with the Altnecelagach no longer selling boat permits, this responsibility to be taken over by the Inchnadamh Hotel.

Income

The Assynt Angling Association organises the sales and advertising of permits through its outlets and distributes income when the cost of boats, engines, boat maintenance, and 10% of sales for permit vendors is subtracted. Income in 2008 was just under £7,000 from around 1300 anglers and in 2009 this had increased to just under £8000 from 1400 anglers in part reflecting increased numbers of tourist visitors in 2009.

Due to the fact that the AAG is a grouping including other organisations it is important to outline the role that income from angling plays for those bodies.

Assynt Angling Club

The Assynt Angling Club has existed since at least the 1950s and historically was given access to around 30 lochs on the Vestey's estate for trout fishing. It is a local growing membership organisation that now has over 150 members. Membership costs just £5 a year and this gives them access to all the fishing organised under the Assynt Angling Association, for which it does work such as maintenance of boats. To qualify as a member you have to live in the Assynt area.

In an agreement with the Assynt Estate, members also get access to some salmon fishing on the Rivers Inver and Kirkaig, which is distributed via a raffle system. The club also has the right to sell permits to fishing in the Inver estuary, below the bridge at Lochinver. These are sold at the Lochinver Post office to visitors at £10 a day

Scott Taylor is the Club's secretary and described that along with helping with the organisation of fishing in the area, the club also organise a range of activities for local people. Notable in this is the organisation of a series of competitions for young people in the district as a way of engaging them in angling, which is a key focus of the club's work. These were run for 6-10 and 10-16 year olds. The club, he said, had changed tactics in providing prizes of angling equipment rather than cash, to further encourage youngsters to take up angling.

One young angler we spoke to, Kenneth Morrison now 12 years old, won the first competition he entered and won a fishing rod. With this, on his first attempt, he caught a salmon. Progressing quickly from spinning to fly fishing -'it's the most exciting' he says - he not only fishes 'as much as I can' but is also recognised as a skilled angler. In August 2009 he won the junior section of the casting competition at the Assynt Highland Games (which the club run) and recently caught a salmon of 12lbs - 'his age in weight'.

Scott Taylor says that there is an age between 14 and 16 that they hope to address, although this reflects trends in sports participation elsewhere. As with the ACT, the amount of voluntary effort that the club puts into the organisation and maintenance of angling in Assynt needs to be acknowledged - both as a demonstration of the community effort that supports angling, but also in any assessment of benefits and cost.



A beautiful wild brown trout from an AAG loch (returned)

The Assynt Foundation

Angling is a source of income to the Assynt Foundation and helps support its wider aims. These are to:

- Manage community land and associated assets for the benefit of the community and the public in general as an important part of the protection and sustainable development of Scotland's natural environment, where 'sustainable development' means development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs
- Advance the education of the community about its environment, culture and/or history.

Key targets for the Assynt Foundation include community sustainability and combating the loss of jobs (due to downturns in agriculture and fishing) and developing affordable local housing. The AF says that 'by fostering creative and sensitive uses of the estates and their assets, we aim to facilitate the creation of new employment and business opportunities.'

Unlike the ACT, which is a collective of crofters only, the AF involves all members of the Assynt community that wish to join. AF staff told us that angling income is a small proportion of their overall income. However, Adam Pellant described it as 'hugely important for the community as a whole'. This is due to a number of factors:

- It is a key generator of visitors to the area and 'forms part of the package that attracts people to Assynt'
- It is something that engages a large number of local people in the area
- It is one of the factors that encourages people to stay in the area

Mark Lazzeri said that

'Socially, it can be as important as economic issues. Push factors for people to locate in places are not just about jobs but increasingly around activities. It helps people, visitors and locals, become one with the natural environment and gets more people onto the land. Even if fishing produced zero income for us we would still want to increase the numbers of people doing it.'

Mark Lazzeri said that they felt it important that local people continued to go fishing because 'people don't value assets unless they use them' and Adam Pellant added that encouraging angling also relates to wider issues of self sufficiency and sourcing local food.

Culag Community Woodland Trust

The CCWT owns the lochs of Little Assynt, notably Loch Leitir Easaidh. Its work in Little Assynt has included the development of an innovative 4.5km 'all abilities' path to Loch Leiter Easaidh and provision of angling boats suitable for disabled people. This is a development that we will be researching further in the coming year and we will be developing information on accessible lochs as part of the project website.



Fishing on Loch Beannach

Angling Development

The AAA has been involved in two important developments in recent years:

i) The Brown Trout Protection Order for Assynt and Coigach

This was issued under the terms of the Freshwater and Salmon Fisheries (Scotland) Act 1976 and covers all of the lochs marketed under the AAG. It makes it prosecutable to fish without a permit, places obligations on landowners to increase access to angling and imposes fly-only regulations on most of the lochs. The development was actively supported by Neil Campbell, former secretary to the AAA, as well as Cathel Macleod from the AAC, and received support from the West Sutherland Fisheries Trust.

ii) Country Sports Tourism Group for Scotland - Brown Trout Tourism Initiative

Following research that demonstrated the value of angling tourism, the CSTG launched a pilot study to promote angling in the Assynt area. This initiated some training with staff at the Visitor Centre in Lochinver, launched a 'Trout Line' to provide phone information for anglers, launched a website and conducted some press promotion, including a feature article in *Trout and Salmon* in June 2008.

The feeling locally was that this had stalled somewhat by the time our research began. Ian Colston, formerly a member of staff at the centre said that the Trout Line was under used (possibly due to poor advertising). Cathel Macleod reported that plans for an angler guiding service and an 'ask the expert' service had not really materialised. By mid-2009 the website was also not functioning.

The project did receive renewed impetus with the appointment of Ian Robertson as its Development Manager in March 2009. The key development he has overseen has been the publication of the *Trout Fishing in Assynt* booklet referred to in Section 2. Under a revenue sharing deal both the CSTG and the AAA will receive income from sales (for the CSTG after costs) and the local bookshop Achins, is handling distribution. The booklet provides detailed guidance to 30 lochs within the AAA area and the model means that not only is new information and advice advertised to anglers - which has been coordinated with provision of information on our research site - but that local organisations benefit directly from sales.

Research and Development

Those involved in the AAA suggested a number of areas where research could assist in ongoing developments. These included:

- How to increase numbers of anglers on 'the shoulders of the season' – April/May and September
- How to provide better information to anglers
- Exploration of the feasibility of services such as tuition – to get a higher percentage of visitors going fishing – and guiding, although there was some scepticism about this
- Understanding more about what is caught by visitors, following two failed attempts to generate catch returns
- Understanding trends they had identified anecdotally, including a perceived increase in 'catch and release'; increase in people going angling for 'relaxation' and an increase in anglers going 'wild camping'

The AF also identified a number of areas for further development of angling. One was plans they are exploring to help increase the passage of migratory fish beyond Druim Suardalain; another was ways to increase physical activity and health of local people through angling; and they were also interested in ways in which numbers of visitors to the area could be increased through angling, including further provision for anglers of all abilities.

They discussed with us information that would assist them in this work, including:

- Better information on visitors – who, where from and numbers visiting for angling
- Information on spending by anglers
- Better knowledge on the services anglers use and what additional services might be provided (such as guiding, hire of tackle, tuition) that might support local employment
- How angling could be incorporated into wider community development, including education

3.3.4 The Assynt Estate

Outside of trout fishing rights that are marketed with the AAG, the Assynt Estate also holds the rights to salmon and sea trout fishing on the Rivers Inver and Kirkaig. Permits for these are sold via the Inverlodge Hotel and preference is given to hotel residents. Permit costs are:

- Day permit - £100 per rod from end June onwards
- Estuary permit - £10 per rod

Trout fishing was allowed on the rivers until the end of June, after which they were given over to salmon and sea trout. Fishing is single bank and both rivers are divided into a series of beats, with the estuary of the Inver now given over to the Assynt Angling Club.

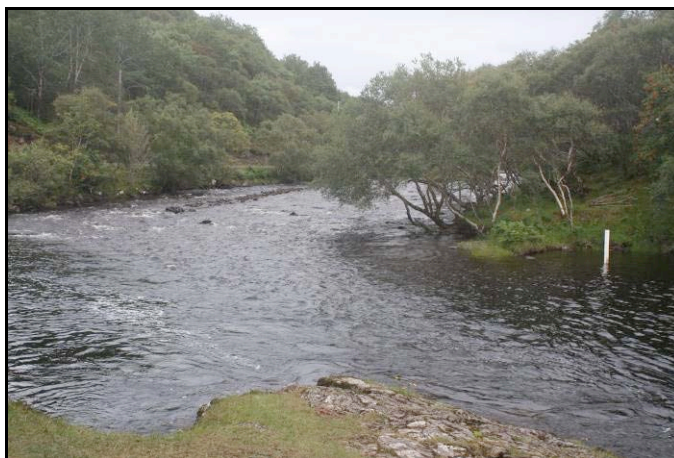
River	Beat	Rods
Inver	Estuary	Assynt Angling Club
	Lower	2/3 rods
	Mid	2 rods
	Upper	2 rods
Kirkaig	Estuary	3 rods
	Lower	2 rods
	Mid	2 rods
	Upper	2 rods

One section of the upper mid Inver is owned privately by another landowner and the estate also has boats on Loch Druim Suardalain, Loch Culag and Loch Awe, all of which have runs of salmon and sea trout. The estate does also allow local access to salmon fishing on the rivers through its allowance of days to the Assynt Angling Club as well as allowing the Club to sell permits for the Inver estuary.

Nick Gorton, hotel manager, told us that from 2010 permits will be sold via CKD Galbraith which will open up access to non-residents. Both are spate rivers and although runs used to occur as early as June it is now July before any significant runs of salmon occur. Like all west coast fisheries, the Inver and Kirkaig have suffered declining numbers although there have been some better years recently (notably 2008). He said that annually from mid-August the fishing is usually completely booked up although there would be scope to increase numbers at other times.

Anglers were ‘a broad spectrum, from executives, solicitors and business men, to people who have retired, to school teachers.’ He estimated that a third of hotel guests were anglers and that in a typical year they would have around 90 anglers, of whom about 10% were female (notably higher than national averages).

We were given access to the angling records at the hotel, which date back over 10 years, and Nick Gorton kindly provided us with postcodes of a sample of anglers, which we have included in our online mapping of angler visitors.



The River Kirkaig

3.3.5 The Lagg Fishery

A more recent addition to the angling portfolio in Assynt has been the Lagg Fishery, two privately owned lochs on the road between Clashnessie and Drumbeg in the northern part of Assynt. These are stocked with rainbow trout 'from 2 to 6lbs' and also have wild brown trout. Much more akin to a normal commercial trout fishery, albeit set in the dramatic landscape of Assynt, it has a fishing hut, vehicular access and permit prices are as follows:

- Half day - 4 hours - 2 fish - £20.00
- 6 hours - 3 fish - £30.00
- Sporting tickets: 4 hours - catch/release with barb-less hooks - £15.00
6 hours - £20.00
- Boat hire £10.00 per person or £15.00 for 2 people

We have not yet spoken to the owners of this fishery but intend to do so in the coming year. It has been reportedly popular with locals as well as visitors wanting 'something different' as well as the better chance of catching larger trout.

3.3.5 Other Related Organisations in Assynt

i) West Sutherland Fisheries Trust

The West Sutherland Fisheries Trust (WSFT) is an important angling-related organisation covering a huge area of 1794.03 km² from the River Hope on the North coast to Achiltibuie in Coigach, south of Assynt. A charitable body, it was established in 1995 by proprietors, fish farmers and hoteliers:

'in order to protect and conserve the fish populations within the area. The trust remit, which covers all native fish species within the area, makes it well placed to lead the coordination and delivery of the required sustainable management and scientific actions informing management in the area.'²⁵

²⁵ WSFT (2008) *Fishery Management Plan for the area covered by the West Sutherland Fisheries Trust, 2008 – 2013*, p2

The Trust is in part recognition that fish populations are both 'and invaluable renewable resource, with rod fisheries, predominantly salmon and trout, representing an important source of revenue for the local economy' as well as an important part of the local ecology. Sustainable use of these resources, it argues, needs to be managed effectively.

Shona Marshall is the manager of the WSFT who reports to a board of trustees. She says that her work focuses on 'the benefit to wild fish, not fisheries' and alongside monitoring of migratory salmonoids, is also investigating eel and char populations. Activities include electro-fishing and sample netting to ascertain fish populations and we observed one sweep netting exercise at the mouth of the Inver in July 2009.



WSFT sample netting on the Inver Estuary July 2009

The WSFT produced a *Fisheries Management Plan* for the area in 2008 and has worked in conjunction with the Protection Order, which, says Shona Marshall, 'has helped provide more control' in areas it covers and had helped in some aspects such as reducing poaching. The trust provide a range of services and activities including:

- Advice to fisheries and managers and work such as native re-stocking projects
- Education work with schools, such as the 'Fishy Tales' project for 4-7 year olds in 7 schools to educate young people about fish ecology; and a 'What's in the Loch' project with Stoer Primary school in Assynt
- More general awareness raising of the ecology of the local area including kick sampling of rivers and burns
- Occasional events for visitors such as electro fishing - on one occasion in the Manse system in Assynt with the Assynt Ranger Service

Shona Marshall said that a perceived declining participation in angling among young people meant that 'people were losing connections to the environment' and that the trust's work was in part to address that so that local people understood its value. She also said that better information in terms of catch returns as well as reporting of catches of stocked sea trout (following a restocking scheme on the Manse system) would help knowledge of fish populations.

ii) Assynt Tourism Group

The Assynt Tourism Group (ATG) is a loose organisation of local businesses and agencies that seeks to promote tourism to the Assynt area. The organisation was started under the guidance of Madeline McPhail and was active in the 1980s and 1990s. It was largely responsible for the establishment of the Visitor Centre in

Lochinver, which was built with both European and Highlands and Islands Enterprise funding.

Roger Glover is its current Chairman and the ATG oversees:

- The Assynt Info website (www.assynt.info) which provides general information on the area as well as advertises services, notably accommodation (for which businesses pay ATG a fee).
- Publications, notably Assynt - Land of rocks and lochs which is a guide to the area republished in 2009.
- Displays, including several in the Visitor Centre
- New tourism initiatives

As with other community organisations in the area, ATG recognises the need to increase opportunities for young people as a priority and sees tourism development as a means to do that. Angling tourism, says Roger Glover, is 'incredibly important' as a driver for visitors to the area, although accurate figures are hard to come by - and would be a useful output from this research. Roger Glover argued that the angling resource was 'underused' and that increasing both the numbers of anglers visiting the area as well as the number of visitors who go angling could be absorbed without creating too much pressure on the resource. He said that capacity for tourism was limited by the amount of available accommodation but that there was capacity 'at the shoulders of the season' in March/April and in September, 'which tends to book up very late on'.

The ATG is involved, through Roger Glover, in a bid to redevelop the Seamans' Mission building in Lochinver. Led by the Assynt Community Association, there is a bid to the Big Lottery Fund's Village SOS scheme, which is ongoing. At the time of writing, the bid - to create a marine life and heritage centre, with bunk house, café and lobster hatchery - has been shortlisted to the last ten nationally (see <http://www.lochinvermission.org.uk/> for further details).

Roger Glover said that research that produced better information about who visited Assynt, including anglers, how numbers might be maintained or increased, and what services would increase the local economic impact of angling for local people, might assist the ATG's work.

iii) Assynt Ranger Service

The Highland Council funds a Ranger Service across the Highlands, including in Assynt (<http://www.assynt.info/page8.html>). Andy Summers is a Senior Ranger for Sutherland operating from the Visitor Centre in Lochinver and manages two seasonal rangers. The service seeks to:

- Promote environmental education, particularly through work with schools
- Undertake interpretation and promote awareness of the countryside
- Work as a service for tourists, a particular focus of work in Assynt

Activities stretch across a wide range of biodiversity-related projects including guided walks based around particular themes such as flora and fauna, geology, archaeology and works with organisations such as WSFT and the Assynt Field club in delivering these. The service also helps to deliver displays and projects within the Visitor Centre in Lochinver and worked closely with this research project in establishing the display and PC access point in the centre.

Andy Summers said that there was a potential greater role for anglers to help contribute to understanding about the natural environment in the area and we have

worked with him to produce a tool for anglers to report wildlife sightings via our project website. Andy also requested that we post information for anglers about approaches to be taken at lochs that have black throated divers on the website and we will be developing further joint initiatives as the research progresses.

One new project of note is work the Ranger Service are undertaking with Culag Community Woodland Trust, Assynt Field Club and West Sutherland Fisheries Trust in Little Assynt. This is to sample, monitor and report biodiversity data such as on invertebrates and chemical make up at their lochs. This project will be very important in understanding more about the biodiversity of the habitats in which angling takes place in Assynt and is one the project seeks to report on. We have also begun discussions about new displays for the Visitor Centre around fly life in Assynt - something visiting anglers have suggested they would like to see - as well as developing a map-based tool for recording wildlife sightings.

iv) Historic Assynt and Assynt Historical Society

There are two organisations that seek to explore and redevelop historic sites in Assynt: Historic Assynt and the Assynt Historical Society (Comunn Eachdraidh Asainte). These have been responsible for the renovation of historic sites such as those near Loch Assynt - Calder House, Ardvreck Castle and the church (or kirk) at Inchnadamph; the ancient mill at Altan na Bradhan; and Clachtoll Broch and Salmon Fisherman's Bothy. Although no work has been undertaken related to angling, this work has been important in publicising Assynt's rich history. We have spoken to Gordon Sleight from Historic Assynt and will be liaising over the ongoing collation and online archiving of historic angling literature and audio-visual material.

v) National Organisations

There are also a range of national organisations that provide a regulatory and development framework for angling in Scotland. These include:

- Scottish Environmental Protection Agency
- Scottish National Heritage
- The Highland Council
- Highland and Islands Enterprise
- The Scottish Fresh Water Fisheries Forum
- Atlantic Salmon Trust
- Then Angling development Board of Scotland and the angling governing bodies

In the coming year we will discuss our research in more detail with these organisations in order to understand how they might support some of the community angling bodies discussed in this section.

3.4 Sea Angling

Although this report and the research to date has focused predominantly on fresh water angling, it also needs to be acknowledged that Assynt is a sea angling centre as well. The majority of this occurs on a casual basis with anglers and holidaymakers fishing from the shore, beaches or rocks along the coast. However, there are also occasional angling competitions from both Lochinver and Achmelvic. Principal species include pollack and coley, plaice, mackerel and codling, as well as occasional sea bass, conger eel and others.

Feedback from tourists at the Visitor Centre and others we have spoken to suggest that there is large demand for both more information as well as services such as boat

angling trips. We have added some information about sea angling to the Assynt Angling Research and Information website and will be developing this further in the coming year. Visitor Centre staff reported to us that information on sea angling would be a significant addition to their information provision.

Those such as Willie Macleod, based in Achmelvic, have been involved in sea angling for many years. Although his business in recent years has been focused on prawn and lobster pot fishing for commercial clients, he reported that in the early 1980s 'sea fishing was phenomenal'. Willie used to regularly take parties of angling clubs on sea fishing trips on his boat but, as with trends elsewhere, fish stocks have declined significantly since the late 1980s. Stocks of haddock in particular have declined dramatically from previous years, which were a major focus for visiting anglers.

Willie along with one or two other local fishermen, still takes occasional parties on his boat and is looking to develop this service further, something that we may be able to assist with in terms of research into the potential market. The cost of fuel, insurance and health and safety legislation and qualifications required has been reported by a number of people in the areas as a barrier to developing more boat sea angling trips as exist further south and around the coast in England.

The relatively short length of the season and the cost of trips - around £250 for a whole day trip - are other barriers so imaginative ways in which this may be handled need to be found. This might include advance booking systems for individuals and couples so that it doesn't require a large parties; provision of rods and tackle for hire to meet tourist demands; as well as diversifying provision to include cruises along the coast and for wildlife viewing (seal colonies, dolphin watching etc.) to make it viable.



Fishing off the rocks in Clachtoll

4. Research With Visiting Anglers - Initial Findings

A key part of research is to find out more information about visiting anglers in Assynt. This has been identified by all the key agencies and angling organisations as data that would be useful for future development and to help generate more benefit for the local community from angling. Outside of the records kept by the Inverlodge Hotel on salmon fishing, it is acknowledged that very little is known beyond anecdotal evidence about visiting anglers, including who they are; where they come from; what they catch; and what their experience is like. This is despite attempts by both the ACT and AAA to generate catch returns: for instance a recent prize draw run by the AAA for those who submitted catch returns, solicited just 6 responses out of about 1300 permit sales.

In the first year of the project we have piloted, in consultation with local groups, a number of ways to generate data to address these questions. It should be noted from the outset that these have been pilots and due to the timing of the project and time taken to get systems and web sites set up, have not been run across the whole fishing season. However, each approach has nonetheless generated interesting data and number of lessons for improving the research in the second year have also been learned.

We have approached this research with visiting anglers in four principal ways:

- i) An online questionnaire
- ii) A postcode survey
- iii) The online OS Map and Comment tool
- iv) Interviews with visiting anglers

This section of the Interim Report summarises initial findings from these research approaches.

4.1 Assynt Angling Questionnaire Survey

Given that there is no existing data on visiting anglers (or 'population') from which we could draw a representative sample, the survey operated as an 'open', non-random method of data collection. The questionnaire was made publicly available through the Assynt Angling Research and Information site in an electronic format, using the online survey platform SurveyMonkey.com.

A website-based questionnaire was considered to be a cost- and time-effective method of making the questionnaire accessible to as wide an audience as possible. Paper copies of the questionnaire were made available on request. Given the non-targeted, open status of the survey, we also conducted a publicity campaign locally and through existing angling websites and forums. The online questionnaire was launched on June 20th 2009 and closed on 10th November 2009.

The response for this survey was limited, at around 50. Although small, for a pilot exercise this is adequate and it represents around 2.5% of visiting anglers. However, it was disappointing that this return was in part due to the fact that visitors using the PC portal in the Visitor Centre in Lochinver - which had been set up precisely so anglers could access information and research tools 'on location' - could not access the survey element from that desktop. Visit Scotland have responsibility for the IT in the centre and despite repeated attempts to address this issue, we were unable to overcome this problem. Addressing this for 2010 is essential to improve survey returns.

A further issue was timing - because it only launched at the end of June, it missed most of the peak period for visiting trout anglers which is from May-June. Again, this will not be an issue for 2010 as we will be able to launch from the start of the fishing season.

4.1.1 Who Fishes in Assynt?

a) Age

The range of anglers we surveyed is shown in Figure 1 and illustrates that Assynt tends to attract middle aged and older anglers. There were no anglers under 25 whilst 27% were between 36 and 45; 37% 46-55; and 19% 56-65.

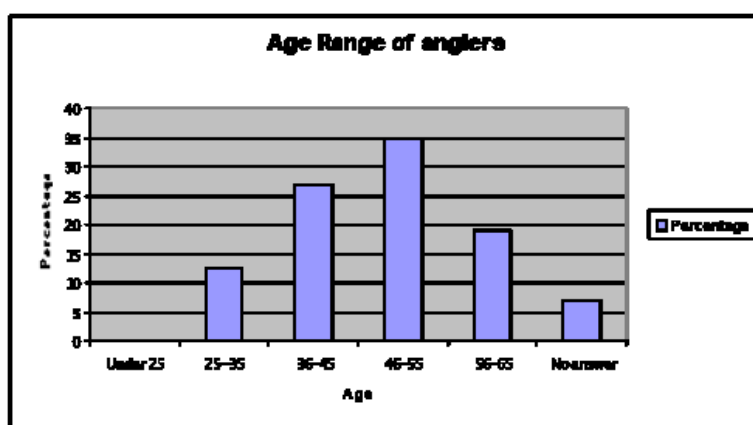


Figure 1- Age Range of Anglers

b) Sex

95.7% of anglers were male and 4.3% female. This roughly reflects national averages which are around 95% male but is less than the 10% females reported by the Inverlodge for salmon fishing.

c) Marital Status

65.2% of those surveyed were married; 13% were 'living with a partner'; 10.9% were divorced or separated; and 10.9% were single. Of these about half, 51.1% had dependent children.

d) Ethnicity

Although a small number of people didn't answer the question on ethnicity, those that did described themselves as white in one way or another. This reflects wider trends in angling in which a very small proportion of anglers are from black and minority ethnic communities.

e) Education, Employment and Income

On the whole anglers in Assynt are very well educated, with 37% holding an undergraduate degree and 28.3% a postgraduate degree as illustrated in Figure 2.

	GCSE O Level or equivalent	GCSE A Level or equivalent	Vocational Training certificate	Undergraduate degree	Postgraduate degree	No educational qualification	Other (please specify)
Qualification	6.5%	10.9%	8.7%	37.0%	28.3%	0.0%	8.7%

Figure 2 - Qualifications of Anglers

Most anglers surveyed were in employment (60%) with 12.5% retired. This is reflected in terms of overall household income, as shown in Figure 3, where there was a reasonable diversity with a concentration between £31-50,000.

Income Range (£)	Percentage (%)
10-20,000	8
21-30,000	21
31-40,000	12.5
41-50,000	12.5
51-60,000	8
61-70,000	8
71-100,000	6.25
101-200,000	6.25
Over 200,000	2

Figure 3 - Household Income

f) Country of Origin

The overwhelming majority of anglers were UK based, with a majority coming from Scotland as shown in the chart below. However, more comprehensive and accurate data on origin is provided from our postcode survey in section 4.2.

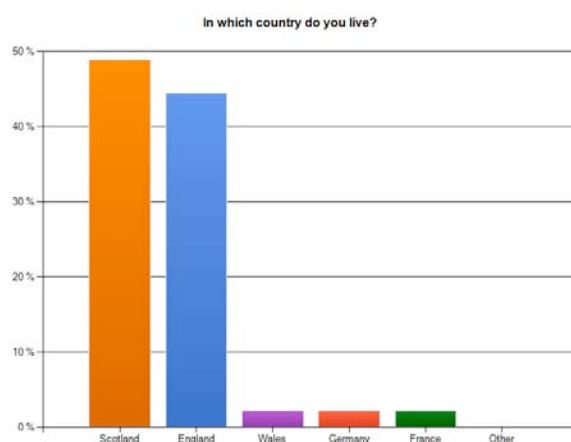


Figure 4 - Country of Origin

4.1.2 Angler's Visits To Assynt

We also asked anglers about their visit to Assynt in terms of things like length of stay and expenditure.

a) Last Visit

The largest percentage of anglers responded to the questionnaire within a month of their stay (25%). The low number, just 5%, who completed whilst staying there reflects the issues problems identified above in terms of accessing the questionnaire at the Visitor Centre as well as issues of accessing online tools in many accommodation centres. This is an area we will seek to address in the coming year although given that most are on holiday whilst there, compiling this information on their return is to be expected.

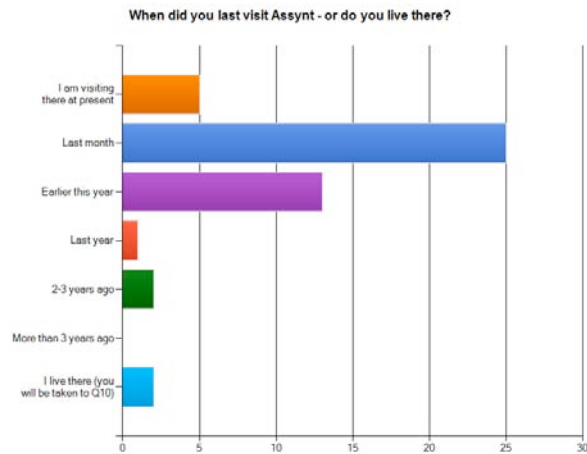


Figure 5: Last Visit

b) Length of Stay

In terms of length of stay, the most popular length was for a week (over 50%), with a fortnight the next most popular and under a week following that.

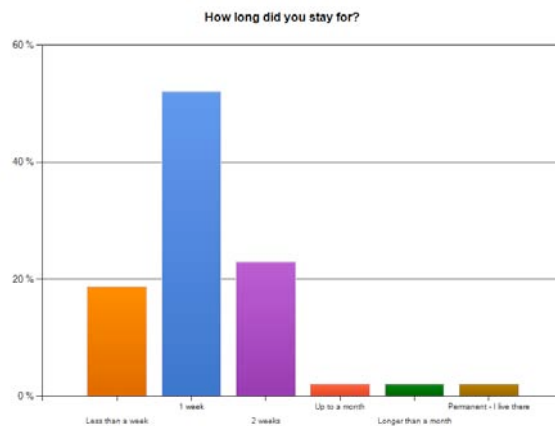


Figure 6: Length of Stay

A majority - over 80% - had visited Assynt before. This reflects much of our anecdotal evidence that we were told by those involved in community organisations in Assynt - as one person said 'people just seem to get attached to the place and come back year after year'. It is also reflected in some of the qualitative comments we had in the questionnaire:

- 'The same things that brought me here in the first place and as usual I shall be back next year.'
- 'It has an enduring charm with its scenery and fishing.'
- 'I come at least twice a year and have done for 15 years.'
- 'Nothing except time and distance will prevent me from coming back to Assynt!'

c) Where They Stayed

As is to be expected given the distribution of accommodation for visitors, self-catering was the most popular type of accommodation (47.8%), although significant percentages are recorded for other types, including camping (15.2%) and hotels (13%).

Where did you stay/are you staying? (Please tick one box).

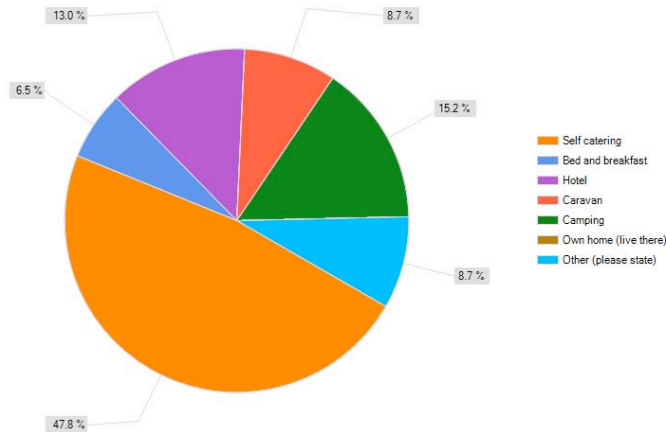


Figure 7: Accommodation Type

d) Economic Impact

We asked anglers what they spent on different items during their stay. Unsurprisingly, accommodation was the highest area of expenditure although significant amounts were also recorded in other areas such as food shopping (£84.26), something that also reflects the dominance of self catering accommodation.

Type of Expenditure	Average Spend
Accommodation	£314.98
Permits	£37.82
Tackle	£8.50
Food Shopping	£87.22
Eating Out	£84.26
Drinking Out	£18.88
Other	£31.22
Total	£582.93

Figure 8: Average Spending

This is a very rough calculation and is based on a limited survey of anglers and figures for the total number of anglers that are not robust. However, it does suggest the economic impact of anglers into the local economy, is significant. Given estimated permit sales of around 1,300 for the AAG and similar for the ACT, and given that a significant percentage of anglers bought permits on both waters, we can very roughly estimate around 2,000 anglers visiting the area per year. On this basis, total spend by anglers per year could be as much as £1,116,000. If the number of anglers was taken to be 1,500, the figure would be £874,500.

However, we would like to post a big ‘health warning’ on these figures. This is a very rough estimate and we will undertake a much more robust and sophisticated calculation of angler spending, based on a larger sample and more accurate data on the number of anglers, in 2010.

f) Motivations

We also asked anglers what would ‘bring them back’ to Assynt. There are high numbers of return visitors anyway, but some of the comments given give a flavour of

what attracts anglers to Assynt, and much of this is to do with factors other than fishing (although that of course features).

Theme	Response
<i>'Coming Back Anyway'</i>	The same things that brought me here in the first place and as usual I shall be back next year It has an enduring charm with its scenery and fishing I come at least twice a year and have done for 15 years
<i>Broad Attraction</i>	Everything about the place The whole experience,... the fishing, the scenery, the weather, the people, the remoteness,
<i>Time</i>	More holiday time and learning to fly fish more effectively. Nothing except time and distance will prevent me from coming back to Assynt!
<i>Fishing</i>	Worlds best wilderness trout fishing The fishing and the hospitality of the locals
<i>Landscape/Scenery</i>	Don't need any incentive - love the area! But fishing, hill walking are all big draws Preserving it as a unique wilderness Hill walking, fishing, pies in Lochinver.
<i>Wilderness/Solitude</i>	The solitude, the ambience. I will be returning next year if not sooner.
<i>Family</i>	Family, scenery, remoteness and fishing Fishing, friends and beauty

Figure 9: Responses to 'What Would Bring You back?'

2.1.3 Anglers' Experiences

The final area of the questionnaire reported on what experience anglers had. This also generated some information on catch returns, something angling groups have said they would like to have, but have struggled to generate. This is an area we will seek to develop further for 2010.

a) Best and Worst Things About Their Visit

We asked anglers to list 3 of the best things and three of the worst things about their visit. For a survey of anglers, some of these are to be expected - fishing, for example, being the most popular 'best thing'. Others will be familiar to anyone who knows the areas - weather and midges featuring as the biggest negatives! Below we present these findings as 'word clouds' which is a way of quantifying qualitative responses to questions such as this. In these images, the size of the word corresponds to the numbers of times and gives a 'snapshot' of people's views.

Theme	Unimportant	Neither Unimportant nor Unimportant	Important	Very Important	Unsure
Improving the quality of printed information about angling in Assynt	9.8%	14.6%	58.5%	14.6%	2.4%
Improving the quality of online information about angling in Assynt	9.5%	14.3%	54.8%	21.4%	0.0%
Improving the quality of fish stocks	29.3%	22.0%	14.6%	26.8%	7.3%
Having more tackle available to buy/ rent	56.1%	22.0%	17.1%	4.9%	0.0%
Reducing the cost	47.6%	38.1%	4.8%	2.4%	7.1%
Increasing the cost	43.9%	41.5%	2.4%	2.4%	9.8%
Having more available accommodation	31.0%	21.4%	38.1%	7.1%	2.4%
Having a 'fishing hotel'	40.5%	16.7%	31.0%	9.5%	2.4%
Having more instructors / guides available	38.1%	28.6%	23.8%	2.4%	7.1%
Having boats on more lochs	26.2%	31.0%	21.4%	16.7%	4.8%
Making more lochs/rivers/coast accessible	30.2%	23.3%	25.6%	14.0%	7.0%
Lower travel costs	25.0%	22.5%	32.5%	17.5%	2.5%

Figure 12: Responses to 'How Could Your Experience Be Improved?'

d) Who Did Anglers Go Fishing With?

We also asked anglers who they went fishing with most often. The largest percentage of anglers said that they went fishing alone (41.3%), with friends (32.6%) and family (28.3%) the next most popular.

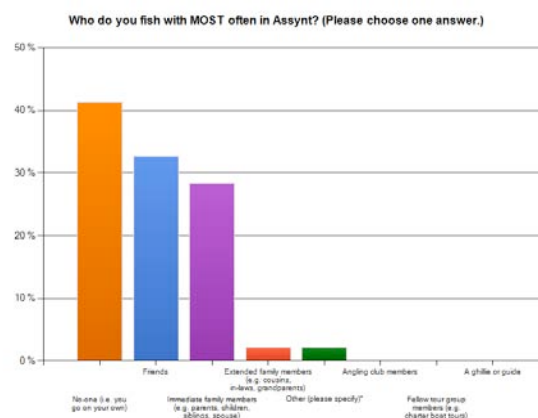


Figure 13: Who Anglers Fished With

e) On Whose Waters Did They Fish?

For freshwater anglers, 62.2% of anglers fished on Assynt Crofters Trust waters and 53.3% on Assynt Angling Group waters in all zones - the percentages also reflecting the fact that many anglers will fish on multiple waters. 8.9% of anglers fished on the Inverlodge waters and 4.4% on Lagg fisheries.

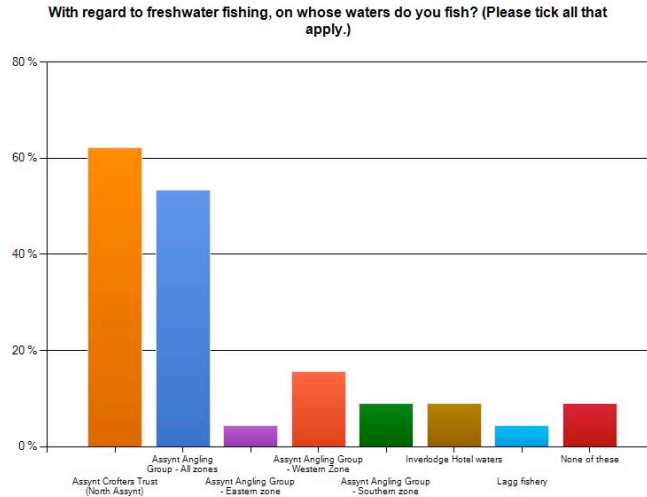


Figure 14: On Whose Waters Did You Fish?

f) Catch Returns

We trialled some ways of collecting data on what anglers caught. This is a complex business because unlike day tickets on commercial trout fisheries people may fish on several lochs or different waters in one day. Whilst some anglers will keep very comprehensive records, many will not, and accounting for all catches is difficult - especially given most completed the survey in retrospect.

However, we also have to recognise the very low base from which we are starting in that both the ACT and AAG receive almost no written catch information at all. As such we asked anglers about:

- The total number of fish caught
- How many were kept
- The different types of fish they caught; and
- The average size fish (although except for brown trout, returns for other species were too low to be meaningful).

The table below shows the total numbers caught by our respondents and the total numbers kept (from 48 anglers). This supports local perceptions that catch and release practices are increasing in the area (about 6% kept), which stands in contrast to some of the practices outlined in more historical accounts.

Type of Fish	Total Number Caught	Total Number Kept
Brown Trout	2738	156
Salmon	1	1
Sea Trout	36	5
Rainbow Trout	15	0
Mackerel	140	86
Pollack / Coley	197	31
Flatfish	5	2
Other (inc 1 sea bass)	30	0

Figure 15: What was caught and what was kept?

In terms of average size our data mostly concerned trout fishing and reflects what is widely known locally, that trout tend to be small, but numerous, although much larger specimens are also caught. This also reflects, very accurately, many of the historical accounts of angling in the area, suggesting there has been little change over time.

Average Size of Fish (ounces)	Number of Respondents
4	4
5	1
6	8
7	3
8	14
10	2
12	5
16	3
20	1
4	4

Figure 16: Average weight of brown trout

We will attempt to refine our approach to catch returns in 2010 to make this more meaningful as this information is identified as important by local angling organisations.

4.2 Questionnaire – Qualitative Comments and Responses

Within the questionnaire were a number of opportunities for anglers to provide other comments about angling in Assynt. We have reviewed these, themed them and provide some examples below. It should be noted that most of those that completed the questionnaire were familiar with Assynt and some had visited many times before, although this was not the case in all examples. Some of these themes were also picked up in qualitative interviews conducted with individual anglers (see section 4.4 below). Also it should be noted that we are not making any comment on the validity or otherwise of these comments, beyond the fact that they suggest areas for further enquiry as the research progresses.

4.2.1 The Promotion of Angling and Eco-Balance

Given the well documented over-fishing in other areas, common problems of promoting eco-based tourism and the balance required to do this successfully, one of the most common additional comments made was around concern that angling - and indeed this research project - might be promoted *too much* in Assynt. This also reflects some of the factors that anglers find most special about angling in Assynt - that you can fish without meeting other people, its 'remoteness' and that it is 'wild'.

These replies come mostly from people familiar with the area, but they raise centrally important issues of balance between promoting angling for local benefit and maintaining the unique natural resource there is (fish and landscape) as well as the experience. Most of these comments were carefully expressed and recognised the need for balance: this will be the one of the areas of focus for the research going forward and we want to represent these thoughts comments here.

- 'I've not answered Q11 as it assumes more people fishing is necessarily good. More people are already fishing and starting to destroy some of the primary qualities of the

landscape... If increasing numbers were well managed, that would be one thing, but just promoting it to more people risks killing the thing itself. I realise there is always a conflict between opening up equitable access and preserving remoteness, but am unsure about the assumptions on which this research is based?’

- ‘I am sure there will be careful consideration of what the promotion of Assynt angling is for. If it is about increasing revenue for local businesses, the ACT etc, which is vital, then perhaps increasing the cost is as effective as increasing the numbers of visitors? Assynt is special because it is still relatively empty. In recent years - this year very particularly - it has started to lose that.’

- ‘Don’t tell too many people about it - it’s been a family secret for ever!’.

- ‘Part of the attraction is spending a day in the hill and not seeing another living soul ! It would be good if the management of this fishery was able to maintain this as much as possible, whilst still increasing visitor numbers. It could be done.’

- ‘Please keep it wild. This is a precious resource and one of the last wildernesses in Europe. In the last few years I have seen the first signs of unacceptable developments that if continued will begin to destroy the point of this area that brings people who care.’

- ‘I love to fish in Assynt but the more attractive and easier you make it, the more likely I am to move on to Uist or Shetland or Southern Ireland for a few years. It’s a dilemma for you folks but if you make it all too accessible your clientele will change and not I fear for the better....finding the optimal position is what you must strive for....not easy!’

- ‘The attraction is the wildness, good value and natural fisheries. Changing any of this would take away what makes the experience of angling here special.’

- ‘Please do not "develop" and "improve" the angling to attract more visitors. The fishing pressure is about right and doing anymore will damage the very point of wild trout fishing in wild places!’

Whilst this clearly suggests a desire to see the locality prosper, it also emphasises the need for care and balance with the factors that attract anglers. However, it should also be noted that in all of the interviews we conducted with angling-related organisations in Assynt, there was unanimity that at present the area was ‘under-fished’ and that there was considerable capacity for increasing angler numbers without seriously affecting either the experience or fish stocks. Indeed this was reflected in one of the comments: ‘Many of the waters I fish seem to fall into the category of "under fished”.’

We are not in a position to comment on this at this stage. However, exploring how better knowledge in relation to this issue might be generated - such as on existing fish stocks in different lochs and best practice in management and the supply of information - is a key issue for the research. It is notable that this concern relates to sense of isolation more than fish stocks:

- ‘Fantastic unspoilt area ! Keep it as it is !!!’

- ‘Walking to fish remote lochs with a feeling that they may only be fished a couple of time a year is a rare joy in this day and age.’



A remote mountain loch - ‘The Green Corrie’

4.2.2 Type of Fish

Several of the anglers reported that they were only interested in fishing for brown trout, signifying that Assynt attracts some specialised anglers given its unique resource of wild brown trout anglers. This was also reflected in some negative comments about the introduction of rainbow trout.

- 'Only interested in wild brown trout'
- 'Wild brown trout is where it's at! But we'd love to see the sea trout return to these waters.'
- 'Rainbow trout should NOT be stocked in the highlands especially in the Assynt area.'
- 'I'm dismayed to see rainbow trout in Assynt waters.'

Several anglers also made negative comments about the existence of salmon farms and their effect on sea trout stocks: 'The trout population can look after themselves if treated with respect. Sea trout and Salmon won't improve until the inappropriate location of salmon farms is addressed!'

4.2.4 Who Anglers Go With?

One key issue for angling based tourism is opportunities for other activities, both for the angler as well as for family and friends they are with.

- 'My wife often walks into the hills with me, but she doesn't fish.'
- 'My wife accompanies me and reads whilst I fish [perfect partner].'
- 'I don't fish with people but meet friends in the bar afterwards.'

4.2.5 Angling Related Services

Respondents made a number of comments about angling-related services, in relation in particular to accommodation and provision of information.

Requests for different kinds of Accommodation

- 'For active, young (and possibly not very wealthy) wilderness trout anglers, accommodation is a difficult issue: in high (trout-fishing) season it definitely feels expensive, but it's also bringing money into the area. I like the idea of a fishing-focused hotel, but not at £100+ per night.'
- 'The demise of Inchnadamph Hotel from a great fishing hotel to a dilapidated embarrassment is a real shame. Drumbeg Hotel would also do well to revive its fishing past; ditto for the Culag.'
- 'More bothy type accommodation, would be good -or reasonable prices.'

Provision of Information

- 'It can be confusing planning fishing on a day to day basis.'
- 'I feel that more information could be supplied by fisheries, estates, etc. to let us all know where they are and what they do. Advertising permit fees and rules on rods /tackle etc.'
- 'Better information on how to access harder to reach lochs might be useful albeit this was part of the enjoyment of the Assynt fishing experience for me.'
- 'Getting to some lochs requires serious effort, and better directions would help. I'll take a GPS next time as I seriously underestimated the terrain. Putting paved paths to many lochs would, however, devalue the wild fishing experience. A non local needs to be warned that the more remote lochs need hill-walking capability. I didn't bother with the boats but should have - I did not even check the costs.'
- 'I think it is essential that parking areas and access points are marked. I wanted to fish a couple of more remote lochs but was unsure where to park that would not obstruct others and also if my starting point was the best access route be it foot or car.'

Permits

- 'Just the one ticket? We've all got cars and like a change from day to day.'

4.2.6 Sea Angling

In common with a wide range of people we spoke to, as well as feedback from those that work at the Visitor Centre in Lochinver, there appears to be a real demand for more information on sea angling, as well as services including boat trips.

- 'The availability of day trips to sea fish would be good for families and kids as it would be good fun and a good intro to fishing as an activity. Fly fishing is demanding for beginners at most times and very demanding up here. Fishing off a boat at sea is pimpsy by comparison.'
- 'Sea Angling does not appear to be promoted.'
- 'Fishing charters for sea fishing very limited or doesn't exist. I travel to Kinlochbervie to get a decent day out on a boat fishing for cod, mackies, ling, eel, etc.. Most people I know, including myself, bring a boat for inshore fishing. Some of us crave doing some deepwater fishing and wreck fishing!'

4.2.7 Catch and Release

A number of people made comments about catch and release and acceptable sizes to keep trout. The comments below reflect these in that people wanted to see larger wild fish returned and more guidance on which lochs it was acceptable to keep fish from.

- 'I'd like to see a MAXIMUM size limit, I think it's better to keep smaller fish and release the bigger ones. This would vary from loch to loch, and could get complicated, however.'
- 'More advice on when it is an isn't Ok to keep fish.'

4.2.8 Organisation

Whilst most anglers praised local organisation - e.g. 'The Assynt Angling Group is very well organised for visitors' - others were confused by the different permit systems in operation for trout fishing and by the different organisations involved. Whilst such comments probably don't reflect an understanding of the different interests, histories and approaches, they do suggest a need for greater explanation.

- 'From the leaflet I could not easily tell that my license did not cover any rivers. This could have caused me a problem.'
- 'The exclusion of the North Assynt Estate from the Assynt Angling Group and therefore from the permit and from Cathel Macleod's excellent book is a nonsense. I hope this can be remedied.'
- 'There should also be more coherence between interest groups and the introduction of a 'North of Scotland Permit' for various time periods. Getting a permit in a garage there and an estate office here, or a Tourist information somewhere else is a pain in the tonsils. What about getting permits and booking boats online prior to going.'

This latter comment is interesting as it reflects a trend elsewhere in the UK for 'passport' type permits that can cover a large area with numerous different angling providers. One such example is in the South West of England run by the South West Rivers Trust²⁶. Given the breadth of game angling opportunities across the North West Coast, from Ullapool to Durness, this might seem like an attractive idea. However, the logistics and practicalities would be problematic.

²⁶ http://www.gethooked.co.uk/general/westcountry_rivers_trust

4.2.9 Community Benefit

There were several comments that related to the community benefit that is evident in Assynt and that money paid out for permits was reinvested - something that anglers applauded.

- 'Most anglers recognise the importance of seeing their money going back into fish stocks and access and wildlife/environmental work and if the fishing is excellent you don't expect that for free.'

Some problems, however, will be beyond even the most determined local provider:

- 'Can you do anything about the price of petrol?'

4.3 The Postcode Survey

In response to a need to know more about where anglers came from to visit Assynt, we conducted a postcode survey of visiting anglers. Data was collected in four ways:

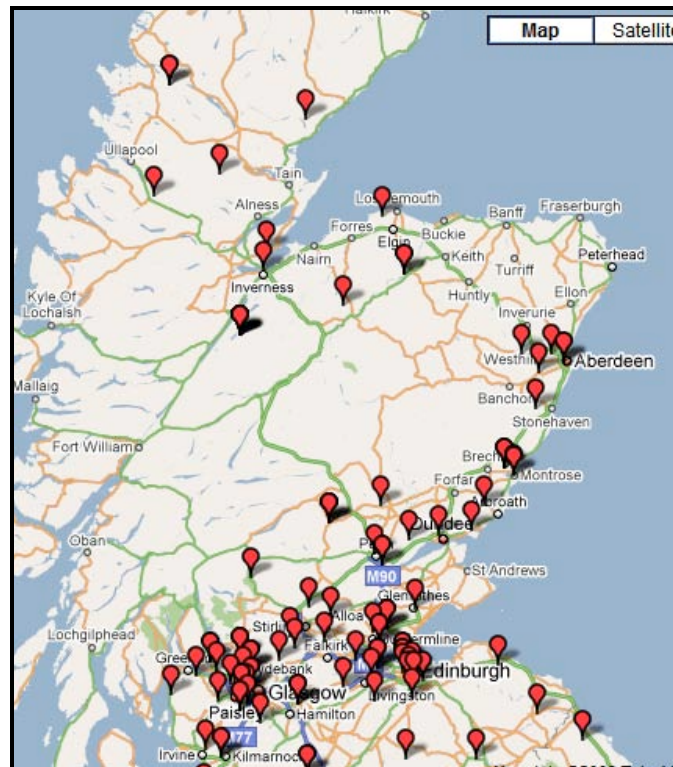
- Postcode forms were distributed to permit vendors selling ACT and AAG trout permits as well as to the Post Office which sells AAC Inver estuary permits.
- Postcodes were collected online via the online questionnaire.
- Postcodes were also collected through a postcode submission tool on the project website.
- A sample of postcodes of guests was kindly provided by the Inverlodge Hotel.

Around 200 postcodes were recorded and the 'Visitors' Map' is viewable online at: http://www.assynt.anglingresearch.org.uk/?q=post_code_map The illustrations below show the key distributions of visitors, the first showing distribution across the UK.



Map 1: Distribution of visiting anglers across the UK

There are clear concentrations from the central belt as well as east coast of Scotland and the map below illustrates that in more detail.



Map 2: Distribution of visiting anglers across Scotland

Anglers also came from across England, although there is a greater concentration from the north.



Map 3: Distribution of visiting anglers across England

We intend to repeat this exercise in 2010 to both generate a higher response rate as well as measure change from one year to the next. Having improved ways of mapping visitors from overseas will also be explored as will the ability to calculate distance travelled and means of travel.

4.4 Qualitative Interviews With Anglers

In 2009 we have also begun a process of interviewing anglers that visit Assynt. This will allow us to discuss in more depth what attracts them to Assynt, what experience they have there and their reflections on angling development in the area. Interviews are conducted on a semi-structured approach, in which we have a range of questions and issues but also allows respondents to discuss areas they feel are important. This element of the research will be ongoing through 2010, but we provide here some initial feedback from interviews conducted to date.

The interviews focus on:

- i. Interviewees' personal and professional background to understand more about the social make up of anglers who visit Assynt.
- ii. Their angling background to understand more about the type of angler that visits Assynt.
- iii. Their experiences of angling in Assynt, including the personal benefits they perceive from fishing in the area.
- iv. The provision of information, advice and services relating to angling
- v. Other questions and concerns including their thoughts on angling development in the area, access, angling pressure and their recommendations about environmental issues.

4.4.1 Personal and Professional Backgrounds

Most interviewees to date are either working professional people, over 40 - a lawyer, software engineer, teacher, self-employed research consultant - or retired/semi-retired people with professional backgrounds. This in part reflects the profile of questionnaire responses we had but also reflects the resources it requires for people to visit Assynt, certainly for reasonable periods in terms of cost of travel, time off from work etc.

In the coming year we will seek interviewees that cover the full spectrum of visiting anglers - including the more casual holidaymaker, family, younger people - as well as ensuring that it reflects the known profile of anglers. We will also focus some interviews on both salmon anglers and sea fishers, who do not feature in these testimonies.

4.4.2 Angling Backgrounds

All those interviewed to date have been experienced anglers, mostly fishing since they were young and their younger experience has on the whole influenced their angling later in life, and their choice of Assynt. For example:

'I used to go fishing with my brother. We started fly fishing for trout on the Esk in Wales where we had family. I started on a very beautiful river and it's always been really important to be in a beautiful place. For me it's 50 or 60% about where I am as much as the fishing.'

Also, all those interviewed to date regarded themselves as predominantly fly fishing brown trout anglers which again one might expect when targeting anglers in Assynt but also might help to inform future marketing and development strategies.

'I've had a dalliance with salmon and I occasionally go sea fishing. Salmon fishing is only once in a blue moon. I've fished in the Spey for grilse, and a few others, but it's only once or twice. Trout fishing is my first love.'

It was notable that salmon fishing was an 'occasional' pastime but not favoured in those interviewed to date. We will need to work with those providing salmon fishing, especially the Inverlodge Hotel and Assynt Estate, to get these perspectives in the coming year. However, sea fishing was more of a feature and all those interviewed said that they did some sea fishing whilst in Assynt.

'Now it's almost all fly fishing for trout, although when I'm in Assynt I take a stout spinning rod and have a go for mackerel and a few pollack. But I don't do course fishing these days.' (Male angler, 61 (retired))

'I carry a sea fishing rod and a small spinning rod with me too. Sometimes I fish off the rocks near Lochinver.'

The interest in sea angling is something that has emerged from the questionnaire, these interviews as well as initial work with non-angling visitors at the Visitor Centre in Lochinver. Advertising more information about sea angling possibilities, as well as the potential for boat trips discussed in 3.4, might help improve the diversity of the 'angling package' on offer to visitors.

It was notable that the range of fishing on offer for trout anglers met a number of needs. On one hand, remote hill lochs and the active nature of loch fishing for wild brown trout in which the angler has to move regularly satisfied a desire for 'fast moving stuff' and exploration:

'We tend to split up and go off in two or three groups. So we get up, have breakfast then head off to our different areas or lochs.'

'We tend to be a bit 'anoracky' in that we like planning a particular route. We might go up the Stoer track, for example, and fish three or four lochs on a circular route so we don't go back on ourselves.... I like them all to be honest, including some of the little ones without names.'

However, for others, it is the accessibility of roadside lochs and the possibilities of boat fishing, that are key:

'I'm a bit old and knackered and can't manage some of those lochs now - the corrie lochs and others up there. I just prefer north Assynt, it's more accessible.'

'It's mostly the big lochs rather than hill lochs. One of my buddies is old and has a bad hip so boat fishing is easier. I have fished a few hill lochs, but not many. We both enjoy drifting about in a boat.'

For an area like Assynt to be able to offer such a breadth of choice to anglers is a very significant resource and meets two important trends:

- i. *An ageing population*, and the high average age of anglers generally and in Assynt in particular, mean that providing physically accessible angling opportunities will be a very important part of angling provision. The provision of disabled access to some lochs in Little Assynt is also important in this respect.

- ii. The desire among more able bodied anglers for more '*extreme*' *angling* experiences, such as accessing remote lochs that few others will fish in a year, mean that noting this provision in Assynt and managing it responsibly is also important.

It is also clear that from anglers we have spoken to, as well as some of the qualitative comments made on both the website questionnaire, Assynt forms an important part of their annual 'angling calendar'. Anglers will put significant personal resources into visits to Assynt to fish and Assynt compares very favourably to other places they fish in the year.

'Apart from Assynt I do fish the rainbow fisheries, but it's all a bit unreal compared to wild brownies... The trouble is, once I've had my mid-season trip to Assynt, I'm spoiled. I can't raise any enthusiasm to go on another trip.'

'I spend at least a month up there every year so I feel very, very connected with the place. I used to go to Wales and Northern Ireland a lot but now I just go to Assynt. It's kind of taken over as a priority for long holidays, although I am going to New Zealand again for fishing and walking next year.'

'To be honest I'm unlikely to be able to get up more than once or twice a year, but at least I get the anticipation. It gives me something to dream about, and probably that makes it all the more precious.'

4.4.3 Experiences of Angling in Assynt

Initial Motivation

It is notable that, although already keen anglers, those we spoke to tended to visit Assynt initially as a holiday, and then 'discovered' the fishing on offer rather than coming first for the fishing.

It wasn't a fishing holiday. I was with my ex-wife. We both had an interest in hill walking, nature and camping, and we used to go up the west coast. One year we got as far as Assynt and we ended up camping in Clachtoll. We just loved it; everyone does... I always took some tackle with me so I fished the Maiden Loch that first time. We went back every year after that, except for two, and gradually I learned more about how to fish them.... It's well worth it, catching rainbows just doesn't compare.

'It was for a holiday. Assynt was a bit of Scotland I'd not been to before. I always check the fishing in an area I'm going to, so I suppose it was 50% for fishing, but we walk a lot too and also knew it was good for that.... I was amazed by how many fish there were. The weather was absolutely awful on that first visit – it hammered down for two weeks – but the fishing was amazing. It was phenomenal, the best fishing I'd ever had.'

This suggests that communicating the angling opportunities more widely to experienced anglers might increase the proportion of visitors to Assynt who are anglers without increasing numbers of visitors *per se*. However, it is also a feature that once people have visited Assynt and experienced the fishing, they come back year after year. As we said above, our sample is to date skewed toward regular visitors and we need to target those who are first time visitors as well as less regular visitors, but this regularity and 'addiction' to Assynt is something that has been communicated more widely in the research.

More Than Angling

However, the other dominant feature of people's comments is that it is not simply the angling experience that draws them back. The nature of the Assynt area is also

crucial - its landscape, scenery and wildlife - are all central to what attracts people to fish in Assynt.

'But it's not just the fishing up there. One of the things I love is being out in the hills. We hike a lot, that's one of the great pleasures of it.'

'But it's also the landscape. It's so unique. We didn't really see the hills most of the time we were there. Then on the Saturday morning when we were leaving it was completely blue sky which revealed that amazing vista. We just had to go back to see more of that. You can't lose up there. If the weather's bad the fishing's good. And if it's bright and sunny the place looks so wonderful. And you can always go sea fishing.'

'Now fishing is a massive part of it, but it's not the only motivation. I enjoy the scenery and hiking. I love going from Inver Kirkaig up to Suilven and I do a lot of big hikes up from Inchnadamph into the high corries. I always take a rod though. I wouldn't hike out there and not fish. I do appreciate the wildlife and flowers but it's from the point of view of a fisherman.'

This suggests not only a richness of experience, but a quality of experience on offer for the visitor that goes well beyond the quality of fishing. Within this theme, the sense of isolation and ability to go fishing without seeing other anglers is important for some.

'I relish the fact that I'm left to my own devices and have to use my own initiative.. I still want to be able to go to a loch when there is no one else there. I know I can but I worry.'

Isolation and Social Carrying Capacity

Whilst a relatively small number of anglers for the number of lochs is part of this equation, the nature of the landscape all lends itself to maintaining this. On some of the larger lochs, and on series of smaller lochs, it is possible for two people to fish and not see each other given the topography. This is a factor to bear in mind when consideration of angling pressure is made, although preserving the ability 'to feel alone' is obviously critical to angler's experience.

This refers to the 'social carrying capacity' referred to in outdoor recreation literature. This is a subjective valuation made by participants that includes visibility but also factors such as the behaviour of others in any given context. Exploring the balance of how this might be maintained whilst at the same increasing revenue for local angling organisations and communities will be a focus of ongoing study²⁷.

For others being part of a group is important:

We fish every day, Sunday to Friday. And we go every year now, although the group has gone up to seven, sometimes 10. Half the group go for the first half of the week, and half for the second, although I am one of those who's there the whole week. We tend to make it the first week of the school holidays, because most of us are teachers, although that's changed a bit.

Health and Well Being

In relation to the wider aims of the *Social and Community Benefits of Angling* project - notably the personal health and well being benefits that angling can provide - Assynt also has much to commend itself. It was notable that anglers reported that they 'needed two weeks' to 'settle' when visiting but that angling in Assynt in

²⁷ Graefe, A. R., J. J. Vaske, and F. R. Kuss. (1984) 'Social carrying capacity: An integration and synthesis of twenty years of research.' *Leisure Sciences* 6:395-432

particular provides an escape from the pressures of professional lives, a means to relax and 'de-stress' and significant 'escape'.

Assynt also notably provides a means of physical exercise for some. The nature of the lochs and hills, the ability to combine hiking with fishing and the active nature of fishing for wild brown trout all lend themselves to this. Our questionnaire suggested that about two thirds of anglers undertook 'high intensity' physical activity whilst in Assynt, about double the average suggested in our more general Angling Participation survey (See the *Angling Participation Interim Report*).

4.4.4 Provision of Information and Advice

Most of those we spoke to were relatively happy with quality of information provided, although in part this reflects the relatively experienced nature of interviewees. However, all but one said that they thought provision of more information would be of benefit to other anglers.

There were some suggestions, including:

- The provision of more up to date or 'live' information
- Provision of information on fly life, hatches and biodiversity of different lochs
- More information about the Brown Trout Protection Order
- More information about catch and release - 'what sizes to keep and why' as well as where

In relation to this last point, all interviewees so far reported that they put back most of the trout they caught, but that they all liked the ability to keep a minority 'for the table'.

'I eat trout about every other day when up there.'

'I like to eat some of what I catch, but it depends where I am. Crocach and Bhriaghe can spare a few I think. But there are some lochans where I tend to put them all back because the water needs them to spawn.'

In a more general angling context where catch and release is on the increase, as with the questionnaire, interviewees wanted more guidance on what and where it was possible to keep some trout to eat.

4.4.5 Other Issues

As with the questionnaire, feedback on the website and information we have provided, and its potential further development, was also positive. Some suggested that they didn't need or necessarily want more information (reflecting their experience), but others suggested that this would be useful for those that don't know the area and for exploring more remote areas.

'[Tuition] was one of the things I appreciated that was done for me. I learned from a guy on a reservoir and got further in ten minutes with him than I had in hours trying by myself. There is a role for it. I think if there was someone at the Inchnadamph hotel, for example, or if they ran a beginners'/improvers' course it would be good. It could be part of their marketing. It would be an attribute for the area to have guides available. I expect some people would be willing to hire them. It's not unknown for some people to have ghillies for a day. I think there's one at the Inver Lodge.'

Other suggestions included:

- More live or up to date information about both fishing and the weather
- A photo gallery

- Chat room / forum
- Feedback on the research and reports published

This report will be publicly available and published via the website and we are looking into the development of the other areas for 2010.

In terms of local services there was some appetite for providing tuition, especially for youngsters visiting the area, something that might help address the older profile of anglers fishing there; as well as better guidance about sea angling.

4.4.6 Non Angler Visitors

In terms of the provision of services for those who don't already fish, and understanding more about the tourist market, we undertook some research in the Visitor Centre in Lochinver in August 2009. We spoke to around 40 visitors who were not anglers.

Whilst most of these did not express an interest in angling, among those that did, there was the suggestion that some services and information might help in terms of:

- Easily accessible fishing:

'They would like to reconnect with angling now that they are retired.'

'Too old. Used to fish for mackerel at Achmelvich.'

- Tuition:

'Need someone able to show them.'

'Not anglers but interested in taking child.'

We will explore demand for and development of services such as this in the coming year in more depth.



A fine specimen (returned)

5. Emerging Themes and Ongoing Work

5.1 Angling Organisation and Community Benefit

It is clear that angling has a close relationship to wider community development in Assynt. It is a key source of income for both angling specific organisations as well as wider community ones. It is also an important driver of tourism in the area as it has been historically.

There are a range of organisations that benefit from angling in Assynt and these include important, but different, means of collective ownership of land and resources. This means that there is a direct relationship between visiting angler numbers and the benefit the community receives. As such it relates to important (international) debates about sustainable eco-tourism, rural and outdoor recreation and rural community development.

However, it is important to also recognise the important role that angling plays within the community of Assynt, as one way in which people connect to the land and environment and in terms of the contribution that local people make to its sustenance and development.

This includes an enormous amount of voluntary effort from local people in terms of maintaining boats and equipment, advising visitors, selling permits, developing and providing information, organising local angling clubs and events and helping young people into angling. As such, angling forms part of the fabric of community in Assynt in very important ways.

5.2 Angling Development, Tourism and Angling ‘Pressure’

There is a clear balance to be struck between increasing angling numbers, and therefore generating wider community benefit, and maintaining the delicate ecological balance and natural resources in the area.

There is concern among some visitors that ‘too many anglers’ will mean that the ‘special’ nature of angling in Assynt will be lost. This is not especially in relation to fish stocks, which people recognise as healthy (although there is little scientific knowledge about this), but in terms of the remote and ‘isolated’ experience many value.

However, there is also unanimity amongst those involved in angling locally that the area could increase numbers of anglers without affecting its uniqueness adversely. All those we spoke to said that its lochs were ‘under-fished’ and that increasing numbers would be of benefit.

Quite simply, not enough is known for us to comment on this definitively but we remain in close contact with local organisations and will undertake further work on this issue.

5.3 Angling Promotion, Services and Information

Linked to this, there is a relative dearth of information about visiting anglers in Assynt which this report starts to address. None of the trout angling organisations receive catch returns from visitors or locals; and little is known about the real economic impact of angling in Assynt.

The web based mapping tool we have developed is one means by which data on what is going on can be generated. Further survey work, questionnaires and other data gathering in this project will also seek to address this issue. The project website and map tool can also serve to help promote what is on offer in Assynt in terms of angling and can serve as a model for what is possible elsewhere.

Assynt provides a wide range of angling opportunities, including both difficult to access and easily accessible lochs. The provision of boats near roadside lochs, all-abilities paths and wheelchair friendly boats all increase the breadth of this offer. We will add sections on accessible and family-friendly loch fishing locations to our website in the coming year.

A number of people have said that the provision of new services would help increase angling participation, especially to newcomers and the young. This might include tuition and guiding services, something that could aid local employment.

There is clearly demand for more information and boat trip services in relation to sea angling. We will also explore the feasibility of this in future research.

5.4 Angling and Other Developments

There are a number of new developments in the area that link to ongoing development of provision for visiting anglers. These include:

- The office and information centre to be developed by the ACT.
- The Trout Fishing in Assynt booklet.
- The biodiversity research in Little Assynt.
- The project to create a marine heritage and community centre at the Lochinver Mission building.

We intend that our research can help inform and support these developments, in consultation with local organisations.

5.5 Assynt Angling Information and Research

Our innovative research web site includes some unique online tools using OS map technology. We will be undertaking further development of this site in the coming months in light of useful feedback we have had. This will include:

- i. Developing an Accessibility, Young People and Families Information
- ii. Updating information.
- iii. Generating more comments and feedback from the mapping tool.
- iv. Increasing information about trout angling
- v. Improving sea fishing information
- vi. Developing the historical section
- vii. Developing local links

In relation to the research structure for the coming year we will:

- Undertake more visiting angler interviews
- Improve postcode and angler email collection
- Undertake a more robust economic analysis of the impact of angling
- Conduct more work with non angling visitors
- In order that the website is most useful for collecting research information, we will need to resolve some of the problems that have existed in terms of the PC portal in the Visitor Centre in Lochinver.

www.anglingresearch.org.uk
www.assynt.anglingresearch.org.uk

substance.

3rd Floor
Fourways House
57 Hilton Street
Manchester
M1 2EJ

Tel. 0161 244 5418
Email. info@substance.coop
Web. www.substance.coop