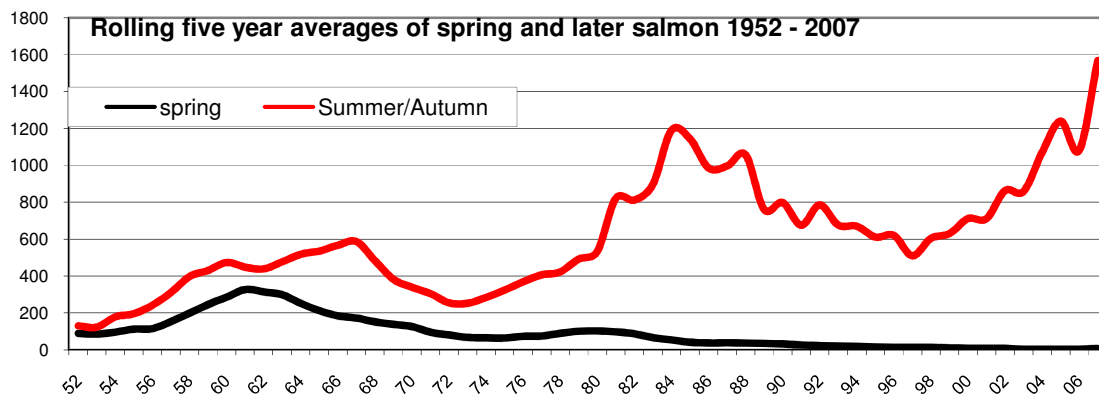


The Dangers of Anthropomorphism for Wildlife Management



In December 2005 a seal took up residence on the River Annan next to the fish pass at Milnbie Caul which is at the head of the tide. Almost every fish which enters the river must pass through this narrow 3m wide gap (picture above right). The seal benefited from this as it made for very easy feeding and quickly took up almost permanent residence in the fish pass. This has happened on two previous occasions in the last ten years but decisive and discrete action had meant that little was known about the seals to the people of Annan.

The reason that the seal had entered this part of the river was clearly due to the large numbers of kelts descending downstream that were relatively easy to catch. However at this time of year Spring fish were also entering the river and accumulating in the seals forage area. Spring fish have become extremely rare on the Annan with catches of several hundred per year declining to single figures. The rarity of these fish has been a concern of the Board for a while and as a result we have made the catch and release of all salmon caught before the 1st of June compulsory on the rod fishery. A separate agreement had been reached with the net fishery where they would not fish during the spring months. The seal as well as targeting kelts was clearly taking fresh spring fish.



An attempt was made to remove the seal but the report of the .308 rifle was heard in the town, which is very close to the location of the weir, and the local newspaper group became involved. A straw poll of the local population carried out by the Annandale Herald decided that the seal (now dubbed Sammy!) was a local tourist attraction and needed protection from the DSFB. Local people stated diversionary feeding but to no avail as the seal was not interested in their offerings of bread and fish based cat food. A vigorous campaign led by a number of local councillors began to have the seal removed and re-located instead of killed, they identified that the British Divers Marine Life Rescue (BDMLR) people were the experts in this. To help keep the peace the DSFB took the advice of the councillors and asked the BDMLR, through the Seal Rescue centre at Oban, for help. They agreed to help and send people to Annan to remove the animal.

Unfortunately the press decided to up the exposure of this and the national newspapers, GMTV, Border News and the BBC took an interest. The BDMLR also contacted other groups and Advocates for Animals and similar groups. These other groups started contacting the Board on a regular basis. The Board took the view that as the whole operation had been blown out of proportion that it had to be available for interviews by the press (a simple no comment could have made the situation worse) and put over the point that whilst the Board would like to see this particular seal removed that it was not advocating a wholesale cull of seals in general and despite what organisations such as BDMLR were saying the Board was involved with conservation work that benefited wild life, not just salmon.

The upshot of this was out of proportion press coverage and the Board was placed in a position where it could not act in any way other than attempting to remove the animal alive. BDMLR made four attempts, each one with an attendant crew of press and large numbers of brightly coloured dry suit wearing volunteer 'seal medics'. The methods used were farcical and unlikely to work with a fit and healthy wild seal. The seal meanwhile continued to make inroads into the Kelts and spring fish at the bottom of the river. Whilst the Board thanked the BDMLR within the Media (Paper and TV) members of the BDMLR team that were meant to be helping were clearly continuing to stoke the fire with inflammatory comments and reports to dubious animal welfare organisations.

The situation could not continue and the Board appointed an individual to shoot the animal at the earliest opportunity. Three weeks later the seal positioned itself in a manner where a safe and humane shot could be taken and the animal was dispatched. The absence of 'Sammy' over the next few weeks amongst the population of Annan caused concern amongst the press and when a direct question was asked to the Board it was confirmed that the animal had been humanely dispatched. At this point BDMLR immediately issued statements condemning the actions of the board and stating, untruthfully, that their attempts had been unsupported by the Board and were only orchestrated to allow time for the animal to be shot. What became more worrying was the mass of hate mail that started arriving in the Board office with threats against staff and their families being made explicitly. At one point a bus load of activists arrived in Annan and was asking for directions to the Annan DSFB offices, they were turned around and sent on their way. Because of the level of threats made to the Board, vehicles were parked at night in the compound of the local police station and staff were asked to take different routes home every night. Most of the hate mail that was generated was by e-mail and it was clear that personal details of staff had been put on message boards of organisations like the ALF. The situation only eased when Huntington Life Sciences announced an expansion of their activities, this gave the activists another target and they stopped most of the effort against the Annan Board.

Meanwhile the salmon netting community of Annan looked on with some amusement about the fuss that the death of a single seal had caused.