

Loch Uisge, Isle of Barra

Remit

The Western Isles Fisheries Trust was asked to perform a site visit to Loch Uisge to investigate the impact of removing the dam on the fishery.

Loch Uisge

Loch Uisge is situated on the western side of the Isle of Barra, approximately one mile from the coast, with the outlet from the loch at grid reference NF 663 002. When the dam was holding back water the loch would have had an area of approximately one hectare.

The loch receives the majority of its water as drainage coming directly off the moor with the rest entering the loch as one very small-defined channel of water (width less than 15cm). The outlet burn from the loch is approximately 1m in width. The gradient of this burn is too steep to permit the upstream passage of migratory fish, as it descends 170m vertical height over a length of approximately 1 mile.

The land surrounding the loch is primarily used for the grazing of sheep and the vegetation is closely cropped heather and grass.

History of the loch

Anecdotal evidence from the residents of Barra suggests that Loch Uisge did not contain a natural population of brown trout before the 1960's. During the 1960's the loch was reportedly stocked with brown trout of an unknown source, although it would have been likely that they were from another fishery on the Island. The stocked fish must have been able to reproduce as a viable population remained until the loch was drained.

The fishings on Barra are operated by the Barra Community Co-operative. Loch Uisge has not been included on the list of available fishings due to the perception that the fishing was poor, when compared to other local fisheries, and that it wasn't worth sending anglers to visit it. It should be noted that although Loch Uisge has always been perceived as a poor fishery it is set within spectacular scenery that will draw people to it.

The Dam

The North of Scotland Water Authority installed a dam on Loch Uisge to act as a water supply for the residents on the west coast of Barra, Photograph 1. The dam has a vertical height of approximately 4m, and can impound water to a maximum depth of approximately 3.5m.

The dam appears to be structurally sound (from the perspective of a Fisheries Biologist), with no visible signs of erosion, undermining or leaks. Under the provisions of the Reservoirs Act (1975) the dam will need to undergo an annual inspection by a Supervising Engineer. In addition a further inspection of the dam

will need to be performed every ten years by an Inspecting Engineer. The approximate costs of the two surveys are £350 and £1,200, respectively.



Photograph 1. Dam at the exit of Loch Uisge.

The order to drain Loch Uisge was given in September 2000, and the loch was emptied towards Christmas of that year. A small amount of water remains in Loch Uisge, with an area of approximately 0.5 hectares. The remaining water appears to be shallow with the majority of the depth being less than 0.5m. As the level of the water has dropped the banks that have been left exposed are not showing any signs of being colonised by vegetation. This is due to the banks consisting of bedrock, shale and a shallow covering of peat.

It is not known whether any fish still survive in the loch. However, it is likely that most of the fish will have died off, as there is little refuge from extremes of temperature or cover from predators available to them.

Suggested Course of Action

The cost to retain the dam under the terms of the Reservoirs Act will be excessive, as an Inspector will need to be brought over from the mainland, and it is unlikely that the costs could be shared between a number of fisheries. Whilst it is unlikely that the dam will need repairing in the short to medium term (perhaps up to 5-10 years), finances will need to be set aside for any future repairs.

Due to the local perception with regards to the performance of the fishery before the loch was drained, there would be little value in maintaining Loch Uisge as a fishery. The comment that came back from a number of anglers on the Island was that any available money would be better spent improving the more viable fisheries on Barra.