

Future of the Forum

Ron Woods – Scottish Federation of Coarse Angling

Thanks very much Gordon. Can you hear me OK? I actually thought that, in addition to a free lunch, I was getting a free ipod, but, apparently, this is the remote mike, so hopefully it works. If you can't hear me, do shout up.

Unlike the other sessions today, this is very much in the nature of a reflective discussion. I do not have any new information to give you, but what I would like to do is run through a little bit of reflection as to where we are; both where we are today and those of who have been involved in similar processes in earlier stages of this process and ask a few questions about how you feel this way of developing legislative proposals and other things works for you and whether you can give us any help in terms of refining and developing it.

I am a comparative new-comer to all this, because I have only actually been involved for about six or seven years and there will be people here who remember the Hunter Committee and I know that there are certainly people here who were involved in the Salmon Strategy Task Force and other activities, looking at fisheries legislation in Scotland and various other Forums, as it were.

My earliest engagement was in dialogue that followed Peter Maitland's Wild Rivers Report and in the subsequent Angling for Change Group which, I think, came up with an awful lot of ideas, which are not entirely dissimilar to some of the things that are coming out today, but was very much a narrower process. The Forum is part of a broader approach and you can read as well as I can. It really does cover a number of media, in terms of trying both to get information across to the wider interest groups and also to draw information in from a wider cross-section of stakeholders. In my mind, and I am happy for others to differ, at the heart of it is the Steering Group; a group of around about twenty-four or twenty-five, I think, which has been assembled and which involves people from stakeholder organisations, angling and fishery management, from the statutory agencies and from SEERAD itself. That has met on, I believe, nine occasions in the last couple of years and this group, this is the third meeting of the Forum, which is a much wider discussion mechanism.

Supporting that, there has been the publication of a lot of information, minutes and papers on the SEERAD web-site. There has been the internet discussion group that Gordon mentioned and, of course, the consultation paper now, with its series of public meetings that have come out over the last couple of weeks. I am happy to be corrected by other members of the Steering Group and indeed other members of the audience overall but, from where I sit, and from the conversations that I have had with other people who have been involved with this and have been involved with the earlier initiatives, I think that it's fair to say that there is a general feeling that, as a process, the Forum and its surrounding mechanisms could be seen to be a success so far.

There has been a thorough debate of real substantive issues. I am not saying that we have not occasionally drifted off into tangents and irrelevancies, but we have actually tackled the real issues and we have tackled them thoroughly and we have tackled them without flinching from the fact that sometimes there is a difference of opinion.

There has been a lot of sharing of understanding between the different interest groups and between those of us who have a private or voluntary sector interest and people from the Executive and the statutory agencies and there has been a very high degree of consensus and, again, other people may think differently. But, I was reflecting on the fact that this morning's discussion, while it did not exactly die on its feet by any manner of means, there was a lot of very interesting stuff. We were not sitting at half-past twelve, with a clamour of people all wanting to throw their tuppence-worth in. In my mind, anyway, a good deal of the reason for that is because there has been quite a high consensus achieved. There has been a lot of transparency. There has been a lot of information that has come out beforehand and people actually had already had a lot of these discussions, and I think that that is a particularly positive point.

There are some things where we don't have a consistent universal consensus and we have been mature enough to agree to disagree. There is not a terribly large body of information which we have that, although, judging from some of the response to Keith's presentation, I think there is plenty of scope for it in the future. So, if you like disagreement, watch this space.

I think one of the results of that is the consultation paper itself is probably a great deal less controversial than it would have been if it had come out of what you might call a traditional consultation process, where government officials keep everything close to their chest, write something down on what they think is best for the world and then unleash it on the stakeholders, on the full expectation that there will be a tirade of abuse.

Again, I am sure that there is scope to do that if we want, but I think that it is refreshing that we are not doing that on this occasion. A lot of that is down to yourselves and those of your colleagues, who were able to come to earlier Forum meetings. Both in terms of those of us, who have been part of the Steering Group and have tried to bring things together from the findings from the internet and from the earlier Forums and from the fact that it emerged, already, at those Forums meetings, that there was quite a strong consensus on a lot of points and that has made it easier to move forward.

Sometimes mutual understanding needs to be stimulated and I know that when I became involved, I did not know what a salmon fishing board was and I think a lot of people did not know what coarse fishing was. So, now, everybody has got the message.

It seems to me that there are two main dimensions to this; the one is that it is a highly-inclusive process and it is a highly-transparent process. You are seeing the proceedings of the Steering Group, you have the opportunity to contribute in a number of different ways, accordingly, to what suits your own preference and, critically, and this is one of the things that is the big difference between the capacity to move forward in this model and the capacity we had to move forward when we had virtually the same group of people, in terms of stakeholder interest in Angling for Change, and that is that we have the active involvement of the Statutory Agencies in the Executive.

So, whereas, in the past, what you have tended to have, and I am over-simplifying, either committees set up by the Executive and, therefore, with nominees or pressure groups that come together to make the Executive do something. What we have actually got here is a

body, which is a partnership, and I think that is a very positive thing and I think that it is reflected in the fact that it works better.

The other thing, and I am competing with Mike Brady here for Gordon's affections, is I think that it has been extremely well-run. It has been chaired in an efficient, but not authoritarian fashion. We have the assurance of the Executive taking it seriously, because we have got somebody at Gordon's level putting in his time and effort into making it work and we have had good secretariat support from Gordon's colleagues, which means that papers get round meetings, things get posted on the internet and those of us that have day jobs can get on with the day job, do the important bits in relation to our stakeholder representation and leave the administration of the process to Gordon's colleagues and I, personally, and I think I speak for all the Steering Group, certainly thank and congratulate them for the way that they have run the process and organised it.

There is a question to ask; whether this mechanism, this machinery, is a creature of the need to consult over the 'Bill,' or whether it should have a longer life-span and I think that is really the thing I want to try to leave you with, but, before I get to that, some thoughts that might come out.

We know we have heard from Keith Hendry and others today that there is another tranche. You will all have seen it in the consultation paper. There is another tranche of legislation, which I think most, if not all, of us will agree is needed to try to set a degree of statutory consistency to the Management Structures, to try to tidy up some of the perceived weaknesses of access and protection and link together management, access and sustainability, in a way that the previous legislation hasn't done.

There are other non-legislative issues that could well be susceptible to the same sort of machinery. What we have here is a model, if you accept my hypotheses anyway, works as a consultative machinery and the question is; do we need to talk to each other about other things? Personally, I believe we do, but I guess there are, perhaps, those who would not want to and I think that is part of the dialogue from now on.

As well, I think, while I would not want to understate, and one of my colleagues in the Steering Group did draw attention to a couple of examples where there has been a good degree of co-operation and communication between other branches in the Executive and stakeholder groups, and I am not saying, by any manner of means, that this is chalk and cheese, but, in terms of this multi-media approach to consultation, this highly-transparent, this highly-involved model I am quite comfortable saying to anyone that the Executive has got the model pretty well right. I am not saying we can't find ways of improving it, but they have got this model pretty well right and if I happen to have an interest in some other piece of legislation that's a benchmark, I would be looking to be observed.

I can tell you, from my own field, in my day job, that I wish it was observed in some other forms of legislation, such as employment, but that is not with the Executive.

So, what I want to leave you with are a couple of prompts for discussion. It's not for me to answer questions because I am certainly not responsible for the decisions on behalf of the either the Executive or the group, but it seems to me that there are a few things that it might be very interesting for us in the Steering Group, and Gordon and his colleagues in the Executive, to have your thoughts on.

One of the things is; what do you think, for the long-term, should there still be a mechanism like this? – and, if there should still be a mechanism like this beyond this Bill, the access and management structures stuff, what should be in the long term work plan?

Are you comfortable with the fact that the balance between fairly large meetings, between fairly large-scale meetings of the Forum and a Steering Group of about twenty and twenty-five people? Could we live with a slightly leaner Steering Group? We have set up a sub-group, to look at management structures, and that allows us to be ever so slightly more nimble, in terms of getting together and meeting and firing e-mails back and forward to each other. But, are you comfortable with the fact that the Steering Group is quite so large?

If we had to trim it back, where would you trim it back? I think one of the things that I think is always worth opening up, as well, particularly because I think it is one of the things which, with the greatest respect to the others who were involved, we probably didn't get right with Angling for Change, is; how do we make sure that we have the best possible dialogue with stakeholders? I don't make any apologies for that. I represent an angling stakeholder group and it is obviously uppermost in my own consciousness, but how do we really make sure that we have a proper dialogue with the angling community and with other interested parties?

As I said to you before I started to get involved in some of these things, I'd been fishing for thirty years and I'd never heard of salmon boards. Now, I guess, there may be other people out there in that sort of situation. To expect them to understand the more esoteric aspects of Keith's different models of management structures might be a bit ambitious from a standing start. So, have we actually got the communication right? - and, if not, what can we do to make it work better? And, at that, I will shut up and leave it to you.

Gordon Brown

Thanks Ron. You may, or may not, want to take a few questions, but can you join me here for a few minutes?

I think we have got ten or fifteen minutes for any questions, for any observations you would like to make about the Forum process and then I will attempt to say a few words in summing up.

Questions and Answers

Alastair Stephen

I would just like to reiterate what Ron said about the usefulness of these meetings and the Steering Group as well, and I feel personally and, representing the Institute of Fisheries Management, that, having a process in the future like what we have just gone through for the last couple of years, would be exceptionally useful. I also feel that it would be best for all concerned if it was continued to be chaired by SEERAD.

Kenny MacDonald - Federation of Highland Angling Clubs

Firstly, on behalf of all the people associated with myself, I would like to thank you for the opportunity of coming here today and for the open discussion that we have had. On where we are going in the future; possibly, to manage anything properly, you require to review it and wouldn't it be rather nice to pull the original Steering Group together, sort of twelve months from now, or, after the legislation is passed, and just see how correct or accurate or how much of what was fed into it actually came to fruition, even if it was only to pat themselves on the back. I do think that reviewing is quite critical to the end result of the exercise.

Jane Wright

Gordon, could you tell us, once this gets into the parliamentary process, could you tell us what we need to do, to make sure that the parts of the Bill that we wish to support go through into the legislation?

Gordon Brown

David, can I put you on the spot and advise on that?

David Ford

I think the most important thing, once the Bill has come out in June, is to check what is and isn't there, from your point of view, but the most important thing, I think, would be to give evidence to the committee, because it's the committee that is quite a driving force in the parliamentary stage.

Unidentified speaker

Which committee will be dealing with it please?

David Ford

Rural Development Committee

Gordon Brown

Chaired currently by Sarah Boyak

Alan Ayre – Grayling Society

Judging by the meeting in Stirling on Wednesday night, when people came in at the very last minute, they had just heard two days ago of these meetings and I am just backing up what Ron said about getting the messages out to the general angling public. Angling for Change found this very difficult and it is a difficult thing to do, but I think that it is imperative that you get the general anglers involved in this.

Michael Brady – Loch Lomond Angling Association

I would say that the web-site is very off-putting. I would have expected to have seen something like Freshwater Fisheries Forum dot com and that could have encouraged the

ordinary angler, perhaps, to have gone into the web-site. There are so many dots and slashes and things that honestly most people you try and say; what's the web-site? - you know, well, you could say its freshwater fisheries dot com. Unfortunately, you can't do that and that's a big, big major negative. The other aspect I would like to mention, since we got a lot of criticism earlier on from, you have used a consultant to look at the freshwater fisheries management and I do feel that you should really look more around the country and see the existing managements and maybe have a wee bit more meetings with the various managements, in various areas, to get the real feedback as to their position. Because I find, in the Loch Lomond system, we don't have the same type of problems that other people have. Our only problem is freshwater legislation. That's it. It's the legislation to enact, to allow to get a permit, and my whole point, in all of this, is that in game angling the game angler pays for the permit-checking and all the things that that entails. If there is bad element like poaching, well, the game angler has to pay for that; and the other side of the fence, the freshwater angler should pay for looking after the coarse fishing, the brown trout, and if they are not being looked after properly, you pay a permit to make sure that you are making rules that that's abided by and if there is coarse fish entering into any fishery indiscriminately by a small section of them, then the freshwater angler has to pay more for his permit to cover that. Now, that to me is very, very simple and straightforward and to have all that stuff and all that talk and that is just a non-event. Rod licences and everything else, I don't see the need for it. It's fairly straightforward. If you have a cost incurred by game anglers, they pay a permit. If you have a cost incurred through freshwater angling, you pay a permit and that's it. There are no free lunches in this world today.

Unidentified speaker

Can I just echo what Mike has just said, but also a plea for the angler in the central belt? One meeting in Stirling, I believe, was on the list and one in Ay, I think, is on the list. What about Glasgow? What harm did Glasgow do? We have the conurbation across the whole of central of Scotland. Why was a Forum meeting not arranged there?

Gordon Brown

Alistair, why was Glasgow left out?

Alistair Prior – SEERAD

We tried to spread them throughout Scotland and we were limited by time and obviously the number of guys from the office that could go to these meetings and we have added extra meetings on. We had eight originally. We now have Oban and Dumfries, as additional meetings, and if there was demand for other meetings, a few weeks ago, then we would have quite happily have had an extra meeting, if there was a demand, but time is against us and we have to finish these meetings quite soon. So, sorry Glasgow.

Gordon Brown

Can I make, actually, quite a serious related point to that? I think, if the Steering Group of the Forum is to work on the angler' behalf, the Steering Group members need to know what their, if I can call it, grass roots membership are thinking and wanting. So, do please use your Steering Group members to get your views recognised and heard.

Unidentified Speaker

Earlier on this afternoon, during one of the presentations, it was put to us that the Management Steering Group has tested with about twenty consultees. Now, I have been counting out the consultees, on the back of the Bill here, and you are talking about four hundred and seventy-five, but I am reliably informed that there are about nine hundred consultees. Now, twenty, out of nine hundred, is a very poor percentage for a Steering Group to use a representation, which we have just witnessed this afternoon. To me, you should be consulting far, far, far more of the angling clubs and associations and private people involved and members of SANA etcetera, etcetera.

Ron Woods

Just to say a couple of very brief words. Firstly, I do have a lot of sympathy with the Glasgow lobby, since I live there, so any meetings in Glasgow, I'm on your side.

The other thing, on quite a serious point, it does strike me that Mike's point about the inaccessibility, or the kind of complex nature of the web-site address, is quite true. I think we can all help in this, in that many of us are part of organisations that have their own web-site and we can make sure that we put a link up to this mechanism and encourage our members to, firstly, to read the proposals and, secondly, get their views across, either in the Executive news group discussion forum, or direct to us to put through. I am a great believer in making use of the web and it does strike me it's a big help on that.

The other thing was, again, as an example of that, it may well be that you go home in the car and think, gosh, I wish I had said that to them, or you have a chat to your own members or colleagues. I think, using that discussion group to give us some ideas on the future of the Forum, would be very helpful. I don't speak for Gordon, but I personally would like to see them there and we do take note of the things that come up on the Forum. We get a summary on it at every meeting.

Gordon Brown

Just on this issue; can I, rather flippantly, take a feel from the floor on continuing? There's been some nice things said, some positive things said, but the vast majority of you have not spoken. If you think that it is a good idea that the Forum continues, in much the same way as it is, although we are open to suggestions, would you raise your hand? That's pretty supportive. Thank you very much. OK.

Ron, thank you very much.