

Assynt Angling Research Final Report



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February 2012

www.assyantanglinginfo.org.uk
www.resources.anglingresearch.org.uk

Contents

1. Introduction	p.3
2. The Profile of Angling Tourism in Assynt	p.6
3. The Benefits of Angling for Assynt	p.13
4. Striking a Balance in Assynt	p.17
5. Increasing the Impact of Angling Tourism in Assynt	p.21
6. Options and Recommendations	p.26

Acknowledgements

This research would simply not have been possible without the friendly, willing and continuing contributions of a large number of people and organisations in Assynt. Indeed, the warmth that has been shown to me and others from Substance during this project is unsurpassed. In particular I would like to thank the following people.

Cathel Macleod, with whom I discussed very early ideas for this work and who has been a constant friend and source of information; and his late wife Jean, who was always warm and welcoming when I was at Polcraig and was above all so tolerant of me taking up much of Cathel's time up to talk fishing. Peter Hendrick of the Assynt Angling Group has helped enormously in collecting information from anglers, promoting our work and website to them and has given so much time to discuss angling in the area. I have often witnessed the huge contribution these two people in particular have made to the experience of visiting anglers. Ray Mackay from the Assynt Crofters' Trust was equally welcoming and has been a valuable sounding board for ideas and findings. Joanne Murray from the ACT has helped compiling permit and other data; and Kirsty Macleod provided many of the initial thoughts around how angling could contribute to the wider community in the early days. The staff at the Tourist Information Centre in Lochinver – Val, Helen, Barbara and Steve – and Andy Summers from the Highland Rangers service were always friendly, encouraging, and helpful and without whom the resource developed for anglers in the centre would not have been possible. Roger Glover from the Assynt Tourism Group and Clive Sheppard at the Assynt Centre have both been especially helpful in discussing development ideas coming from the project and how angling fits into wider tourism and community development. Other people who have also contributed lots of help are Adam Pellant at the Assynt Foundation, Nick Gorton at the Inverlodge Hotel and Alex Dickson at Achins. The provision of IT facilities at the Assynt Leisure was invaluable at times and thanks to Kelly there for her friendly help. Those selling permits at various times at the TIC, the Post Office, the Chandlers, Drumbeg Hotel, Drumbeg Stores, Kyelsku Hotel and Cruachan B+B have all helped enormously by allowing us to publicise the research work and collect anglers' details. I've probably missed people out, for which I apologise – but thanks one and all.

Adam Brown, Substance, Project Manager, Social and Community Benefits of Angling Project



1. Introduction: The Assynt Angling Research Project

1.1 The Social and Community Benefits of Angling Research

This report is the Final Report of the Assynt Angling Research project. The project forms a part of wider, national, study called *The Social and Community Benefits of Angling*. The research was funded by the Big Lottery Fund from 2009-2011 and undertaken by Substance.

The Social and Community Benefits of Angling is a national project that had three principal elements:

- i. Research into the nature of angling participation and the individual and community benefits it generates
- ii. Research into the benefits of angling for young people, particularly those at risk of exclusion
- iii. Research into how angling can help create sustainable rural communities?

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

A final report for the project - ***Fishing for Answers: The Final Report of the Social and Community Benefits of Angling project*** – was published in January 2012. This, and all other research outputs, including all the reports on Assynt, are available at the Angling Research Resources Website: www.resources.anglingresearch.org.uk

1.2 Aims of the Assynt Angling Research

The basis of the study in Assynt was to use it as a research case study to provide evidence of the positive role that angling can play in rural communities as well as to test new approaches, inform local organisations and propose ongoing development. This included key questions about:

- How rural communities and local groups benefit from angling?
- What is the value of angling tourism and how angling tourism services be improved?

Findings from the Assynt research have not only been used to inform local groups, but also the wider study (see Section 5 of the final report, ***Fishing for Answers***).

1.3 Assynt and the Angling Tourism Context

The importance of tourism to sustaining rural areas has been emphasised in the last two decades:

- Since 2001 there has been a drive for greater diversification of rural economies. Key agencies have highlighted recreation tourism as a source of income for rural areas.¹
- In Scotland there has been a growing interest in the contribution that ‘country sports’ in general, including angling, can make to rural development; and of marketing tourism based on ‘distinctive regional opportunities’.²
- Recent reports from the Scottish Government and the Environment Agency in England and Wales suggest angling-related expenditure has a significant impact in rural areas.
- More generally there has been a desire to see: diversification of rural businesses; increased rural income and employment development; and sustainable strategies for addressing rural exclusion issues (including housing, youth unemployment, isolation, transport and seasonal economies).

¹ Environment Agency (2004) *Our Nations Fisheries*, Bristol: EA; DEFRA (2004)

² TNS (2004) *Country Sports Tourism in Scotland*, Perth: Scottish Country Sports Tourism Group <http://countrysportscotland.com/About.asp>; Highlands and Islands Enterprise (2011) *Operating Plan 2011-2014*, Inverness: HIE <http://www.hie.co.uk/about-hie/about-hie/what-we-do.html>

The increased awareness and understanding of angling's contribution to rural economies has led to the emergence of a number of recent initiatives aiming to promote angling tourism and re-invigorate rural areas. They include:

- **Fishing Wales** which seeks to promote Wales as 'the premiere destination for game, sea and coarse fishing'.³
- The promotion of angling within a broader portfolio of 'country sports' by the **Scottish Country Sports Tourism Group**, including a pilot initiative in 2008 to promote wild brown trout angling in Assynt.⁴
- The promotion within **English regions** of angling tourism that includes an angling festival in the Lake District run in 2009, 2010 and 2011⁵; and the development of an 'angling passport' schemes by the Wye and Usk Foundation and the Westcountry Rivers Trust.⁶

Yet despite the growing body of policy, research and practice based initiatives to promote angling in rural areas, little is known about angling's impact in *particular* rural communities, the different ways in which it involves local people and visitors, and the ways in which it can contribute to the development of sustainable rural communities.

Assynt is an area of outstanding natural beauty and natural scientific interest and is historically significant in terms of Highland development and land ownership. Assynt has around 1000 inhabitants⁷ living in 475km² of mostly remote mountainous landscape. Its nearest major population centre is Inverness, over 2 hours drive away. Assynt provided a useful case study for a number of reasons:

- i. Assynt is a fairly **easily defined rural area**, with widely 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, land ownership and local development.
- iv. From 2008-2009 there was a **specific initiative** focused on promoting angling tourism to Assynt, funded by the Country Sports Tourism Group for Scotland.
- v. Large parts of Assynt are part of the **Assynt and Coigach Protection Order**.

Assynt also faces challenges common to many remote and rural areas, such as:

- A seasonal tourist economy
- Declining owner occupancy and rising house prices (in two of its townships, Stoer and Clachtoll, over 50% of homes are holiday homes)
- Although ward statistics⁸ show a spread of different employment categories, 30.2% of employment is in distribution, hotels and restaurants, the second highest category after the public sector (32.4%)
- Average unemployment lies at 3.8%⁹, with seasonal peaks and troughs.¹⁰

1.4 Methods

The research in Assynt adopted a multi-method approach combining both qualitative and quantitative methods as well as action research elements in which we have developed new tools (notably online). This research involved:

- i) A literature review of historical literature and contemporary documents
- ii) Qualitative interviews with local groups especially those involved in angling
- iii) Qualitative interviews with anglers (n=50)

³ www.fishing.visitwales.com

⁴ www.countrysportscotland.com; Brown, A. (2009) *Angling and Rural Areas: The Assynt Angling Study: Interim Report for the Social and Community Benefits of Angling Project*, Manchester: Substance.

⁵ www.cumbriafishingfestival.co.uk

⁶ See <http://www.wyeuskfoundation.org>; www.wrt.org.uk/projects/anglingpassport/anglingpassport.html

⁷ The 2001 census said that the population of the Assynt Community Council area in 2001 was 953

⁸ *Ibid*

⁹ Source: Highland Council: <http://www.highland.gov.uk> accessed on 17.12.10

¹⁰ MacLeod, K (2007) *Assynt Area Profile*, Lochinver: Assynt Office Services for Assynt Crofters Trust

- iv) Three online and face-to-face questionnaire surveys:
 - o Assynt Anglers' Survey 2009
 - o Assynt Anglers' Survey 2010
 - o Assynt Visitors' Survey 2010
- v) Postcode surveys of visiting anglers in 2009, 2010 and 2011
- vi) Data gathering via an online mapping tool
- vii) Research into trout angling permit sales

The research posed a number of key questions:

- How important is angling to the local economy?
- Who fishes in Assynt, why, and what is their experience?
- How can support and information services be better developed?
- How can angling tourism relate to wider community developments?

1.5 Utilising Technology: Research in Remote Rural Areas

Undertaking research with visiting anglers in a remote rural area poses particular 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 for a week or fortnight.

Added to this are a lack of internet or mobile coverage in many areas and the absence of collection of angler details that one might find at more commercial fisheries (personal or contact details, catch etc.). To help address this, we:

- i) Established a project website – **Assynt Angling Information and Research**, www.assynt.anglingresearch.org.uk – as a portal for the research. This provided information alongside tools to collect feedback and research data.
- ii) Distributed forms and stamped permits for permit sellers to collect angler details
- iii) Distributed information about the research in print format throughout Assynt supplemented by local and national press coverage.
- iv) Worked with Visit Scotland, tourist centre staff and local tourist groups to install a PC in the Lochinver Tourist Centre allowing access to the website.

Alongside this we had the cooperation of those selling permits in collecting angler details at the point of sale either on forms or on the reverse of permit stubs. This allowed us to contact those anglers subsequently and gain their input.

1.5 Project Outputs

The Assynt Angling Research involved:

- Over 200 visiting Assynt anglers surveyed
- 130 other Assynt visitors surveyed
- Postcodes collected from around 300 visiting Assynt anglers
- 150 comments posted on Assynt Angling website
- Over 10,000 unique site users at www.assynt.anglingresearch.org.uk
- Over 50 Assynt anglers interviewed
- 20 local organisations consulted

The research has produced a total of six reports in addition to this one:

1. Angling in Assynt: Interim Report 2009
2. Assynt Angler Survey 2010
3. Assynt Visitor Survey 2010
4. Assynt Trout Angler Permit Sales 2009-2010
5. Assynt Angler Postcode Survey
6. Assynt Angling Development Options Paper

These and all other outputs from the Social and Community Benefits of Angling project are available at: www.resources.anglingresearch.org.uk

2. The Profile of Angling Tourism in Assynt

2.1 The Structure of Angling in Assynt

Our Interim Report in 2009 provided a detailed account of the demographic context of Assynt as well as of the different organisations that are involved in some way in angling in Assynt¹¹. It highlighted the range of community and private ownership of angling in Assynt which is summarised in the table overleaf.

Trout angling in Assynt is divided into four areas:

- The North Assynt Estate run by the Assynt Crofters' Trust
- The South, West and East Zones of the Assynt Angling Association, a collection of local landowners
- There are also one or two lochans not included in wider provision and privately held; and there is also a small rainbow trout fishery, Lagg.

The map shows the boundaries of trout angling in Assynt. An online interactive version is available at: www.assyntanglinginfo.org.uk



Salmon and sea trout angling is predominantly on the River Inver and River Kirkaig. The rights to these are mostly held by the Assynt Estate (owned by the Vestey family) and marketed through CKD Galbraith. Additional salmon and sea trout angling is available on a number of lochs run by the Assynt Angling Association waters; as well as sea trout fishing on the Assynt Crofter's Trust Manse system.

Sea angling is available all along the coast of Assynt as well as, by arrangement, through some local boat owners. For an online map of some sea angling locations, see: www.assyntanglingresearch.org.uk/?q=mapstraction_sea

¹¹ Brown, A (2009) *Angling in Assynt: Interim Report 2009*, Manchester: Substance

Principal Angling-Related Organisations in Assynt

Organisation	Type	Role	Ownership of Angling
Assynt Crofters Trust	Community: Trust	Represents crofters in the North Assynt Estate who won an historic right to buy their land in 1993. Website: www.assyntcrofters.co.uk www.sportingassynt.co.uk	Fishing: Owns trout fishing on all North Assynt estate lochs and lochans (over 150) as well as sea trout fishing on the Manse system. Boats: ACT has boats on 8 lochs.
Assynt Angling Association	Limited Company: Umbrella organisation	Created in 2000 as a unique partnership of local landowners to provide permits to fishing for trout as well as some lochs with migratory fish. Website: www.assyantangling.co.uk	Fishing: Sells permits for all the trout angling in South, West and East areas of Assynt (all lochs not covered by the ACT). This includes over 100 lochs and lochans including the larger lochs – Loch Assynt, Cam Loch, Loch Veyatie. Boats: The AAA manages 20 boats, some with engines
Assynt Angling Club	Community: Membership	The AAC was established in the 1950s to provide access for local people to fishing in Assynt.	AAC members have access to trout fishing on all the Assynt lochs as well as around 50 days on the Rivers Inver and Kirkaig. It also sells permits for non-members and visitors to fish the Inver Estuary at £10 per day.
Assynt Estate	Private	The Assynt Estate has been owned by the Vestey Family since the 1930s. Website for angling: http://www.sportinglets.co.uk	Fishing: Trout fishing is administered under the umbrella of the AAA. Salmon and sea trout fishing on the River Inver and River Kirkaig is now administered by CKD Galbraith which has allowed greater access to day tickets. Boats: The estate also has a number of boats including on Loch Assynt, Ailsh and Awe.
Assynt Foundation	Community: Charitable	Owns the Drumrunie and Glencanisp estates which it bought via a community buy-out in 2005. Website: www.assyntfoundation.org	Fishing: Fishing on the AF's land is administered via the Assynt Angling Association. Boats: See AAA above.
Culag Community Woodland Trust	Community: Charitable	Owns and manages the Little Assynt estate to increase access and education about the area's natural environment. Website: www.culagwoods.org.uk	Fishing: Lochs on the Little Assynt estate are administered by the AAA. CCWT has created a unique All Abilities Path to its lochs as well as disabled-friendly boats and facilities.

2.2 Assynt Angler Visitors

When the research began there was very little robust evidence about who visits Assynt to go fishing; where they come from; how long they stay; what they catch and what their views are. What follows is a summary of anglers we surveyed.

i) Age

The average age of Assynt anglers surveyed is relatively high, at 53. 20% of anglers are 50-54, 14% at 45-49 and 14% at 55-59. Our Visitor Survey in 2010 suggested that some younger visitors who went sea fishing didn't know where to start with freshwater fishing. Given that some of these are game anglers of the future, investigating how they and local youngsters could be encouraged to learn about game fishing could help sustain tourism in the future.

ii) Gender

As with the results of angling studies conducted elsewhere, angling in Assynt is heavily dominated by males – between 95 and 99% in our surveys. Exploring the demand of female visitors to Assynt to go angling, and ways in which this could be encouraged, could help increase angler numbers without increasing total numbers of visitors.

iii) Marital Status

64.4% of visiting anglers were married, 18.6% living with a partner and 17% were single or divorced/separated.

iv) Ethnicity

Anglers surveyed overwhelmingly (99%) classified themselves as White, White Scottish or White British ethnic groups.

v) Education

Visiting anglers have high educational backgrounds: around a third had a postgraduate degree; a quarter had degree level qualifications. 3.5% had no educational qualifications.

vi) Country of Origin

The vast majority of visitors are UK based with a slight majority from Scotland (50.8% as opposed to 42.4% from England and 3.4% from Wales).

vii) Visits

A majority of respondents (54.4%) stayed for one week, with 30% staying for less than a week and 13.3% staying for two weeks. One option for increasing income from angling into the local area would be to encourage those staying a week or less to stay longer.

viii) Stay

A majority of respondents (55.3%) stayed in self catering accommodation, with 11.8% 'other' (including 5% who stayed with family or friends), 11.8% in hotels and 10.5% in B+B's. In order to increase the impact of existing visitors and to encourage longer or repeat stays, one option would be to develop accommodation and angling 'packages'.

ix) Who they fished with

When in Assynt, anglers mostly fished with friends (39.7%) or family (28.6%), while a considerable number fish on their own (30.2%).

x) Physical Activity

Anglers were asked to rate the amount of physical activity they undertook when fishing.

- 56% of anglers rated their experience as involving 'high intensity', almost double national averages.
- 36% rated their activity as of moderate intensity.
- Very low numbers reported low activity levels (8%)

In an age where tourists seek more active holidays, this suggests that marketing Assynt angling as a healthy outdoor activity could have some results.

2.3 Postcode Survey Data

We surveyed the postcodes of over 300 anglers to determine where anglers travelled from to Assynt in 2009, 2010 and 2011. The map below shows the distribution of all respondents from all three years.



Map: Distribution of all home location postcodes

Using 'as the crow flies' distances we were able to demonstrate the breakdown of the travel distances of visiting anglers. The breakdown in distances is shown the chart below, with the single biggest distance between 151 to 200 miles.

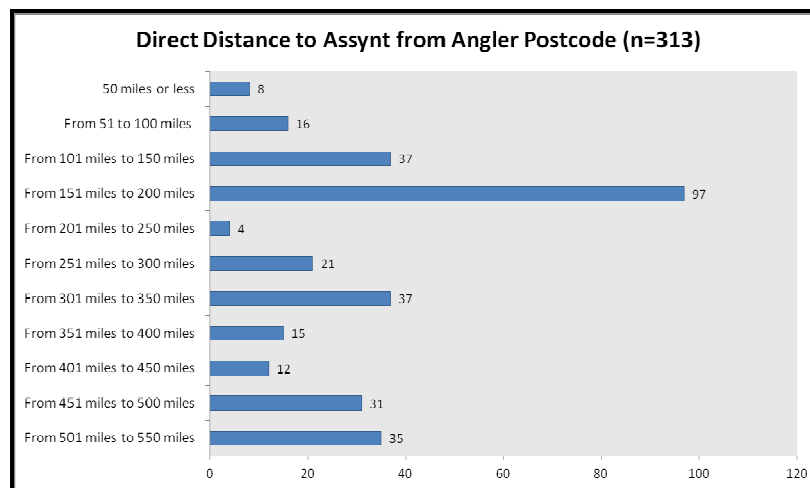


Table: Travelling Distances of Visiting Anglers

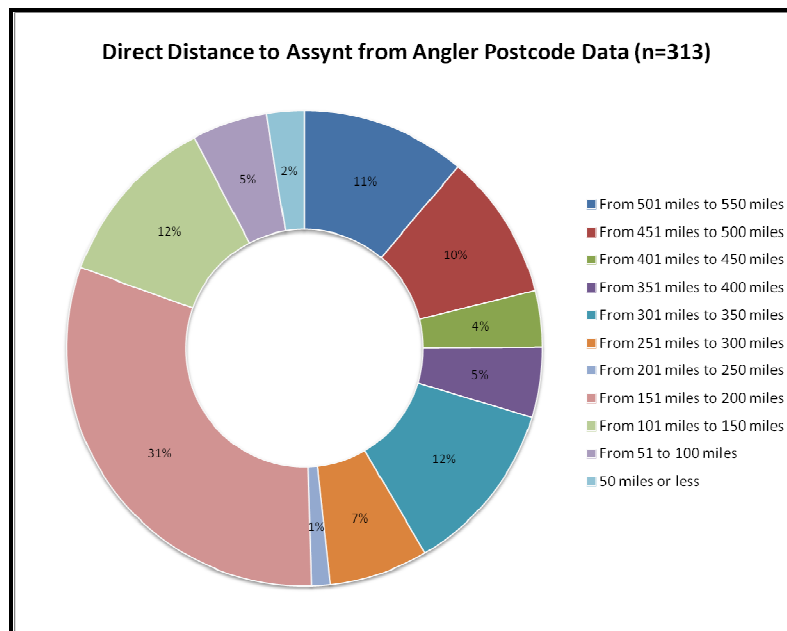
The table below represents the totals across each year in five areas: Highlands; the Central Belt of Scotland; Northern England; Midlands and Southern England.

Distance	% of Visiting Anglers	Area
50 miles or less	2%	Highlands
51-100 miles	5%	Highlands
101-150 miles	12%	Highlands
151-200 miles	31%	Central Belt
201-250 miles	1%	Central Belt
251-300 miles	7%	Northern England
301-350 miles	12%	Northern England
351-400 miles	5%	Northern England
401-450 miles	4%	Midlands
451-500 miles	10%	Southern
501-550 miles	11%	Southern

The average distances year on year were as follows:

Year	Average 'As the Crow Flies' Distance
2011	287 miles (461 Km)
2010	271 miles (436 Km)
2009	245 miles (394 Km)

This chart and the table which follows it shows the percentage of visiting anglers from each 'grouped' area.



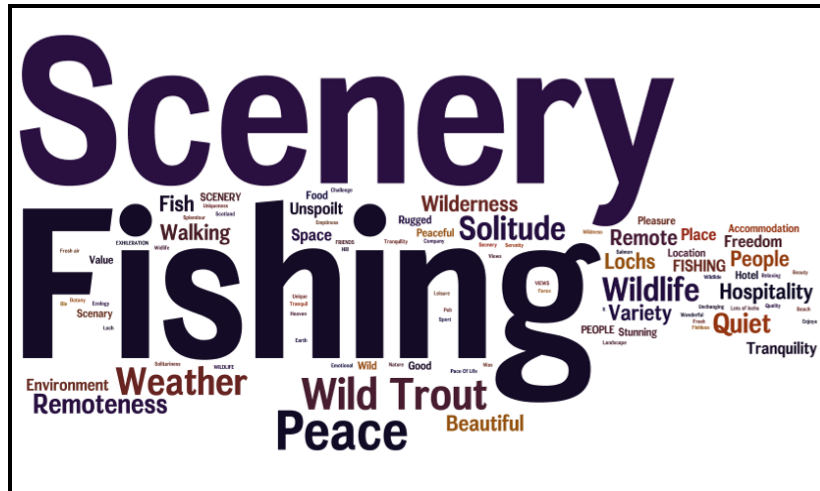
Collating these figures shows that there are:

- 19% of anglers surveyed came from the Highlands
- 32% came from the Central Belt of Scotland
- 24% came from Northern England
- 4% came from the Midlands
- 22% came from Southern England

2.4 Assynt Angler Experiences

From quantitative survey data and in-depth interviews with visiting anglers in Assynt it is clear that their experience is **overwhelmingly positive**. Indeed, it was difficult to find anglers who had a poor experience except where uncontrollable natural factors intervened – notably the weather and midges.

We asked anglers to say what they feel were the **best and worst things** about their visit to Assynt in three words. We then quantified these responses and the ‘word clouds’ represent those findings, with the larger words representing greater frequency in responses.



Word Cloud: Best things about visiting Assynt



Word Cloud: Worst things about visiting Assynt

The high volume of respondents who put ‘nothing’ in the worst thing about visiting Assynt speaks volumes for anglers’ positive experience.

Further evidence comes from the 50 in depth interviews we conducted with Assynt anglers. Comments from interviewees included the following:

I deliberately went [to Assynt] to fish. I wanted to find the wildest, most natural environment within which to fish brown trout and Assynt seemed the right place to go. It was very good. I liked the scenery and the idea that I had to figure out everything, explore everything on my own. The fact that it has stayed exactly as it was, wild and authentic with wild brown trout. I choose lochs that are as inaccessible, remote and difficult to get to as possible. The lochs I find in this way are in their most original,

pristine state. I want to explore them and understand them myself, which takes years. (Interviewee 2011, male, 48)

The AAA is a very well organized and structured club and access to the lochs is well defined even though they are quite remote. (Interviewee 2011, male, 60)

I buy the [the Crofters permits]. I think they are reasonably priced and easy to get hold of. (Interviewee 2011, male, 39i)

The main attraction for me is the immersion and involvement with what goes on in the natural world more than the angling per se. It is very interesting to try to persuade a fish to go for an artificial fly and think that it is going to eat an actual insect – it is the process of attempting to understand the dynamics involved well enough to be able to seduce a wild creature that is of great interest. (Interviewee 2011, male, 39ii)

Loved it – I would have liked to spend more time there! Crossing moorlands to find even wilder lochs and using light tackle to catch little fish in these wild lochs – it was great! It is perhaps the only place in the British Isles that provides a real sense of authentic uninhabited wilderness experience just on the edge of Europe. (Interviewee 2011, male, 39iii)

Where there were a handful of constructively critical comments these tended to concern:

- The condition of a small number of boats, especially in relation to the ACT lochs
- The location of sellers of some boat permits
- Confusion for some anglers about the different groups selling permits
- Restrictions on fishing on Sunday (a particular issue for those staying shorter periods).

However, such comments need to be taken within the context of the capacity of local organisations and people to offer alternatives and especially the cost of alternative arrangements when permit costs are kept so low.

2.5 Improving Services

We also asked anglers about how they felt angling as well as other tourist services in Assynt could be improved (see the Assynt Anglers Survey 2010). From the table, it can be observed that the developments that received the highest approval were:

- Improving information
- Improving fish stocks
- Sea angling charter boat services
- Permits to cover all areas
- Boats available on more lochs

There was only moderate support for ‘beginner’ services such as angling tuition, or guides amongst existing anglers, although this reflects the experienced nature of the majority of respondents. However, this wasn’t true of all interviewees:

I think that more anglers would use guides or ghillies if such services were available at reasonable prices. Fly-fishermen tend to watch the pennies so the prices would need to be reasonable. A decent tackle shop would also be a good service which could generate additional income for the local community. (Angler male 62 Interview 2011)

This sort of service rated much higher in our general visitors’ survey where families, in particular, wanted to introduce children to fly fishing. Further exploration of how existing providers can be promoted to meet this demand and where there are opportunities for new service provision would be one way to increase the positive impact of angling in Assynt.

3. The Benefits of Angling for Assynt

3.1 The Economic Contribution of Angling Tourism

In 2001 academics warned that in the UK ‘the scope of tourism in rural areas remains largely unrecognised.’¹² This situation has changed over the last decade, with the publication of studies that emphasised the importance of angling and recreation to rural economies:

- The Country Sports Tourism Group of Scotland report in 2004 estimated the value of country sports in Scotland at around £200m, and that 67% of the value of game and coarse angling was attributable to visiting anglers.¹³
- Other studies have emphasised the contribution of angling to specific areas. Some have centred on specific river catchments, such as the SQW report on the River Tweed which estimated a GVA of £7m supporting 487 FTE jobs from angling; others have taken a regional focus, such as the Nautilus (2006) study estimating local resident spending of £110m and visitor spending of £165m in the South West region of England.¹⁴
- The value of freshwater fishing (Radford 2007) and sea angling (Drew 2004, Radford 2009) to the national economy has also raised the profile of angling.¹⁵
- In a broader sense, a recent study in Scotland has also sought to assess the ‘social value’ of natural spaces in Scotland. The Scottish National Heritage’s 2010 report estimated the value of ‘nature based tourism’ at £1.4 billion, with 39,000 associated FTE jobs.¹⁶

Although diversification has been recognised as an increasingly important element in sustainable rural development, the *relative* impact that angling can make is less often understood within *particular communities*.

In 2009 and 2010 we surveyed visiting anglers in Assynt (n=125) to determine the average expenditure by anglers in a number of areas. We asked them about their spending in the area in a range of different categories. Given a lack of data about total angler numbers, we used estimates of total visiting angler numbers at 1,200 and 1,500 per year based on our own permit survey data as well as local knowledge. The table below outlines the average spending per head of anglers surveyed as well as total Economic Output for the area generated from standard multipliers.

Category	Average Spend per Angler (£)	Leakage from angling rents (5%)	-10% adjustment (displacement)	Multiplier	Output (to nearest whole)
Accommodation	322.39		290.39	1.25	363
Fishing permits	12.27		11.07	1.4	15
Boats	94.3		84.9	1.47	125
Fishing tackle	119.67		107.77	1.21	130
Guiding/coaching	40.38	38.36	34.56		35
Food shopping	20.70	20.08	18.08	1.4	25
Eating/drinking out	0.11	0.1	0.09	1.4	0
Other	41.08		36.98	1.24	46
Total	650.9				739

¹² Sharpley R, Craven B. (2001) ‘The 2001 Foot and Mouth crisis: rural economy and tourism policy implications: a comment’, *Current Issues in Tourism* 4(6): p 527–537.

¹³ TNS (2004) *op cit.*: 2

¹⁴ SQW (2006) *Economic Impact from Angling on the Tweed River System*; Nautilus (2005) *The Motivation, Demographics and Views of South West Recreational Sea Anglers and their Socio-economic Impact on the Region*

¹⁵ Radford A., Riddington, G. and Gibson, H. (2009) *The Economic evaluation of inland fisheries* Bristol: EA Science Report SC050026/SR2; Drew Associates (2004) *Research Into the Economic Contribution of Sea Angling*; Radford, A. *et al* (2009) *Economic Impact of Recreational Sea Angling in Scotland*,

¹⁶ Bryden, D.M., *et al* (2010) *Assessing the Economic Impacts of Nature Based Tourism in Scotland* Scottish Natural Heritage Commissioned Report No. 398

We also estimated the 'Gross Value Added' of expenditure in a region. This means the 'operating profit' that expenditure in a region can equate to. To better illustrate this concept, expenditure on food in a local shop can be calculated as a total amount, but some of that expenditure will be paying for the cost of supplying the food bought. Alternatively it can be viewed as 'turnover minus cost of bought in goods and services'¹⁷. We utilised approaches adopted in similar studies elsewhere which used a GVA rate of 39% of total economic output. If we apply this to Assynt figures the Total GVA based on a ratio of 39% is therefore £432,315. However, a note of caution is that a more comprehensive business survey would provide more accuracy.

In summary:

- **An economic contribution of between £887,000 and £1,109,000 is made by anglers visiting Assynt annually.**
- **This equates to a Gross Value Added (or profit to the local area) of between £345,840-£432,300**
- **This equates to an employment impact of between 25 and 31 Full Time Equivalent jobs.**

Whilst this is based on a limited study, it has implications both for Assynt and other remote and rural communities:

- It suggests that **angling tourism can play a significant role** in bringing income into small rural areas, and can help sustain employment in often economically fragile communities.
- Local, regional or national governments, or statutory and regional agencies, should consider **investment in angling-based tourism** initiatives to increase economic benefits through increased numbers.
- Should the numbers of anglers visiting in a year increase, the **benefit of this should also increase proportionately across economic indicators** (a 10% increase in the numbers of angler stays in Assynt could result in 3 FTEs and an additional £100,000 economic contribution).

3.2 Lengthening the Tourist Season

One way that angling can contribute to tourism in rural areas is that it can help 'lengthen' the tourist season and thereby reduce the peaks and troughs associated with seasonality. For many rural areas, and in particular remote ones where the length of travel tends to mean people stay for relatively longer periods (a week or two weeks according to our surveys), tourist trade can be focused on relatively short periods in the year.

As part of our research in Assynt we mapped the sale of trout angling permits in 2009 and 2010. The graph overleaf illustrates how angling can encourage visitation outside the principal holiday periods – in this case (where game angling is most prominent) on the 'shoulders' of the summer season in May, June and in September.

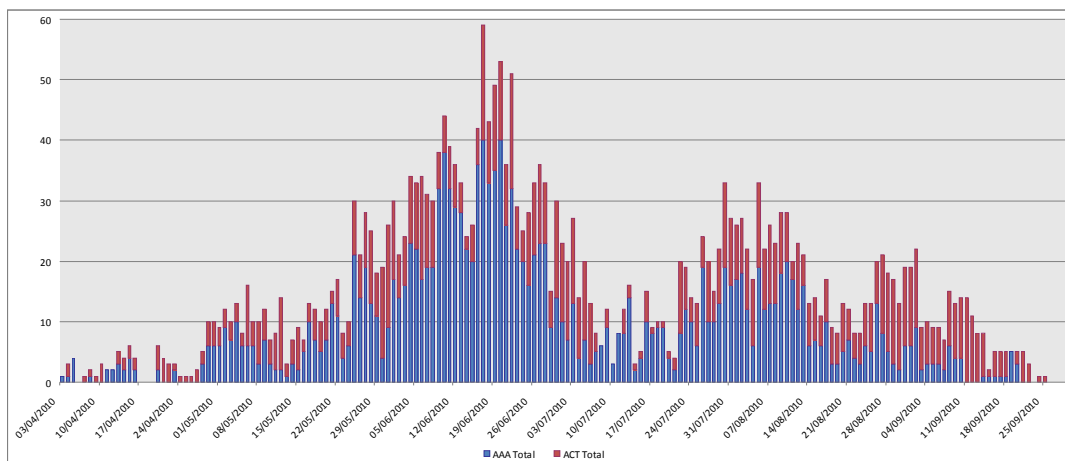


Chart: Trout Angling Rods per Day in Assynt 2010

This effect of lengthening the tourist season could be emphasised further in Assynt through promotion of angling opportunities outside of the main trout fishing activity in June – such as early season (ferox angling); salmon angling in September; and sea fishing in autumn and winter months.

3.3 Offsetting Declines in Other Forms of Tourism

Specialist outdoor activity based tourism, such as angling, can also help rural areas offset more general declines in visitor numbers. Other studies have recognised the contribution of developing niche or special interest tourism in offsetting such declines¹⁸ and the development of tourist loyalty and repeat visitation. This can be enhanced further by dedicated project and promotional work (such as our project which emphasised information provision to niche markets).

Our surveys of visiting anglers in Assynt highlighted the 'loyalty' many had to the area – between 70% and 80% had visited Assynt previously and a significant number of anglers interviewed had visited on multiple occasions. This suggests that angling can assist in retaining visitors from one year to the next when more general tourism declines.

In Assynt, during our research, there was a notable increase in angling tourism during the lifetime of our project:

- In 2010 there was an estimated 10-12% decline in all visitors to Assynt but a 25% increase in income from trout angling permits for the Assynt Angling Association (AAA) with an additional 15% increase in permit income for the AAA in 2011.
- In 2011 the Assynt Crofters' Trust recorded a 10% increase in permit income gross takings since 2009.

This suggests that specialist work on angling – such as dedicated provision of centralised high quality information – can help maintain and increase angler tourism even in the context of wider tourism downturns as well as provide direct income via permits.

3.4 Contributing to 'Portfolio Employment'

Angling tourism has a role to play in a portfolio of rural employment – an economic strategy that is often an essential part of rural economies, enabling households and businesses to draw consistent income in an economy affected by seasonality.

¹⁸ Carson D and Schmallegger, D, Fishing 'The Big Rivers in Australia's Northern Territory: Market diversification for the Daly River' in Prideaux, B. and Cooper, M. (eds.) (2009) *River Tourism*, CAB International pp131-149

The Angling in the Rural Environment project undertaken by Newcastle and Durham Universities in 2009 generated some important findings in relation to angling and the economic development of rural communities in the North Yorkshire region. It found that:

- Angling businesses in rural areas need to be appreciated within the context of a larger and sometimes complex economic 'jigsaw'
- Angling-related income can be small, but can also be very important - a difference between viability and non viability for some households
- Angling tends to be 'invisible' in policy/development contexts because it falls 'below the radar of development indicators'.¹⁹

The 'small but significant' role angling can play in household or business income is also reflected in our research into angling's impact in Assynt. In the area many people have a 'portfolio of employment' that involves different jobs at different times of the year, reflecting seasonal variations in agriculture and tourism.

For some, angling income can help to support the viability of families or businesses by adding extra income for example through permit sales and especially through provision of tourism-related services (much related to accommodation and food). Although often this income is often not enough to register on regional development employment measures, it can make an important difference at the household/small business level.

3.5 The Cultural Heritage of Rural Communities

Angling is also an activity that can be an important element of the cultural heritage of rural areas, steeped in a cultural history that defines communities and contributes to a collective identity. This is also an added attraction to visiting anglers and something rural communities can help research, develop and display.

As part of our research in Assynt we began to collate an online archive of material including:

- Historic literature detailing visitors' experiences dating back to the mid 19th century
- Digitally recording hotel angling records dating back to the 1880s
- Collecting old photographs and making old cine footage available.²⁰

This material has been made available electronically on a project-specific website, as well as being displayed in the local Tourist Information Centre at Lochinver. It will also be submitted to the Assynt Community Archive housed in the community-owned Lochinver Mission building. Although in early stages, the ACA is an excellent example of good practice in the management of cultural heritage, enabling community groups and individuals – from the area as well as elsewhere - to digitise and catalogue archive material.²¹ This kind of angling-specific archiving can sit alongside other community initiatives such as historical society projects and helps a community to 'know itself' as well as preserve and communicate its history to visitors.²²

¹⁹ Oughton, L, Wheelock, J, Whitman, G. (2009) 'The Move to Still Waters: the rural development implications' paper presented to Angling in the Rural Environment, Dissemination Conference, York, May 27th 2009.

²⁰ http://assynt.anglingresearch.org.uk/?q=angling_history

²¹ http://www.dspacedev2.org/index.php?option=com_content&catid=85&id=3558&view=article ; <http://www.lochinvermission.org.uk/>

²² Assynt demonstrates some very good practice in this regard – the voluntary work of Historic Assynt (www.historicassynt.co.uk) and the Assynt Historical Society (www.normist.co.uk/mills.htm) has helped restore historic buildings in the area and provide information and interpretation signage at key sites that are valued by visitors (not just anglers).

4. Striking a Balance in Assynt

One of the most important factors in promoting angling-based tourism in rural areas is balancing the desire for increased visitor numbers and associated economic growth with the potential social, economic, cultural and environmental impacts related to tourism development. This is a particular concern in rural areas where wild fish stocks may be more sensitive to increased angling pressure than commercial or stocked fisheries, but also where the angler experience of the environment is an important element.

As such there are two related issues at stake:

- Whether developing angling tourism in rural areas creates too much '**angling pressure**' and damages sensitive fish stocks or the environment.
- What impact angling tourism has on the visiting angler experience, either through **exceeding social carrying capacity** or 'over development'.

Increasingly, rural industries have to operate within parameters that conserve the special qualities of rural areas²³ – and angling is no different. Angling tourism needs to function within the broader context of 'ecotourism', defined as supporting environmental, economic and social/cultural sustainability,²⁴ if it is to be considered a viable component of rural development.

Our research in Assynt has highlighted some common dilemmas:

- i. The need to implement **sustainable management systems** to protect fragile areas;
- ii. The need to **mediate** between the at times different aims of conservation, preservation and local development
- iii. The need to encourage **balanced, broad-based** but community-focused economic growth.

4.1 Angling Pressure and the Environment

The effect of angling tourism on the ecology of the destination is one that is not confined to our study nor to the UK. Zwirn *et al*'s study of the potential of angling tourism in Russia argued that:

*'When angling tourists reach threatened freshwater ecosystems... there is a risk of degrading the very fishery and landscapes that attracted them, thwarting long term economic development prospects and reducing biodiversity... we believe that angling can be legitimately considered a form of ecotourism that contributes positively to conservation, science, and local or regional economic development.'*²⁵

Our research in Assynt recorded the concerns of some anglers that any 'development' of angling or increase in angler numbers would both harm fish stocks and mean that there were too many anglers.

'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!' (Online comment submitted August 2009)

'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.' (Survey comment submitted June 2010)

²³ Sharpley, R. and Roberts, L. (2004) 'Rural Tourism - 10 Years On' International Journal Of Tourism Research, 6, 119–124: 119

²⁴ 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

²⁵ Zwirn *et al* (2005) *op cit*

Other anglers however, were less concerned. One interviewee commented:

'I don't see this as a danger. There certainly aren't too many anglers. In the 2 weeks of fishing we didn't see another person, which is fine for us as we like to get away from people to a pristine, solitary environment.' (Interviewee, male 66)

We explored the contrasting views of some visiting anglers and local organisations' feedback about increasing angler numbers. This related to two issues:

- Whether numbers of anglers could be increased at particular times of the year; and
- Whether numbers of anglers could be increased without undermining the value that visiting anglers placed on fishing in a remote place as well as the unique bio-diversity of the area.

Part of the solution to this is having adequate data on angler numbers and of fish stocks. In the Assynt case, although it is a historically renowned angling destination that attracts hundreds of anglers every year, there has been almost no natural sciences research about the brown trout population,²⁶ minimal catch returns, and very little monitoring of angler numbers and 'angling pressure'.

Our research has explored a number of ways in which these evidence shortcomings could be addressed at low cost:

- Development of a web site with interactive OS mapping that allows anglers to feedback information on their experience and catches so there is some guide as to where people fish and what they catch.
- Use of online survey tools for catch returns.
- A survey of permit sales (through analysis of permit stubs) in order to:
 - Calculate total rod day numbers
 - 'Map' angling pressure across a year
 - Understand maximum, minimum and average rods fishing in Assynt on any one day

Our permit survey provided some particularly firm evidence on which to base debates about angler numbers in Assynt. It showed that for an area of several hundred lochs and lochans, during the vast majority of the year angling numbers are very low:

- On only 12% (n=21) of available days there were more than 30 rods fishing.
- On exactly half the total days (92 days) there were between 5 and 20 rods
- For 20% of the time (36 days) there are less than 5 rods fishing in Assynt

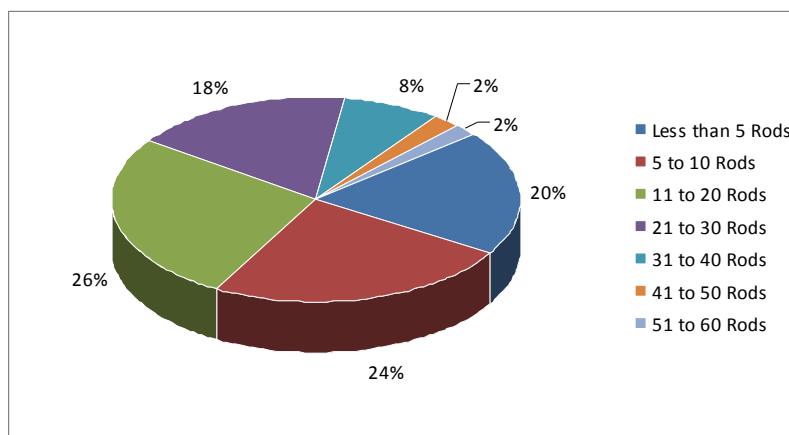


Chart: Trout Angler 'Rods per Day' in Assynt, 2010

²⁶ Stephen, A. (1986) The Brown Trout Project; and some work by the West Sutherland Fisheries Trust

4.2 'Social Carrying Capacity'

The absence of people is a key driver for visitors (the 'rurality' of rural areas²⁷). The '**social carrying capacity**' of an area refers to the subjective valuation made by participants that includes visibility of others but also encompasses factors such as the behaviour of others in any given context.²⁸ Maintaining a **balance between increased numbers** (that can generate additional income for rural communities) **and the subjective experience of anglers** is vital in development of angling tourism.

Our surveys of anglers in Assynt suggested that being able to fish alone, or with a small group and not see other anglers was an appealing feature of angling in the area. In our 2010 survey, although quality of fish stocks and the fishing were the main motivators, the 'feeling of remoteness' and 'being able to fish without seeing others' followed close behind. This was also referred to in several of the interviews we conducted:

'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.' (Assynt angler interview 2011)

However, for others angling in Assynt the apparent absence of people was so pronounced that it actually raised some concern:

'I'm wondering if there is any fisherman in Assynt?! I've been, in the last seven days, in more than twenty lochs, most of them around two hours of walk from the first car park, and I haven't met ONE fisherman. But lot of deers and, sometimes, very nice trouts.' (Comment submitted online by French angler July 2011)

Striking a balance was a key theme of anglers we interviewed:

The area is still in the early stages of development. Unless there is a huge influx of anglers who want to take away their catch, it is unlikely that angling will damage the fishing in the area as there is so much water available and so many wild fish. Having said that however, one goes to Assynt for a wild, solitary fishing experience and if one turned up at every loch and encountered several other fishermen, this could be detrimental to the angling ambiance that is so important to the region. This would need to be kept in mind as the area is further developed. (Interviewee 2011, male, 39)

Alongside monitoring the numbers of anglers (or rod days) and their distribution across the year, **feedback from anglers about their experience is required** to continually inform communities about the social qualities of angler experiences. The type of data gathering we developed makes it possible to identify when and where numbers could be increased as well as managing where anglers fish. In our interviews and surveys the overwhelming majority of anglers said that they would not object to being asked to leave more information at the point of sale and in terms of catch returns, something we believe future developments should embrace.

4.3 Local Capacity

Although angling in rural areas can form part of a portfolio of income for local residents, the local angling offer in Assynt (as often elsewhere) is heavily reliant on a small number of people, mostly on a voluntary basis. The capacity of an area to maintain and develop angling and increase community benefit from it can consequently be severely limited by the availability of personnel. Within rural communities, the management of fisheries for community benefit requires attention to five key areas:

²⁷ Sharpley, R. and Roberts, L. (2004) *op cit*: p121

²⁸ 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: pp395–432

- **Maintenance** – for example dealing with boat problems especially where they are located in remote areas; or maintaining boat engines
- **Administration** – dealing with permit distribution and income as well as club or association costs
- **Membership** – with problems of declining, or inactive, membership of clubs
- **Advice provision** – this is often given by a few people who get overburdened with ad hoc advice provision
- **Coordination** - angling permit income may not be sufficient to support specific appointments and need public support if community-wide benefits are to be achieved.

It is important to recognise the valuable contribution individuals make to angling provision. Maximising the benefits of angling for rural communities, however, requires greater attention to be paid to capacity building – such as funding development and volunteer coordination.

Given the benefits that angling tourism can bring to rural areas, it is important that national and regional policy as well as funding and development agencies recognise the role it can play and assist communities in building their capacity.



5. Increasing the Impact of Angling Tourism in Assynt

Our research explored ways in which the local benefits from angling based tourism were being, or could be, enhanced further.

5.1 Improving Information Provision

In some rural areas, especially where recreational angling is provided by more than one supplier/landowner, information for visitors can be piecemeal, difficult to get hold of and sometimes confusing or outdated. In Assynt, when the research project started there was no central point of information; a number of different angling providers producing their own information; limited visitor access to the internet; and little robust data.

We utilised an action research approach to test new approaches and in particular:

- The Assynt Angling Information and Research website which provided a one-stop information point, online mapping and feedback tools for visiting anglers and facilitate up to date peer-to-peer advice.
- Use of the website as a portal for local angling history, wildlife and other activities
- Production of a booklet summarising information on all angling opportunities in the area for accommodation providers, tourist agencies and angling organisations
- Development of an angling 'hub' at the Visitor Centre, displays, leaflets and free use of a computer with access to the website. This was supplemented by affordable internet access at the Assynt Leisure Centre and a local newsagents.

The website included a digital, interactive, online map, based on Ordnance Survey's OpenSpace API. The map included:

- Over 100 angling locations tagged by a map marker
- A 'zoom-in' feature providing precise topographical information about angling locations and routes
- 'Click through' facility giving location, access, permit and other details.
- A comment tool on each location allowing anglers to post feedback

Use of the site was supported by publicity on internet forums and in angling and mainstream press²⁹; Visit Scotland's provision of a dedicated PC in the Information Centre; local permit sellers; leaflets and posters distributed locally. The website was heavily used by anglers and proved extremely popular. At the time of writing it had generated:

- 23,400 visits
- 11,200 unique visitors
- 112,000 page views
- An average of over 5 minutes per visit
- Nearly 5 pages viewed per visit

As one of the outputs from this research project we have renamed and redesigned the website to be re-focused around information provision rather than research (with a new URL: www.assyntanglinginfo.org.uk). However, although secure for the short term, the long term future of maintenance, updating and ongoing editing remains somewhat uncertain.

5.2 Increased Access to Angling

Making angling accessible to visitors is not just about generating accurate information, but also about ensuring the angling offer is easily understood, affordable and well-publicised.

Developments in several rural areas in the UK demonstrate the effectiveness of 'angling passport schemes'. The first of these was developed by the Westcountry Rivers Trust and Wye and Usk Foundation and has been followed by similar schemes in the Eden, Ribble and Tyne areas. These schemes help to bring together formerly disparate sources of information

²⁹ www.assyntanglingresearch.org.uk/press

and permits for angling and make it easy for visitors to access previously inaccessible angling.

The staging of angling festivals can also help to advertise angling in areas that might be better known for other activities or attractions. For example, the Cumbrian Fishing Festival which began in 2009 has helped to make the wide variety of fishing available in the Lake District more widely known and attracted visitors in mid-May.

In Assynt, a number of changes since the early 1990s have assisted in increasing angler tourist numbers:

- The **Assynt Crofters Trust buy-out** of the North Assynt Estate made trout angling in the whole of that area available at affordable prices for visitors.
- The formation of the **Assynt Angling Association** in 2000 created a 'mini-passport scheme' bringing together all other trout angling in Assynt under one banner.
- Public access to angling was increased as a result of the **Assynt and Coigach Protection Order** which helps protect wild fish stocks but creates greater public access.
- The **marketing of salmon and sea trout angling** on the two primary rivers in the area from 2010 by CKD Galbraith, has broadened the price range of rod days and made it available to all visitors (e.g. not just hotel guests).

It should also be noted neither the ACT nor the AAA have ever increased the cost of trout angling permits – the ACT since it bought the North Assynt Estate in 1993 and the AAA since it formed in 2000. This represents real value to visiting anglers and, in an age of increased fuel and accommodation costs, means trout angling in Assynt remains very affordable. The cost of salmon fishing on the Inver and Kirkaig is now more segmented, meaning that it is more affordable as well as accessible to visiting anglers, although peak times remain at a premium.

Maintaining this universal, affordable, permitted public access to Assynt's trout angling and improved access to salmon and sea trout angling, is essential to its offer to visiting anglers, although some consideration of limited trout permit price increases could be considered.

5.3 Lengthening the Tourist Season

It has been noted that angling can help lengthen the tourist season for rural areas. This already happens to some extent in Assynt – for example visitor numbers are boosted in June by high numbers of anglers. Additional promotion of different angling opportunities in the Assynt area could extend this impact further, such as:

- Specialist ferox angling in the early season/April
- Further promotion of trout angling in mid-late May and September
- Family angling offers for the July and Scottish summer holiday periods
- Offers for trout and salmon fishing 'combo' deals in September

5.4 Developing Angling within Outdoor Recreation Based Tourism

One of the ways in which angling tourism can be developed is by positioning it within a broader outdoor recreation 'offer'. Our research suggests that the motivations for anglers in Assynt are much broader than simply going fishing and tapping into these motivations can help 'deepen' the attraction of certain locations for anglers.

We asked anglers in our Assynt Anglers Survey in 2010 to identify the most important things about angling in Assynt. The results are presented in the bar chart below. The catch-related aspects of the angling experience – most notably the quality of fish stocks – perhaps inevitably received the largest number of 1st place rankings. However, the remoteness, fishing mountain lochs, being able to fish without seeing others and the scenery in which people go fishing scored highest overall. These results suggest that anglers who visit Assynt value the isolation and the quality of the landscape at least as much as they do the actual fishing.

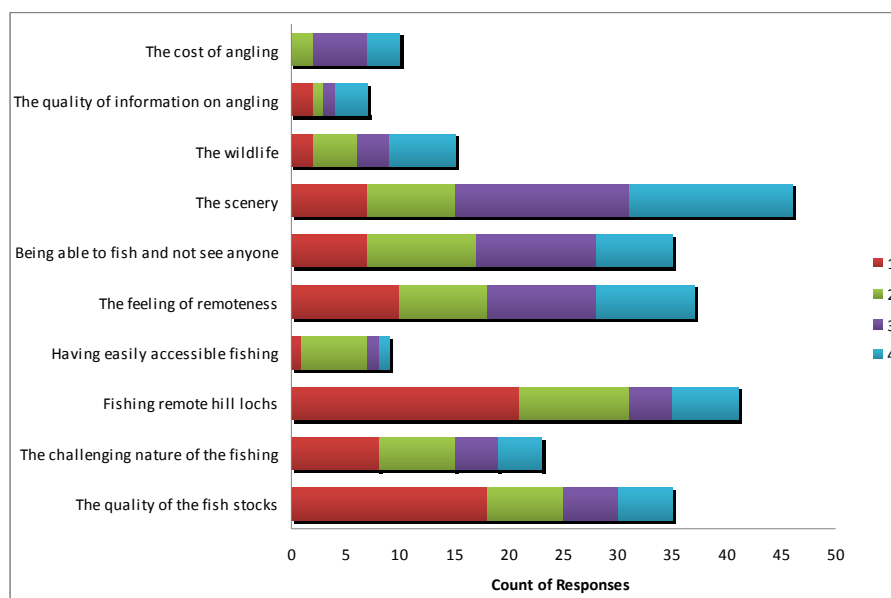


Chart: Responses to 'Please rank from 1 to 4 the four most important things to you about fishing in Assynt.' (Assynt Anglers' Survey 2010)

In qualitative interviews, anglers stressed the importance of hill walking in particular as an additional and associated activity.

'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.' (Female angler, Interview 2009)

Anglers also reported their interest in flora and fauna, organised walks put on by the Highland Council Ranger Service and activities such as kayaking and mountain climbing. More generally, these findings suggest that there may be an opportunity for rural areas to maximise the attractiveness of their area by highlighting the range of outdoor activities on offer and making links between the two. This is particularly relevant to rural areas in the UK given the variable weather and water level conditions.

5.5 Clustering Businesses and Co-operative Competition

Some tourism studies contend that 'clustering' visitor-related services in remote rural areas can assist the production of a greater overall economic benefit. Research by Jackson and Murphy at La Trobe University in Australia³⁰ applied Porter's clustering theory to rural development, and as a result surmised that more benefit can be derived from activity-based tourism by:

- i. Understanding demand better and the local 'USP' in relation to other areas
- ii. Working cooperatively and developing local networks
- iii. Developing work between complementary businesses
- iv. Using government support to assist new developments
- v. Developing interdependent businesses in 'cooperative competition'
- vi. Support work by developing research and training

Clustering approaches have been developed, for instance, in relation to wine tourists where companies providing tours of vineyards, wine, food and accommodation which might otherwise have been considered in 'competition' actually all work together to create packages that create a 'critical mass' creating mutual benefits. Such 'clustering' and 'cooperative

³⁰ Jackson, J. and Murphy, P. (2002) 'Tourism Destinations as Clusters: Analytical Experiences From The New World', *Tourism and Hospitality Research*, Vol.4, N^o1, pp. 36-52.

competition' can also operate on both an intra-regional basis (e.g. within a particular rural community) and inter-regional basis (e.g. across wider areas or regions).

Our research in Assynt suggested that although such cooperation does occur, it happens mostly on an *ad hoc* basis. In relation to angling tourism, there is the potential to further develop co-operative approaches both in terms of 'general' tourists as well as visiting anglers. This might include:

- Marketing of '**accommodation and fishing' packages** - small discounts might be offered with provision of permits or angling information offered on arrival.
- Packages to **promote low demand periods** of the year, such as multiple activities for families
- Developing '**angler friendly' schemes** for accommodation and food businesses
- Cross-marketing and development of **other outdoor activities** – e.g. walking, climbing, mountain biking, kayaking, wildlife, guided 'walk-and-fish' tours etc.
- **Food initiatives** such as 'eat what you catch' offers at local restaurants
- **Signposting** between businesses to ensure visitors use local services

5.6 Land Ownership and Community Benefit

One way in which rural communities can collectively benefit from angling is through **common ownership of land**. Income earned directly from the sale of fishing permits can then be used for purposes that benefit local community organisations and collective angling organisations. This is not to say that other forms of land ownership do not allow wider benefit from angling in rural areas, but rather that collective organisations can deliver added value in this regard.

In Assynt there are a **wide range of community based organisations** that own fishing rights including the Assynt Crofters Trust, Assynt Angling Association, Assynt Foundation and the Culag Community Woodland Trust. Because these are community owned there is a relationship between the direct income earned from angling and local organisations.

Income from permit sales is also more generally reinvested in Assynt, for instance through increased provision of boats and their maintenance, which are much valued by visiting anglers and help to generate ongoing revenue. Alongside the wider economic value of angling we have reported, initiatives which raise angling revenue have a positive impact on both angling provision and community organisations.

One example has been a guide booklet written by local angling expert Cathel Macleod, *Trout Fishing in Assynt*, produced by the Scottish Country Sports Tourism Group with some assistance from our research, which has helped raise further funds for local angling groups – resulting for instance in the provision of a new boat on the Little Assynt estate. Although this booklet is specifically about trout angling belonging to the AAA area, others, notably the Crofters' Trust could undertake a similar approach.

5.7 Integration with Other Tourism Development

Embedding angling tourism development within broader tourism initiatives can help reduce costs and increase impact. This applies not just in terms of the potential for 'clustering' services, but also as a way of maximising the input into Assynt tourism development, reducing cost and human resource burden and maximising publicity about the area.

The **Assynt Tourism Group** represents a wide range of tourism-related businesses in Assynt, including accommodation providers, shops and food and beverage outlets. It is currently exploring ways of developing and improving its web presence as well as how it can assist in integrating tourism services. It makes good sense, financially and in terms of coordination, for angling providers to work with ATG on this.

In particular **website development** could provide an ideal opportunity for cross marketing and development of joint offers – accommodation and angling packages, or angling services.

Given the need for match funding for tourism grants, angling groups (AAA, ACT and salmon angling providers) should consider whether they could contribute to such developments.

Other groups such as Historic Assynt are developing other tourist-related initiatives, notably an **Assynt Festival**, to ‘celebrate the cultural and natural heritage of the area’, the first of which is scheduled for 3rd-10th October 2012. For angling it is perhaps unfortunate that this is right at the end of the trout angling season (which ends on October 6th) and very near the end of the salmon season (October 15th), but angling groups should nonetheless explore ways in which they might be involved. If future events are within the main body of the angling season, there are a host of possibilities to attract and retain anglers as part of an events strategy:

- Competitions, possibly for charity
- Tuition on casting, guiding, information and advice
- Fly tying and casting demonstrations
- Readings and literature events
- Food related events
- Creative arts – such as an existing junior photography project on rivers

5.8 Broadening the Angling Offer

Although the primary focus of angling tourism to Assynt is based around game angling, **sea fishing** is not only popular but something both anglers and non-angling visitors would like to do more. Weather conditions sometimes mean that game angling is limited; and those who are not experienced game anglers, families with young children and those who have never fished would all like more opportunities to take part in sea angling.

Our survey of visiting anglers in 2010 showed a huge appetite for sea angling **boat trips** (as well as other boat trips, such as for sea-life spotting). Although there is some ad hoc provision from local boat operators, this is a service area ripe for development.

5.9 A Regional Benefit

Closely associated with clustering service approaches is the potential of developing **tourist ‘trails’** – linking places within the same region that offer similar or related activities. This has been successful in the US, New Zealand and Australia in relation to both wine and fishing; and the promotion of tourist driving routes in Scotland has been successful in increasing visitor traffic/footfall to more remote areas. Such trails are particularly effective when you have a dispersed population, especially in remote rural/regional communities.

In the UK, some regions have brought together angling providers under an **‘angling passport’** scheme which has significantly increased the total numbers of visiting anglers and the expanded the range of fishery resources available to anglers.

The **North West coast of Scotland** offers a unique collection of trout, salmon and sea trout and sea angling, in settings that are hard to beat anywhere in the world. This is especially true of the wild brown trout angling and there is an opportunity for all areas to benefit from joint promotion of the North West coast angling offer, by increasing total visitor numbers across the region.

It would be possible to promote angling visitors to this area via the creation of a **‘Fishing Trail’** or **‘Trout Trail’**. This could extend from Ullapool through Achiltibuie to Assynt, Scourie, Durness and on to Tongue. Such a development might involve:

- i. An expanded version of the Assynt Angling Information **website** for all areas
- ii. Development of angling **information points** as has been developed in Assynt
- iii. Marketing of the area as an **angling destination** branded under one banner.
- iv. Road **signage** and common logo
- v. Introduction of a **‘passport scheme’** for anglers

Such a scheme could also involve clustering of services in each area – possibly with associated discounts.

6. Options and Recommendations

Angling clearly makes a significant contribution to the Assynt area – economically, culturally and socially. In particular it is a key driver for tourism. The extent to which that benefit can be extended will be down to the approach that local groups decide to take.

Below we summarise a series of options and the different levels which they could be developed, as well as some of the barriers and issues that each entails.

Option 1: ‘Do Nothing’

The first option is to do nothing more than is happening at present. Angling already contributes a significant amount locally and the vast majority of anglers that visit are happy with what is provided. However, even to maintain the status quo, a number of areas need to be addressed:

- **Website:** Substance have redesigned the project website to have a shelf life beyond the research, renamed as Assynt Angling Information (www.assyntanglinginfo.org.uk). Although this can be maintained in the short term, its long term future – without any further development or updating - will require some very small scale investment.
- **Tourist Information Centre:** The PC access and display can continue unaided as long as Visit Scotland support the centre and the provision. However, some updating of the display is recommended and Substance will try and assist with this.
- **Booklet and Leaflets:** Substance has developed copy and design for these which it can make available, and the booklet is a download on the website, but printing and distribution would require some additional resources.

The threats of the ‘do nothing’ approach are that:

- If no investment is made into formation provision it could decline, become dated or not maintained, particularly with the website. In the long term its future may be in jeopardy.
- Angling will continue to rely on the voluntary input of a dwindling number of local people. This applies particularly to the ad hoc provision of angling advice; maintenance; development. Without additional resources the burden will not be alleviated and the opportunities for increasing local benefits from angling not realised.
- Other publicity: Brochures, posters and leaflets could become dated, and the visibility of angling in the area and visitor’s access to information could decline.

Option 2: ‘Low Level’

A middle option is some low level investment and work to maintain things properly and explore future developments. Options include the following:

Website: Investing a small amount would help maintain the site and ensure it is updated regularly. Additional investment could mean that it is developed further and publicised annually. Investment could be used as match funding for grant bids.

Booklet: A moderate investment could secure the production of a booklet on angling in Assynt that advertises all angling opportunities and is updated annually. Angling organisation investment along with local advertising income could help meet print and distribution costs.

Tourist Information Centre: A small amount of effort would be required each year to update display information.

Angling Signage: There is currently no signage at the entrance to Assynt (e.g. Ledmore Junction) nor in Lochinver or elsewhere about angling in the area. It should be possible to install basic signage, or brown signs in conjunction with the Highland Council, to do this.

Collecting Data: Maintaining a means by which anglers details can be collated would mean that angling organisations can contact individual anglers in the future. This could help both monitor who is fishing in Assynt as well as generate loyalty from visiting anglers.

Better Visibility for Services: Some feedback from our work suggested that local there needs to be more visibility for local providers of tuition and guiding, especially in terms of low-cost options for young people, beginners, families and large groups. Ensuring these opportunities are known about would be a low cost option.

Publicity: The research project has distributed a large amount of publicity locally to advertise the website and angling opportunities. This could be undertaken at low cost each year, placing posters and leaflets in all shops, restaurants and accommodation providers.

Festivals and Events: The Assynt Festival in October 2012, although at the end of the angling season provides an opportunity to test angling related activities for such events.

Marketing: It should be possible to undertake some low level marketing and promotion of angling in Assynt, utilising existing budgets from both ACT and AAA, as well as no-cost options such as angling websites and forums. This could involve, for instance marketing of angling opportunities in low demand periods as described in this report.

Other Pragmatic Changes: Some small-scale improvements to angling provision could be made. One example would be for the ACT to sell boat permits for their lochs near to Lochinver which are rarely used (Manse, Tuirc, Crocach) in Lochinver itself.

Coordination of Sea Angling Opportunities: Although significant barriers exist to existing boat owners going wholesale into running boat trips from Lochinver, better coordination and publicity about what opportunities there are could at least 'test the water' in this area.

The key barrier to this approach is securing resources to assist development. Even with low and no-cost options, somebody needs to do it. Nonetheless, if the will is there, this level of development remains the most likely to succeed, and have a positive impact in the short term.

Option 3: 'Significant Development'

To maximise the opportunities for local benefit from angling tourism would require a more significant investment as well as securing more substantial public/grant funding.

Angling Development Worker: The appointment of a part time angling development worker would allow full exploration of opportunities for angling tourism development by providing the human capacity and time required. Such a post could be part-funded through grants: however match funding would need to be secured (possibly 25% of it private) and longer term sustainability would need to be ensured. Roles could include marketing and promotion, coordination between different stakeholders and development of new opportunities.

Tourism Development Worker: Integrating angling development work – including a development worker - with wider tourism development is perhaps a more cost effective and coherent approach. This could help generate buy-in from and coordination between different stakeholders. Specific angling knowledge would however need to be part of the skill set for such a post.

Marketing and Press: Develop a collective/cooperative approach to promotion of Assynt as an angling destination involving all providers. This could include: joint press and PR work; joint adverts; work with forums, social network and other web sites to promote Assynt angling in general; as well as local print-based information incorporating key points *en route*.

North West Coast Trail: It would be possible to promote more angling visitors to the area via the creation of a 'Fishing Trail' or 'Trout Trail' up the North West coast. It would have to be

developed working with other angling providers in the region as well as key public agencies, alongside private funders. A 'passport' type scheme could be developed as part of this.

Sea Angling Boat Trips: Development of a sea angling boat trip business would be hugely popular. Business planning, training, start up investment, patchy availability due to weather and insurance and safety issues would all have to be overcome.

Angling Festival: Whether in conjunction with a wider Assynt Festival (the timing of that permitting) or as a stand alone, an Assynt Angling festival could be developed. This could include a wide variety of angling related activities to attract visitors at lower-demand periods.

Training and Employment: Provision of training for employment could be put in place, particularly targeting young people in the area, to help provide employment around angling and tourist services for any increased demand.

Volunteering: Holidays that include opportunities for visitors to volunteer is something increasing numbers of tourists are taking. Providing opportunities to volunteer around angling could help attract people and build local capacity and ease the burden on some (for instance taking boats in and out; maintaining boats, engines or paths).

The threats this more significant development approach raises is that:

- It might be taking on too much, too quickly;
- It would need to be carefully monitored against social carrying capacity and environmental impact
- There are currently very limited resources to jump from the current level to this
- It requires significant up front funding, which itself requires significant work to secure

However, the benefits could be considerable. If development of angling-related tourism were to increase numbers by 10% - which our work suggests is sustainable – then based on our research, then the additional economic contribution could be in the region of £100,000 (GVA £40-50,000) and around 3 full time equivalent jobs.

Conclusions

The benefits to Assynt from angling tourism are already significant. These have increased in recent years as provision for visiting anglers has improved (public access, information provision, the quality angling services such as boat provision). Direct income from angling both helps improve provision – such as through boat and engine maintenance – as well as provide income directly into local community based organisations. The wider benefits to the area, notably economic, are perhaps even more substantial, supporting income to local businesses, jobs and portfolios of employment.

Our project has both generated significant amounts of information about visiting anglers as well as sought to put in place, test and develop ways that provision for visiting anglers could be improved and local benefits increased.

However, in an increasingly competitive tourism market, standing still rarely means that. If absolutely no further action were to be taken by local groups, then the quality of provision, local capacity and opportunities for generating greater local benefit could easily decline.

As such it is our recommendation that the local angling providers, landowners and other groups work together in a collaborative way to maintain the improvements that have been made in recent years and at the least pursue the 'middle ground' of development options.

Public agencies – local and regional government, Visit Scotland and Highlands and Islands Enterprise in particular – also need to recognise the contribution that outdoor based recreation such as angling can bring to often economically marginal remote and rural communities. Investment in developing sustainable tourism in this area, can bring much needed dividends in terms of jobs and income.



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