

Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee

Environmental impacts of salmon farming

Written submission from Seaprobe Atlantis Ltd

I have been operating wildlife watching boat trips from Kyle of Lochalsh since 1998.

During this period I have observed and studied the life-cycles and behaviour of the local common seal populations.

I have also observed first hand the complete destruction of one local seal colony and the decimation of another.

In both instances the salmon farms have been located with no regard for the proximity to existing seal haul-out sites.

In the first instance the salmon farm was located in the Scalpay Narrows, Skye. The lease site overlapped my oyster farm. I was there first and despite the recommended 1.5 mile separation distance between a shellfish farm and a fin fish farm the CEC gave the salmon company the lease. In the end I had to stop growing shellfish as my customers did not trust the quality, due to the obvious potential consequences of filter feeding animals being within the effluent drift zone of a salmon farm.

Sitting in the middle of the bay where my oyster farm was located - Sgianadin, Broadford - is a rock that exposes at low water. During my tenure of the lease site, I observed a group of 10 -12 common seals hauling out on this rock every day. Within a few weeks of me vacating the site, and over the course of just a few days, one fish-farm employee had shot dead every single seal on this haul-out site.

The fish-farm company soon went bust, however, with the farm being removed and never replaced. This all happened about 28 years ago. A seal colony which had been there forever was destroyed in the short-term interest of a fish farm company that was 'here today, gone tomorrow'. But the seals have never come back.

Since running my wildlife watching trips I have had the opportunity to observe the common seals in the area I now work. approximately 5 times a day, every day, from March until the end of October. They congregate in mid May in preparation of having their pups in June. Shortly after birth the mother takes to the water with the pup and hauls out on a cleaner rock where she feeds the pup. The pup suckles with the mother sometimes for only 3 weeks but it can be longer. This all takes place on the same haul-out site. When the pup is weened it continues to rest on this same haul-out site - going off to feed at night and returning in the morning. This is the natural daily cycle.

By Autumn these pups haul out together separate from the adults and we are able to count them all. By the following Spring, those that have survived the winter are distinct from other seals as they are moulting so they are all sandy coloured. All the other seals moult later in the summer. So, by the following Spring, we can observe seal pups that were born on one rock still frequenting that rock the following year. These seals have a familiarity with the geography of the area and know the location of the preferred haul-out sites. They use the same sites every day throughout their

lives. The seals born the previous year use the haul-out sites the following year, and the next, and the next, until eventually they too will have a pup on the same rocks - and so the cycle goes on.

What we are looking at is a dynasty - a long line of seals using the same haul-out sites going back centuries. The seals do not randomly choose any old rock on a daily basis. The rock has to be suitable. In an area with an 18' tidal range it is critical for the seals to be able to get up and down the rock regardless of whether the tide is high or low. A seal does not want to rest on a rock at high tide if at low tide there is a precipitous drop of 18' down to the water. The preferred pupping rock where I am located is gently sloping, allowing weak pups an easy incline to get up or down regardless of the tide.

Going back to the seal haul-out site at Sgianadin, when the fish-farm employee shot all those seals, he wiped out an entire community and destroyed that continuity. No seals have ever returned to that site - because the seals for whom it was home were all killed. The seals in my area are not going to say 'Ooh, look! There's a vacant rock 2 miles away'. They already have their traditional haul-site. That rock at Sgianadin was the traditional haul-out site for that now-extinct line of seals. They are all long gone, as is the fish-farm - with the employee who shot all those seals now working as a postman. My point is that that colony of seals had been there forever and would still be there today, if they had not been wiped out in the narrow self-interest of a company at a narrow point in time.

The power of the salmon industry was/is such that that salmon farm was allowed to position itself in close proximity to an existing oyster farm, and in close proximity to a long-established seal colony. The salmon farm wiped out both - by polluting the waters around my oyster farm and killing all the seals in the vicinity - and then it left, leaving all its junk behind on the seabed. Three decades later, it still shocks me that the company could do that - and then just up and leave, with no questions asked and no penalties imposed.

Currently, I am constantly on the lookout for seal shooting - as in the area I now work there are three farms in close proximity. In 2004, one farm manager shot 20% of the seals in Kyle. I created quite a fuss about that - so, as a result, they try to shoot them without me seeing. But our boats go far and wide and we often come across seals that have been shot, drifting by.

The new licensing arrangements are no excuse for a salmon farm locating itself right by seal haul-out sites, then refusing to use anti predator nets or high tension nets to prevent seals. The salmon farms in Lochalsh are surrounded by several large seal-haul out sites. Acoustic devices don't have any effect on seals as I have observed, on a weekly basis, seals by the farm with the device clearly audible.

I also question the capability of common seals to tear nets and suspect that common seals are often targeted when the much larger and more confident grey seal is to blame. The salmon farms make no attempt to differentiate. If they discover a hole in the net, they've no idea which species caused it, if indeed any species was responsible as it is also likely that an employee, not wishing to get into trouble, would cover up his own failings by blaming seals for a hole or tear they were responsible for.

Why do the farms shoot one -to two year old seal pups, they don't have the strength to tear nets? One final thing is the consequences for the fishermen catching crustaceans in our area, how long will it be before consumers start to question the amount of effluent going into the sea being taken up by crabs and prawns living on the seabed. With this current massive increase in salmon farm applications, Is anyone monitoring the levels of effluent be it benthic or chemical being ingested by lobsters, crabs and prawns prior to being consumed by the public? The salmon farm industry concentrated in one area could destroy the current pristine environment tag line for wild caught shellfish, just like that salmon farm 28 years ago destroyed my oyster business.

It is possible for a disease outbreak to wipe out this industry, with so many farms in such close proximity it's not an impossibility. In this event we would be left with empty, polluted sea lochs, contaminated shellfish and a greatly diminished seal population.