

RURAL ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY COMMITTEE

SALMON FARMING IN SCOTLAND

SUBMISSION FROM DAVID J. WATSON

I look after a short beat on the lovely River Doon in Ayrshire.

For many decades Charities and Voluntary organisation have worked tirelessly on the conservation of this River. These include the River Doon Improvement Association (formed in 1978), the Ayrshire Rivers Trust, the River Don District Salmon Fishery Board, Fishing Clubs and, of course a multitude of volunteers & benefactors.

A huge amount of time and money have therefore been invested by local people in improving the River, the fish stocks and the adjoining environment.

Our own beat's 5 year average salmon catches follow –

1988 – 60

1998 – 35

2008 – 29

2018 – 2

In 10 years our salmon and sea trout stocks have gone from healthy to near extinction. This crash coincides with the arrival of the Firth of Clyde Fish Farms, some of which, recently available information shows, are the most environmentally destructive fish farms in Scotland. In 2014 one of our few fish caught was a fine grilse. It was plastered with 47 sea lice, some covering its eyes, in addition to nine raw skin lesions where most of the parasites had fallen off. Such lice burdens are unheard of on fresh wild fish, and it is hard to imagine a worse death than being eaten alive by blood sucking parasites! (Photos included).

The fish was in excellent condition showing that having survived the lice barrier as a smolt on its outward journey, it had flourished in the ocean environment.

P/s I enclose a copy of a letter which I sent to relevant MSP's in 2001 indicating the severe losses that have been inflicted on the Scottish Wild Fish Economy, by inviting the Fishing Farming Companies to our shores.

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Dear Sir

The Destruction of the Wild Salmon Industry

I am sure that you are well aware of the drastic decline in and in some cases, the extinction of our migratory fish stocks. Papers, articles and reports by Jim Semple, Michael Wigan, Professor Mackay and more recently by Julian Pettifer have highlighted what Michael Wigan has called, "the worst environmental catastrophe to hit the western Highlands in recent history". I should like to focus on just one aspect of this crisis: the economic effect.

Much has been made of the Farmed Salmon Industry and its ostensible benefit to remote rural areas, but the economic and environmental advantages of Wild Fish have been taken totally for granted. Perhaps this is because for decades the welfare of wild salmon and sea trout has been solely supported by the efforts and investments of rod fishermen. The factors causing the demise of our wild fisheries now lie well outside the control of rod anglers and river catchments – hence the current catastrophe.

Visiting anglers – both Foreign and British – are deserting Scotland and taking their vital currency to countries where viable stocks of salmon and sea trout still exist. As an example of our wild fisheries true value I will outline the situation on Loch Maree – once World famous for its sea trout fisheries. Some years ago this Loch was fished throughout the season by about 30 boats. That meant 30 full-time gillies, 60 visiting anglers, plus their wives and children, all pouring money into hotels, petrol stations, local shops etc., and the fish continued to flourish. I understand that 2 gillies now work part-time on the Loch, mainly trolling for the occasional salmon. Multiply this reduction by every river and loch in Scotland and the scale of this economic disaster will quickly dawn.

This disgrace has resulted from the cynical expedience of past politicians and governments, but even at this late stage it may be possible to reverse the situation. This will require some brave and radical action. The benefits of such action, however, would be almost immediate as the time period from descending smolt to returning grilse salmon is only one year.

I dearly hope that our new Scottish Parliament will seize the opportunity to save this vital part of our Natural Heritage and in so doing recreate a sustainable rural economy which will provide a healthier environment for us all.

Yours faithfully