

**Threats from, and Practical Solutions to,  
Scottish Coastal Mixed Stock Salmon Fisheries**

**NASCO**

The North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organisation (NASCO) takes advice from the International Council for the Exploration of the Seas (ICES) each year as to the status of salmon stocks within their oceanic range throughout the Northern hemisphere. ICES has consistently stated that the exploitation of salmon in marine mixed stock fisheries is bad management practice, and this advice has been embraced by all the NASCO parties. This was confirmed once again during the review of NASCO parties' Implementation Plans and Focus Area Reports in 2007/8, where Norway, Scotland and Northern Ireland came under particular scrutiny for their policies on mixed stock netting of salmon.

It is understood that the President of NASCO has since written a letter to the Scottish Government, reiterating these concerns, laying out 'best practice' advice on controlling mixed stock fisheries and inviting confirmation that the issue is being addressed as a matter of urgency. Whilst this letter is not yet in the public domain, it is against the backdrop of NASCO policy, supported by the Scottish Government as part of the EU delegation, that the following position paper is written on behalf of the Association of Salmon Fishery Boards (ASFB), Atlantic Salmon Trust (AST) and Salmon & Trout Association (S&TA):

**Introduction**

In 1967, there was such an abundance of salmon, grilse and sea trout returning to Scottish rivers that three netting stations on the north east coast took over 50,000 salmon between them that year. In Scotland, over half a million salmon and grilse, a staggering 4,000 tons, were killed each year. There was a massive surplus which could be exploited without apparent detriment to stocks.

Those halcyon days did not continue. The number of returning fish dwindled, due primarily to a collapse in the sea's ability to foster the development of the young salmon. Forty years ago, for every 100 salmon smolts migrating to sea, 30 to 40 would return as adults. Now we are lucky to see ten. Sea trout have similarly declined, with an alarming drop in stocks over recent years.

We have learnt to look at wild salmonid stock management differently. No longer can we exploit these fish without concern for the future, or regard them as a cheap form of food; that is being provided by farmed fish. We now realise that, however well riverine environments are managed, excessive exploitation will result in too few adult fish being available to utilise available spawning habitat, and so production in the overall stock will suffer.

**Threats to Salmon Stocks and an impediment to good management**

ASFB, AST and S&TA recognise the threat to specific populations of salmon and sea trout posed by coastal mixed stock netting. Invariably, fixed engine nets are located with precision to intercept coastal migratory routes of salmon and sea trout from many different

catchments. Coastal nets can therefore be a highly effective method of exploitation, but there is currently limited data as to which populations are being impacted, or to what extent. Whilst some rivers may be able to sustain the current level of exploitation, others almost certainly will not, yet it is impossible to tell from which river stocks coastal netted fish originate. This makes the efficient management of individual river stocks almost impossible, and so we firmly believe that the Precautionary Principle should be urgently adopted.

This is particularly relevant to coastal fisheries likely to exploit stocks from rivers designated Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) under the EU Habitats Directive, as exploitation by these netting stations can severely affect the ability of local managers to maintain designated species (Atlantic salmon and freshwater mussel) at favourable conservation status.

### **Current Exploitation**

In the past fifty years, we have seen exploitation of wild salmon change dramatically from a source of food to a sport fish. That shift of emphasis has precipitated a collapse in the netting industry, with less than 10% still operating. Many areas in Scotland have no nets, and the few remaining tend to be clustered together for economic reasons. This, in itself, produces direct management problems for local rivers. 2008 saw further closures with the cessation of the Strathy nets on the north coast, together with the nets north of Montrose, the former being closed on scientific grounds and the latter through a Board buyout.

The total catch in 2007 from Scottish coastal nets was 13,618, about 25% of all fish killed. Of these, 80% are taken in two specific areas, although lesser netting effort in other fisheries is known to have an adverse effect on local salmon and sea trout stocks, particularly on the West Coast.

### **Over-exploitation of Individual Stocks**

Angling is an inefficient method of catching fish compared to netting. Using angling catch data and the counter on the North Esk, it is possible to surmise that less than 10% of salmon and sea trout running the river are caught by rod and line, and of these over half are returned alive to the water. It could thus be argued that angling, if practiced with conservation in mind, cannot make a significant difference to stock numbers.

Using a similar method for the netting off the North Esk coast before it closed, and allowing for 60% of the fish taken to be returning to the North Esk, it would suggest a 30% exploitation rate. This is clearly significant.

### **Contrary to international advice**

Scotland has increasingly come under international pressure for its continued tolerance of coastal netting. We remain the only Atlantic Salmon producing country without a policy to reduce coastal exploitation.

International advice is that there should be a presumption against operating Multi Stock Fisheries unless they can be shown not to contravene basic conservation policies.

The Scottish Government is in possession of a letter from the President of NASCO asking for more action to be taken on mixed stock fisheries.

## **Inequity**

Coastal Netting is inequitable on various fronts. On a local level, it is inequitable if the exploitation of the stock is at a level to reduce and even jeopardise the rights of other fishery owners, many of whom invest significantly in managing and conserving freshwater spawning and juvenile habitats vital for salmon and sea trout populations. It is also inequitable on anglers who are now practicing catch and release of an ever increasing scale for conservation purposes. For example, on the Dee district, anglers are encouraged to return all their fish alive to the water, yet salmon destined for the Dee and the Cowie are intercepted and killed in coastal nets.

It is unfair that netting whilst taking 25% of the harvest contribute less than 2% to cost of the management of that stock. This will be explored further in a following paper.

It is also seen as inequitable on an international level, where other NASCO countries have been persuaded to cease mixed stock exploitation, yet it is still permitted in Scotland. NASCO itself has expressed the desire to demonstrate balance and fairness between management of those fisheries which are subject to NASCO regulation (distant-water) and those which are not (home-water) (NASCO 2005), and this opinion was reinforced strongly in the opening statements at the NASCO conference in 2007.

## **Inefficient use of a limited resource**

The socio-economics of salmon and seatrout fisheries are complex. Whilst the value to Scotland of angling is over £120m per year (Scottish Government), the output value of the netting industry could be estimated at £1.75m. These figures show the disparity in size between the two industries, and also demonstrates the value to the Scottish economy of each harvested fish (£2,500 for rod caught as opposed to £100 for netted).

## **Scottish Government's Past Attitude to Coastal Mixed Stock Netting**

The Scottish Government recognises the threat to migrating salmonids from coastal mixed stock fisheries. This was highlighted when the Government granted the use of a Statutory Instrument to curb exploitation of spring salmon and early-running sea trout populations in the Esk District in 2005, an initiative supported by both riparian owners and anglers. The Scottish Government did not renew the netting lease at Strathy on scientific grounds.

## **Scottish Government's Commitment under Habitats Directive.**

We refer you to the Atlantic Salmon Trust's paper.

## **Practical Solutions.**

The ASFB, AST and S&TA cannot condone the continuance of a practice which is criticised within NASCO, is in conflict with international opinion, is inequitable and is an inefficient use of a precious natural resource. We do, however, recognise the rights of ownership of coastal netting, and the part such netting has played in our history and heritage. We also recognise the important role netting can play in salmon and sea trout research.

We believe the Government must recognise its international obligations, and develop a policy which falls into line with similar countries. Whilst we believe that the only correct action is for coastal mixed stock fisheries to be closed immediately, we also recognise that this might be considered draconian, and that a more pragmatic approach is required. We believe there should be immediate discussions, both on a local level and nationally, to find a

solution, and that the Government has an obligation to be involved and cannot continue with its present reliance on the willing buyer, willing seller principle. Discussions should concentrate on transferring the use of coastal nets from commercial harvest to research, thus protecting the heritage of coastal netting stations and promoting their vital role in science. We also wish to discuss the establishment of a Compensation Fund to alleviate the inevitable loss of netmen's income, similar to that put in place in the Irish Republic in 2006.

We would also welcome the immediate introduction of a tagging scheme, on the lines of that being introduced into England and Wales.

We would draw your attention to a recommendation of the REPORT OF THE SCOTTISH SALMON STRATEGY TASK FORCE (1997):

“All net fisheries outside estuary limits operated or genuinely let in any two years in the period 1963-96, inclusive, should be registered, and only those that are so registered should be permitted to continue operating. The number of traps fished at a bag-net or stake-net station, or the number of crews working a net and coble station outside estuary limits, should not be greater than those qualifying for registration.”

We consider that this recommendation should be enacted now, with compulsory registration of nets operated within the period 2005-08. Any netting stations which were not operated during this time should not be registered, or permitted to resume fishing.

We are committed to these courses of action and welcome the opening of discussions and negotiation at the earliest possible opportunity.

**Note:**

Greater elaboration and detail of the issues discussed above can be found in REVIEW OF MIXED STOCK FISHERIES FOR ATLANTIC SALMON IN EUROPEAN COMMUNITY WATERS, EXCLUDING THE BALTIC SEA by Ted Potter, Cefas, UK & Niall Ó Maoiléidigh, MI, Ireland, NASCO IMPLEMENTATION PLANS and FOCUS AREA REPORTS (NASCO 2007/08) and REPORT OF THE SCOTTISH SALMON STRATEGY TASK FORCE (1997):