

Declining wild fish runs

Adult salmon

Fish that returned from their ocean migrations in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s had to negotiate their way past a profusion of coastal and estuary nets which could easily kill up to 500,000 salmon and grilse annually (and that was just the declared catch). Netting effort is now just a small fraction of what it was back then. Thus fish that now return to our coasts are far more likely to reach their rivers of origin than was the case prior to the great netting buy-outs in the late 1980s and 1990s.

The decline in exploitation by nets has been a vital compensating factor for the dramatic fall in the marine survival of salmon – before the fish arrive back on the Scottish coast after one or two (occasionally more) years at sea.

Marine survival of salmon is estimated currently at 5 % or less; 50 years ago it was 20 % or more. This issue is now by far the most critical factor affecting Atlantic salmon fisheries and the need to maximise the number of wild smolts going to sea has never been more important. The impact of salmon farming is an additional negative factor, particularly for runs in the west Highlands and Islands ([See Salmon Farming Overview](#))

Fisheries experts say that “it is likely that salmon will continue to experience severe challenges and detrimental effects of reduced availability or quality of feeding opportunities for some years to come.” ([See Phenological and phenotypic changes in Atlantic salmon populations in response to a changing climate: Todd et al, ICES Journal of Marine Science \[2012\]](#)).

Sea trout

Sea trout numbers have also declined in much of Scotland - again despite the great contraction in the netting industry. The long-term national decline is apparent in rod catches. This decline is partly to a change in recording practice for “finnock” (juvenile sea trout returning from the sea for the first time) introduced in 2004. Prior to then there was considerable inconsistency among fisheries in the recording of finnock; some did reported them while others did not, probably making a big difference to both numbers and mean weight. Since 2004 finnock have been record separately from sea trout, which causes difficulties in making comparisons over time.

However, it is only in the salmon farming areas of the west Highlands and Islands that mature sea trout have almost completely disappeared. Sea trout in these areas are extremely vulnerable to infestation (leading to premature death) from parasitic sea lice larvae emanating from farmed salmon cages. Few fish survive beyond the finnock stage ([See Salmon Farming Overview](#)).

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