

Concerns are growing for the safety of Scottish waters as the economic drivers of open cage salmon farming are given more import than ecological integrity

HERE is little doubt that commercial salmon farming makes an important contribution to Scotland's rural economy. It is the country's top food export and the industry aims to double production by 2030.

However, as output grows, so do concerns. The open cage farms can cause environmental damage and a considerable number of concerns include fish welfare: more than 10 million salmon died during production in 2019.

There are now more than 250 of these on Scotland's west coast and the feeling is growing that local communities are not having their voices properly heard when related planning applications are being considered.

Worries abound that economic and employment benefits are being placed ahead of negative impacts on local people and the environment, despite the fact that both the Scottish Government and the industry say that they want expansion to take place in a sustainable way.

Certainly public opinion appears to be strongly on the side of communities and the environment rather than the salmon farmers.

A Survation poll of more than 1000 people carried out in January and February this year revealed that 83 per cent of Scots felt that the Scottish Government should protect wild Atlantic salmon from any harm even if it meant job losses. In addition, only 20 per cent of respondents thought that local communities should not have the final say on whether salmon farms should be permitted.

Paul Chandler is a former geoscientist and long-time marine conservation campaigner living on Arran. The island currently only has one farm at Lamash Bay which has expanded exponentially since the 1980s, though two others are currently going through the planning process.

"We have seen the effects here, particularly the killing of the seabed directly below because of the waste from the salmon, and that is allowable by SEPA (the Scottish Environment Protection Agency)", he says.

Another issue, he says, is that SEPA has not assessed the effect on human health of some chemicals used to treat the fish.

"If you're a wild swimmer going by when treatment is being undertaken, they don't know the effects. Some of this licensing is happening without proper science."

Like other campaigners, Mr Chandler believes the failure is on the part of the regulators, many of whom are accused of sitting in offices in the Central Belt and only rarely visiting the sites to police what is actually happening.

The regulation process, he says, needs to be joined up. "We have SEPA giving out a licence, planners passing the application, NatureScot saying something



What price should we weigh against net profit?

else and Marine Scotland only being responsible for the infrastructure. They're all looking at it from different directions."

Another advocate of a changed approach is Corin Smith, founder of ISSF (Inside Scottish Salmon Feedlots), an organisation campaigning against degradation of marine ecosystems by open cage salmon farming.

He says the Scottish Government's policy of expanding this "appears to be completely out of touch, out of date and out of support in Scotland", adding: "The public rejects the reality of Scotland's seas continuing to be used as a sewer for salmon feedlots."

Mr Smith claims the government has a culture of "essentially going to huge lengths to create the illusion of regulation, where in reality it doesn't exist".

He explains: "For instance, on parasite or mortality levels, instead of saying that a farm must beat a certain level or it will have its licence rescinded, it says the farmer must try to meet the threshold. That's a huge difference."

Why, however, is the Scottish Government being so benign about this?

■ It is feared that commercial salmon farming is not addressing the fears of local communities or wider ecological concerns in Scotland

He claims it is all about the contribution the sector makes to GDP. "There's no other industry that is as deregulated and therefore has the capacity to grow. It's seen as one of the quickest and easiest routes to driving growth. That's what it's all about. But salmon farming in remote rural communities today employs no more than 200 people above its 1996 level. The jobs issue is a complete red herring."

Another criticism of the industry is that there is no evidence of a cost benefit analysis ever having been undertaken,

according to Charles Millar, Chief Executive of SIFT (the Sustainable Inshore Fisheries Trust), which with Salmon and Trout Conservation Scotland has commissioned a report into the economic impact of salmon farming.

"We think that there should be some form of coherent analysis in terms of the areas affected, particularly when the industry raises so many concerns with such a wide variety of stakeholders."

In addition, he says, there is little evidence to show the Scottish Government has carried out research to establish if the policy of doubling the size of the industry by 2030 is supported by voters.

"It really does need to go ahead and do this sort of research. Clearly people do work in the industry and so it is creating jobs, but we need to look at what the costs are as well as the benefits."

"Until you have seen both sides of the argument, you can't know if your policy is in the interests of the country or not."

Dr Richard Luxmoore is former Head of Nature Conservation at the National Trust for Scotland who now lives on the Sound of Jura. He is concerned about the impact

of the farms on natural heritage, ecosystems and local communities.

"The Scottish Government knows that the industry is likely to have a seriously damaging effect on wild salmon and trout, which is why it has stopped farming on the north and east coasts of Scotland."

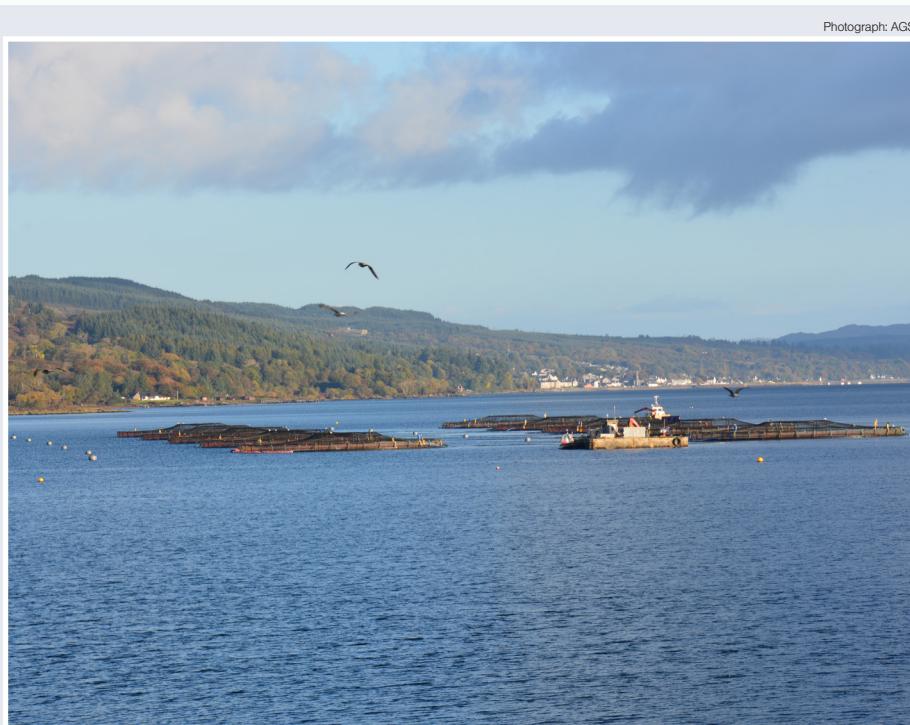
"However, they have allowed it to go ahead unfettered on the west coast. The big commercial interest in wild salmon and sea trout is on the east coast, where you have a lot of large rivers and large landowners, all of whom make substantial money from the salmon fishery."

Dr Luxmoore concedes there have been some improvements made in the way the farms are run, with SEPA flexing muscles on the use of some chemicals.

"However, hydrogen peroxide, which is a very strong bleach, is poured into the water in enormous quantities with no regulation whatsoever. A single treatment on one farm involves 122 tonnes of this being spread into the sea."

"This stuff has been shown in Norway to kill off kelp at a range of four kilometres from the pollution site. You have to be concerned about that."

Salmon farming in remote rural communities employs no more than 200 above its 1996 level. The jobs issue is a red herring



■ A new poll shows the Scottish public want wild salmon protected from the effects of commercial farms

'There is no mandate to expand salmon farming'

NEW poll commissioned by ISSF and Salmon and Trout Conservation Scotland (S&TCS) and conducted by Survation shows clear support from the Scottish public for protecting wild Atlantic salmon and the environment from the damage caused by open cage salmon farming.

It contains some fascinating findings. No fewer than 83 per cent of the 1012 people surveyed in January and February said wild salmon should be protected, even if it meant job losses in the farmed sector.

In answer to another question, 79 per cent of those expressing a preference said that farms should not be permitted to dump their waste at sea, with only eight per cent taking the opposite view.

More than half – 52 per cent – said they felt the industry was bad for the environment in Scotland, with just 15 per cent believing it was

good and a further 10 per cent saying it had no effect. A further 23 per cent said that they didn't know. When asked if local communities living next to salmon farms should have the final say on whether or not these operations were permitted, 50 per cent agreed, with just 19 per cent disagreeing.

Andrew-Graham Stewart, Director of S&TCS, said: "It is clear from this polling that the Scottish Government has no public mandate to expand open cage salmon farming in Scotland."

John Aitchison, spokesperson for the Coastal Communities Network, commented: "These results show there is little public support for fish farms being run as they are."

"The salmon farming industry must now choose between being a good neighbour or bad. It must prove that it does no harm before looking to expand."

Fight for local communities is waged against all the odds

CLAIMS by the salmon farming industry the sector is sustainable are an illusion and can easily be disproved, campaigners allege. Among them is Katie Tunn, a Skye-based artist and ocean advocate involved with marine conservation organisations, who says farms cannot be held to account.

"We know they have a negative effect on their immediate surroundings, whether that be in terms of disturbance to cetaceans, insecticides affecting seabird wildlife or the plastic piping that is now common on most Skye beaches. "To me, these are all reasons in themselves to move away from salmon farm expansion. There's also a much wider impact on marine ecosystems in terms of the forage fish that go into feeding farmed salmon."

Another issue, Ms Tunn says, is that seabird populations are declining.

"Few people are aware that the main cause of this is a lack of food generated by overfishing."

"These little fish aren't even used for human consumption. The capelins and sand eels that go into fishmeal are vital to wildlife like puffins – just one species that suffers a knock-on effect from these expanding salmon farms."

She also accuses the farming companies of deceiving local communities by branding themselves as the underdogs and saying they are on the side of local people.

Referring to the Flodigarry and Balmacqueen communities on Skye opposed to farms in their vicinity, she says: "While there are people in the area who support and work for fish farms, the overwhelming majority do not want this industry to expand here and it feels like a David and Goliath battle."

Ian Dobb, a retired campaigner living on Skye with experience of planning applications, also feels local voices in opposition are not being heard.

"The odds are stacked against the



■ Salmon farm insecticides affect ecosystems while beaches are strewn with piping and equipment

local community. The councils are hell-bent on aquaculture expansion regardless and the large corporates you are fighting have well paid specialist agents.

"Even if you manage to win and get a refusal at the planning stage, it goes to appeal. They have expensive Edinburgh lawyers fighting and no doubt meeting with government representatives."

Local communities in Skye, he adds,

simply do not want new farms.

"If the authorities were listening to local communities, it should be an open and shut case. In my opinion, the Scottish Government leans on the councils and controls the regulators, who appear to be scared to say what they really think."

"The odds are stacked and you feel you're fighting a rearguard action right from the start."