

IT was the stench that first alerted locals that something was far wrong. A sickly odour of rotting fish carcasses that weighed heavily on the soft Hebridean air, forcing residents to drag their freshly laundered sheets indoors and slam shut their windows.

The stink was, at times, overpowering. Tens of thousands of infected salmon, once destined for a nation's dinner plates, now lay decaying in piles after they were hauled from the fish farm net cages which lurk in the salt waters of Loch Erisort.

For weeks on end, mechanical lifters would be spotted scooping up the remains and dumping them in the backs of lorries ready to be driven from this secluded spot in the south-east of the Isle of Lewis and disposed of in an incinerator hundreds of miles away.

In all, between August and November last year, 177,000 salmon – many weakened by disease and parasitic sea lice – succumbed to the deadly bacterium *pasteurella skyensis* at the facility operated by Marine Harvest.

The sheer scale of the operation to counter the outbreak may seem shocking, but it is not uncommon.

Stacks of dead fish have been removed with worrying regularity from other fish farms up and down Scotland's Atlantic coastline because of rising levels of diseases, parasites and other problems.

Indeed, Scottish fish farmers have admitted they threw away up to ten million farmed salmon in 2016 – nearly a quarter of their stock. Such high mortality rates have inevitably thrown the spotlight onto this highly prized sector of the aquaculture industry which contributes an estimated £620million a year to the Scottish economy and which hopes to double in size by 2030.

Critics argue they are evidence of deep systemic problems within salmon farming which are threatening Scotland's fragile marine ecosystem and endangering stocks of wild salmon and sea trout.

Dr Richard Luxmoore, senior nature conservation adviser for the National Trust for Scotland, described the disposal of huge amounts of rotting fish as 'stomach churning', adding: 'It's the sign of an environmental catastrophe.'

He said: 'The salmon farming industry has lost the ability to control fish diseases and this results in escalating quantities of toxic chemicals being poured into the sea in an increasingly fruitless attempt to control them.'

'It also inevitably leads to the release of an infectious soup of disease organisms into our coastal waters.'

SALMON producers dismiss such emotive language as scaremongering, blaming long-standing problems with sea lice and amoebic gill disease, both of which can lead to the slow deaths of large numbers of caged stock, on matters largely beyond their control, such as global warming.

However, their industry is about to be thrust into the most public of forums as a Scottish parliamentary inquiry is expected to begin imminently into the state of the Scottish aquaculture industry.

Holyrood's rural economy and connectivity committee has given itself a wide-ranging brief to investigate, among other things, what damage has been wrought by Scotland's 253 salmon farms on one of Europe's most magnificent wildernesses.

MSPs will be wading into an increasingly polarised debate, where truth is often blurred by polemic. Conservationists, though, insist one thing is clear: any attempt to rear fish in the quantities needed to meet our growing appetite for what was once considered a luxury food is bound to upset the local ecosystem.

Their claims were bolstered earlier this month by a report which suggests that sea lice escaping from fish farms have ravaged wild salmon and sea trout and reduced their numbers by as much as 29 per cent.

The findings by the Norwegian Institute for Nature Research appear to fly in the face of the Scottish Government's official position that there is 'no evidence' that sea lice from salmon farms

damage wild fish populations. Ministers are acutely sensitive to the aquaculture industry argument that its fish and shellfish-based operations offer vital employment for around 12,000 people, many in areas with few other job opportunities, although only around 1,400 of those work full-time in the highly automated farmed salmon sector.

As opposing sides prepare to join battle, MSPs will attempt to balance the seemingly impossible – protecting wild fish stocks while meeting the increasingly voracious

public demand for farmed salmon. If they cannot square that circle, then they may face a stark choice – which one is worth saving?

'Disease and mortalities on Scottish salmon farms continue at shocking levels,' said Andrew Graham-Stewart, director of the game angler's lobby group, Salmon & Trout Conservation Scotland (S&TCS).

'What concerns us is that the Scottish Government has almost no idea what the effects are on wild salmon and wild sea trout in

Scottish sea lochs.' S&TCS says thousands of salmon packed in huge net cages become natural breeding grounds for tiny sea lice, which burrow into the fish's skin and kill them either directly or indirectly by exposing them to fatal infections.

Most cages are sited close to shore – where they are easier to manage but where tidal flows that might wash away residues of waste, chemicals and antibiotics are weaker than in deeper waters.

Wild salmon and trout migrating to sea or returning to rivers to spawn often have to swim past these farms and through clouds of sea lice spilling out of the cages.

Adult wild salmon are used to coping with modest numbers of sea lice which occur naturally, but S&TCS claims the advent of salmon farming has changed the density and occurrence of the pest, particularly in largely enclosed sea lochs in the west Highlands and

Islands. Last summer, the organisation announced a collapse in the number of wild salmon returning to spawn in Loch Awe, the most closely monitored river in the western Highlands where a fish counter was installed when a hydroelectric dam was constructed.

S&TCS said young salmon fail to return to the Awe because they were killed at the start of their migration to sea by having to pass dozens of salmon cages.

Similar concerns were voiced following the opening of a salmon farm in 1987 in Loch Ewe, Ross-shire. A year later, sea trout numbers collapsed in Loch Maree, an internationally renowned freshwater loch emptying into Loch Ewe.

The vital money stream from anglers soon dried up too. A report by Andrew Walker, formerly of the Scottish Government's Fisheries Research Services, concluded that 'the introduction of salmon farming in Loch Ewe played a promi-

Thousands of fish thrown in a truck – and troubling new questions for salmon farms

A staggering 177,000 were hauled out of one loch last autumn but that's a fraction of the 10m diseased salmon binned by the industry in a single year

SPECIAL INVESTIGATION

by Gavin Madeley