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C O M M E N T

## The enemy within

**G**OOD NEWS STORIES from the fish-farm-blighted west Highlands and Islands are rare. However one particular area - north-east Lewis in the Outer Hebrides - has successfully bucked the trend of decline in salmon and sea-trout numbers. Until recently the Creed and Gress rivers, both ruthlessly poached, were basket cases; indeed before the millennium the Creed's annual salmon rod catch could be in single figures and the Gress's situation was so dire that catch records were largely non-existent. Finally the Stornoway Trust, which owns both, acknowledged that river management was not its forte and granted leases to the Stornoway Angling Association and the Gress Angling Association in 2001 and 2004 respectively. Since then the clubs have had complete responsibility for river management. Poaching has been virtually eliminated and the rivers are being restored to their former glory. The numbers speak for themselves; in 2009 (generally a poor year for salmon) the Creed's catch was 250 salmon and a similar number of sea-trout whereas the Gress recorded 63 salmon and 315 sea-trout (its best figures for more than 100 years).

Both clubs deserve huge credit for bringing their rivers back from the dead. Fortunately their migrating smolts enter a comparatively benign marine environment. The east coast of Lewis - from five miles south of Stornoway to the northern tip at the Butt of Lewis (30 miles as the crow flies) — has remained free of salmon cages. Consequently smolts leaving these rivers are not eaten alive by plagues of lice of fish-farm origin.

But... for how much longer? Lighthouse Caledonia is now seeking to open a massive new salmon farm two miles north of the Gress in Broad Bay. It says that it requires the extra tonnage to justify a new fish-gutting plant by Stornoway, employing 100, although just how many jobs will go to locals is unknown (some mainland plants are dominated by east Europeans).

I am assured that the Outer Hebrides Fisheries Trust, with its remit to protect wild fish, is lobbying hard against Broad Bay. However the Trust finds itself in an awkward position. One of its trustees is a senior executive of Lighthouse. This begs the question: by what possible standard can he be acting in the best interests of the Trust (given his duty as a trustee) when he is party to a proposal to exploit virgin marine territory to the inevitable detriment of local wild fish?

I daresay that most readers will be as shocked as I was to learn that all the fisheries trusts (FTs) in north-west Scotland count salmon farmers among their trustees. They are: Outer Hebrides FT - Derek Smith (Lighthouse Caledonia); West Sutherland FT - Nick Joy (Loch Duart Ltd); Wester Ross FT - Ben Hadfield (Marine Harvest); Lochaber FT - John Rea (Scottish Sea Farms); and Argyll FT - Derek Smith (yes, the same Lighthouse employee, although furtively listed here as representing the Scottish Federation of Coarse Anglers!).

The reality is that the salmon-farming industry has wheedled its way into the trusts as a means of neutering their ability to fight for wild fish - I know of a former trustee and salmon farmer that attempted to have a trust biologist fired for daring to voice blunt truths about the impact of salmon farming. Often their influence is backed by substantial financial support (some may consider it "blood money"), further compromising the trusts. Let's be clear, these trustees (from an industry which is hell-bent on expansion and which has the audacity to deny any responsibility for the demise of wild fish) represent the problem, not the solution. Surely it is time that the impostors were expelled or forced to resign forthwith. It is hard to imagine a more blatant or cynical conflict of interest.



