

# DAMNED LICE

This estate once teemed with wild salmon but today they are being destroyed by parasites. Now Jenny Scobie is fighting to restore the species to its glory days



**On a mission:** Jenny Scobie wants the Scottish Government to make the Ullapool River a Special Area of Conservation, well away from salmon farms



should be pristine. Since 1998, the estate has operated a policy of returning all fish caught with rod and line.

But the numbers caught have fallen dramatically. 'On the Ullapool, Loch Achall and Rhidoroch river system, it has fallen from 70-80 salmon and 60-80 sea trout in the 1980s to 10-20 salmon and zero sea trout by the early 2000s,' she says, adding: 'It is frightening.'

Guy Linley-Adams says: 'In 2006, Jenny and her late husband asked the Scottish Government to designate the Ullapool River an SAC. It was a generous offer which was refused.'

As a result, Mrs Scobie can argue to the European Commission that the Government has failed in its obligation to protect wild salmon under EU Habitat Directives.

Linley-Adams adds: 'The problems have been known for 20 years. The failure of the Government to get to

grips with the industry and ensure it does not damage wild salmon off the West Coast is a disgrace.'

If the EC were to uphold Mrs Scobie's complaint, the UK will be required to designate parts of the West of Scotland as SACs and introduce greater protection for wild salmon.

It could lead to fish farms being subjected to stringent new rules that would limit production.

Mrs Scobie says: 'We are not demanding a ban on fish farms but there is nothing to stop them being on land, or taking them away from salmon migratory routes.'

However, the Scottish Government continues to claim that the concerns of Mrs Scobie and others are 'ill informed'. Ministers say 'considerable steps' have been taken to protect wild salmon with what they describe as 'a framework to address fish health and minimise

escapes, while developing better scientific understanding of interactions between farmed and wild fish.'

It is the Scottish Government that is ill informed, claims writer and naturalist Bruce Sandison. 'Fish farming is an act of vandalism,' he says, adding: 'Fish farmers act within the law, sanctioned by government and heritage bodies that fail to do anything about the decline of wild salmon.'

Mrs Scobie adds: 'If they don't change the way they farm fish, it will mean the extinction of sea trout and salmon.'

**M**ARTIN KRKOSEK, a fisheries ecologist from the University of Alberta, in Canada, agrees. The academic, who was in charge of the study on the impact of farmed fish on wild stock, says: 'The viability of the wild populations is threatened.'

'Aquaculture is a serious problem, especially on the West Coast of Scotland where sea lice have impacted on wild sea trout and salmon since the 1980s.'

Linley-Adams adds: 'If we are successful, the EU Commission will require the Government to designate more areas of special conservation, especially in Ullapool, which would affect lots of fish farms. It could mean many will find their licences will have to be tightened or perhaps even revoked in order to comply with European law.'

Mrs Scobie says: 'We are committed to preserving the wild salmon and we will win. The fight may take years but no matter how big the opponent, be it the Scottish Government or the fish farming industry, we will prevail.'