

Scottish Field – March 2013

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With the season of goodwill a distant memory, an almighty *stushie* has been brewing this month within the Scottish salmon fisheries world. Several key wild fish organisations that are responsible for protecting our freshwater fisheries have become embroiled in the murky politics of the Scottish Government's fish farm expansion plans. And Scottish anglers, who pay for these organisations through their permits and annual subscriptions, are reacting furiously.

It all started in a most unlikely way. Back in 2010 a committee in Oslo awarded the Nobel peace prize to Liu Xiaobo, a Chinese civil rights activist. Immediately China ceased trading with Norway. But in order to satisfy their insatiable demand for fish, the Chinese immediately started to court Alex Salmond and before we knew it we had gifts of pandas at Edinburgh Zoo and the First Minister announcing his desire (with no consultation with anyone in the wild fisheries world) to double Scottish salmon farm production by 2015.

But there was a problem. Where were these new fish farms going to go? A wealth of evidence had built up over the years to demonstrate that the plethora of farms that already litter the west coast's inland fjords had been depleting local salmon and sea trout populations – the latest research from St Andrew's University at the end of last year suggested that up to 39% of salmon smolts leaving west coast sea lochs are being killed by sea lice billowing out from fish farms.

So the tactic of the civil servants in Edinburgh was to put the ball back into the wild fisheries' court. When RAFTS (the representative organisation of all fishery trusts in Scotland) approached Scottish government for their annual handout in early 2012 to fund scientific research, Marine Scotland made it very clear that what they would like to see on their funding proposal would be a project to inform future fish farm expansion in areas that would be palatable to wild fish groups. Thus the Locational Guidance model of the Managing Interactions Project was born.

And what a dreadfully flawed piece of 'science' it is.

When Scottish Natural Heritage were asked what would be required to identify suitable locations on the west coast for future fish farms they said that the two main elements needed would be information on wild smolt migration routes out from rivers and sea lice dispersal models from fish farms. SNH were right. With this information it might then perhaps be possible to identify places where the placing of a fish farm might present the least risk to the environment.

But the problem was that this research would have taken at least 5 years to assemble and Alex Salmond's expansion plans couldn't wait that long. So RAFTS came up with an alternative locational model, even though their own Aquaculture Policy Paper (written before they became embroiled in this) stated that 'without a far better understanding of the coastal migration routes and habitats of wild salmonids it is impossible to plan aquaculture developments in a fully informed manner'.

Over the last year (with the support of the Association of DSFB's, the Salmon and Trout Association and the Atlantic Salmon Trust, who all have in the past expressed their complete opposition to further inshore fish farm expansion) RAFTS has been putting together a map that will show areas of the inland west coast that might be more suitable for future fish farms. Far from basing this map on relevant science, they have engaged in a process of 'ranking' rivers in order of economic and sporting 'importance' using measures such as catch records and rateable values. This

information is then matched with some token geographic information on individual sea lochs. The result is a map showing areas of red, amber and green for possible future aquaculture development.

What the Scottish Government has managed to achieve therefore is a rubber stamp of approval from wild fish organisations for the location of more fish farms in the inshore sea lochs of the west coast, in spite of all of their policies to the contrary.

At the time of writing a single fishery Trust (Lochaber LFT) were demonstrating their integrity by refusing to release data to the project on the grounds of its flawed scientific approach, but otherwise RAFTS and all of their member Trusts plan to apply for another 3 years of funding to 'fine tune' their map. Alex Salmond's policy-makers must be dumbfounded that they have so easily hoodwinked the wild fish groups into this trap and will surely spare RAFTS a few more research pennies in order to secure their multi-million pound Chinese prize.