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Ms Rosemary Agnew,
Scottish Information Commissioner,
Kinburn Castle,
Doubledykes Road,
St. Andrews KY16 9DS.

Copied to the Scottish Government Ministers

Dear Commissioner,

Don Staniford of Global Alliance Against Industrial Aquaculture (GAAIA) has sent me a copy of your letter of 9th January 2013 to The Salmon Net Fishing Association of Scotland regarding your decision 193/2012 requiring the Scottish Government to disclose the location of licensed seal shooting incidents in Scotland.

This was a decision I welcomed as we receive reports of shooting incidents but cannot compare these with the official statistics as details of where and when shooting takes place are not released. As you may be aware no-one monitors seal shooting and the official figures are totally reliant on the accuracy of the returns made by those carrying out the shooting.

I understand that some people within the salmon netting industry are concerned that if the Government releases details identifying where and when seals are shot this might put those carrying out the shooting at risk of personal harassment or attack. I find it extremely difficult to accept that argument as the Government will only be releasing historic details of where and when shooting has taken place with no identification of those who carried out the shooting.

It is common knowledge that seal shooting takes place at salmon netting stations and I see from your letter that salmon netsmen have reported threats from "local residents" over seal shooting. It has long been the case that there is friction within local communities where seal shooting takes place. Salmon netsmen claim they have to shoot seals to protect their nets and locals who rely on tourism through letting holiday property or running wildlife watch safaris are angry that by killing seals the netsmen are damaging the tourist economy. This was highlighted last summer when some tourists very publicly abandoned their holiday in the village of Crovie by Gardenston when they discovered that local salmon netsmen were regularly shooting seals from a rocky outcrop adjacent to some holiday cottages.

Over the last thirty years I have investigated seal shooting incidents at salmon netting stations on the Mull of Kintyre, Hopeman, The Black Isle, Nairn and Helmsdale. On each of these occasions, as with many other incidents involving salmon farms and salmon river boards, I was following up information supplied to me by local residents or people who had witnessed seal shooting incidents while they were on holiday.

I do not know of any incidents in recent years of people involved in the legal shooting of seals receiving threats of personal harassment or attack on their person or property by animal welfare groups or individual supporters. The last such incident where I understand anonymous threats were made was perhaps twenty years ago after a salmon netman at Hopeman boasted on a Channel 4

documentary that he had killed circa 90 seals in one season at his netting station. I understand he received some nasty letters from campaigners armed with felt-tip pens but no actual attack was made on him or his nets

I do not dismiss the effects of such intimidation lightly as I have been a victim of it myself. A few years ago, due to my campaign against airgun misuse, I received threats of physical violence which I was able to trace to a gun shop in the south of England. I informed West Sussex police and the staff member concerned was arrested, interviewed and released with a police caution after he admitted he had made the threats to wind me up. Anyone receiving such threats should obviously report them to the police for investigation.

What concerns me greatly is that the issue of “threats”, whether real or fictitious, will influence the way Government Ministers respond to your ruling. When the anti-hunting bill was going through the House of Lords there was a deliberate campaign of misinformation to discredit the anti-hunting lobby. A great deal of weight was given to a reported incident where two elderly anglers were attacked by “antis” and thrown into the River Teith near Callander. Their waders quickly filled up with water, dragging them down to their deaths. They were only saved when two younger men saw them and dived into the pool and rescued them.

A Scottish journalist decided to track down the victims of this life threatening attack. Central Scotland Police had no record of the incident. Angling clubs and tackle shops in the area had no knowledge of the incident. Proprietors of pubs and hotels frequented by anglers had never heard of the incident. In short – the incident never happened yet peers were taking this fictitious nonsense seriously when voting on new legislation.

At the moment witnesses to seal shooting incidents are angry and frustrated because there is nothing they can do about it. When in future the dates and locations of seal shooting incidents are regularly released by the Scottish Government those witnesses will have a legal, passive and very important part to play in the protection of seals by comparing their records of seal shooting incidents to those officially reported to the Government thus enabling them to call for a full and open investigation into any discrepancies.

Yours sincerely,

John F. Robins,
Secretary