

Dirty secrets down on the salmon farm

Charles Clover

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You have to credit the people who sell Scottish farmed salmon. They deserve their awards — for marketing. They have managed to convince us that their product in the supermarket is just as good as the wild thing and comes from clear, unpolluted waters with tidal flows that produce strong and healthy fish. All suggestions that salmon are kept like battery chickens in cages that foul the natural environment, have their flesh dyed, are prone to disease and are treated regularly with chemicals to remove parasites that have finished off wild sea trout and salmon — well, these slurs belong to the past.

Tesco's website gives the common line taken by the supermarkets: "Farm assurance standards have been introduced to ensure the fish remain healthy and have minimal impact on the environment."

I must also tell you that the moon is made of cheese and that there is a small bar in Memphis, Tennessee, where a heavily disguised Elvis Presley sneaks in sometimes to sing. What persuaded us to believe the claims made for Scottish salmon? Business leaders, politicians and officials in Scotland have conspired to perpetuate the myth that salmon farming has no impact on the environment. Alex Salmond, the first minister, recently claimed salmon farming was capable of vast expansion to satisfy growing demand from China.

The reality about salmon farming's impact on the environment is rather different. Occasionally the mask slips, as it has with the disclosure under freedom of information rules of official figures showing that sea bed pollution is "unsatisfactory" at 16%-20% of all active Scottish salmon farms and "borderline" at 10%-12% more. The Scottish Environment Protection Agency (Sepa) has accepted that the figures published by the Salmon and Trout Association's lawyers are correct and that "unsatisfactory" farms are killing all forms of life, other than marine manure worms, underneath the fish cages and sometimes far into the sea lochs where they are tethered.

The discovery that quite so many Scottish salmon farms are toxic with ordure affects their reputation all over the world. The two companies with the highest number of unsatisfactory reports were Wester Ross Fisheries — winner of an award for environmental stewardship from the Crown Estate last year — and Loch Duart, which bills itself as the "sustainable salmon company" and supplies Gordon Ramsay at Claridge's and Rick Stein's Seafood Restaurant in Padstow.

Nick Joy, managing director of Loch Duart, protests that the association's figures don't give the full picture: for instance, he fallows all his sites for one year in every three to reduce cumulative pollution and parasite problems. He is also reducing stocking levels at sites that fail Sepa's tests.

The Scottish Salmon Producers' Organisation pooh-poohs the figures. Scott Landsburgh, its chief executive, says: "Numerous time-consuming freedom of information requests and then taking raw data out of context to suit lobbying purposes is an abuse of taxpayers' money — this must stop!" The data reveal a truth he doesn't like, so he would like them suppressed by the Scottish state.

I am not against fish farming. But the reality is that if salmon farming were any other industry it would be required to use the best available technology to protect the environment. If it were pig farming, a comparable industry, farms would be issued with an enforcement notice and

threatened with closure if their untreated effluent was found to be polluting watercourses. Open-cage salmon farming is highly polluting. And technology has moved on. Closed-containment production in tanks — floating and on land — has been tested and shown to be vastly more environmentally friendly.

A Norwegian firm, Niri Seafood, has installed tanks on land in Bantry Bay, southwest Ireland, which it says will produce salmon this year at a lower cost than sea cages. The world's largest salmon farmer, Marine Harvest, is planning a facility there too. Costs are lower because you don't need boats, or toxic chemicals to make the parasitic sea lice fall off (water is filtered as it enters the tanks to prevent infestation), and the salmon droppings can be siphoned off and used for fertiliser.

Why does Scotland not spend some of the millions of pounds of EU money it receives for salmon farming on developing cleaner fish-farming technology? The only explanation can be that Scotland's salmon farmers see no need: their "light touch" regulatory system, and cronyism with ministers, has proved highly profitable.

It is now clear that these profits are made at untold cost to the marine environment. We knew whole river systems had been denuded of sea trout and salmon. We can now see that pollution exists on such a scale that shellfish, fish and other marine life are being poisoned. Expansion of the industry will only make these things worse. Scottish salmon farmers should be told that in five years' time sea cages will be banned. There should be a deadline, a road map and government help to get from here to there.

If Salmond is too beholden to vested interests to act, the time has come for the supermarkets and their customers to insist Scottish salmon farmers clean up their disgusting mess.

Salmon farms turn sea bed into graveyard

Mark Macaskill

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DOZENS of salmon farms around the Scottish coastline have been dumping unacceptable levels of pollutants into the sea.

The impact of Scotland's £500m aquaculture industry, which supplies many of Britain's top chefs, including Rick Stein and Gordon Ramsay, is revealed in the results of sea bed surveys released by the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (Sepa).

The surveys, carried out over the past three years, cover more than 250 fish farms run by 23 companies. Some farms have been surveyed more than once. Sepa classed 137 of the surveys (44%) as unsatisfactory, indicating high levels of organic matter, such as fish faeces and uneaten food, on the sea bed.

Such waste can disrupt biodiversity by killing off flora and fauna. A further 64 (21%) of surveys were deemed borderline — defined as close to having an unsustainable impact on the environment — and 106 (34%) were satisfactory.

The findings have prompted fresh criticism of aquaculture as a "dirty industry" and renewed calls for chefs to boycott farmed fish. Stein and Ramsay declined to comment.

According to Sepa, the companies with the poorest records included Wester Ross Fisheries: 70% of its reports were classed unsatisfactory and 30% were borderline. Of the surveys of sites run by Loch Duart — which, according to its website, supplies Stein's Seafood

Restaurant in Padstow, Cornwall, and Ramsay's Maze in London — 68% were unsatisfactory.

The Salmon and Trout Association (STA), which obtained the surveys under freedom of information laws, said the industry's expansion in Scotland was a concern.

“This report is a damning indictment of the salmon farming industry and makes a mockery of its claims that it operates in harmony with the wider environment,” said Hughie Campbell-Adamson, chairman of the STA.

Scott Landsburgh, chief executive of the Scottish Salmon Producers' Organisation, defended the industry and said 87% of Scotland's fish farms received “excellent” or “good” ratings from Sepa last year.