

Guest Column

Fish welfare in captivity is better than fish welfare in the wild.**‘Not in my world’ says Kipperman**

Mike Smylie is affectionately known as ‘Kipperman’. He fights for the survival of coastal fishing communities and for their right to fish sustainably. He seeks an end to the use of highly mechanised, large, international trawlers.

Mike travels widely with his exhibition, ‘Kipperland’. The exhibition describes the herring fishery industry and won a prestigious BBC award in 2004. He is a maritime historian and author of six books on fishing matters.

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Recent claims that farmed salmon have a better standard of welfare than fish in the wild struck me as odd; in fact, more than odd, almost arrogant and seemingly playing at being God. Let me start at the beginning. In March of this year Bristol resident Mary Morgan bought a pack of hot-smoked salmon from the ‘Fresh and Wild’ shop in Clifton. The salmon came from a fish farm near Scourie in North West Scotland operated by Loch Duart Ltd, but it had been smoked and packaged seven hundred miles south from its source by the Dartmouth Smokehouse in Devon. The pack carried the RSPCA’s ‘Freedom Foods’ logo but there was no mention that it was farmed salmon, although it did say it was ‘sea-reared’. Accordingly, Mrs Morgan presumed it was wild salmon, a fact the shop assistant confirmed when she was asked. When Mary discovered that it was not wild, she wrote to the Bristol Evening Post, complaining about the lack of clarity on these packs, as well as contacting the Trading Standards Authority, the shop and the smokehouse. Her letter was published on 17th March and promoted an interesting response on 29th March from Nick Joy, the managing director of Loch Duart Ltd. Mr Joy said that ‘there is no way a salmon in the wild can be protected from being torn apart by a seal or an otter.’ Of course there isn’t Nick. He continued ‘there is no way to stop it smashing into rocks when it tumbles back from a waterfall.’ That, too, is obvious, but this doesn’t give mortals an excuse to pretend that salmon farms are an improvement upon nature. Whatever happened to the process of natural selection? Is Nick Joy suggesting that by keeping his fish in captivity he is improving on God’s own evolutionary processes? This sounds like putting a hamster on a treadmill and saying it’s free to run wild.

Mary Morgan, after discovering that she was about to eat farmed salmon - which she abhors (she didn't eat it in the end) - also phoned the RSPCA and was eventually put through to John Avizienius. He told her, echoing Nick Joy's words, that, in his opinion 'wild salmon doesn't necessarily have a better welfare than farmed salmon'.

Nick Joy promotes himself as being a 'humane salmon farmer'. According to the Daily Telegraph (Sunday, 4th March) he reckons 'fish can be happy too'; presumably swimming in one of his cages? His company won the Gold Award for Best food in the Taste of Britain 2005; an event sponsored by the Daily Telegraph and the supermarket giant, Sainsbury's.

There is no doubt that Loch Duart Ltd farm fish have a less stressful life than many of the residents in other intensive salmon farms around our coasts, and that Mr Joy is serious about producing a superior product. Furthermore, his farm salmon probably do have a better survival rate than those in the wild. Being caged for their entire lives they would have, wouldn't they.

That is not to say, though, that the welfare of salmon which swim in their natal rivers for up to three years, then head seaward before returning to spawn, is improved upon by rearing them artificially in cages. Mr Joy's fish reach their ideal slaughter weight after 28 months, presumably before they reach sexual maturity, which doesn't compare with wild salmon that can live for up to 20 years.

There are other factors as well, such as the food feed to farm salmon. Most farmed salmon are fed on processed sandeels, pout, capelin, herring, sardines and pilchards, or on left-overs after other species have been gutted and processed. As such, fish farming not only robs us of fresh fish supplies, but also wastefully uses up natural resources; it is generally accepted that it takes three tons of these fish to produce one ton of farm fish. Fishing at the base of the food chain damages stocks of other species.

Mary Morgan's pack of smoked salmon, as mentioned, had the 'Freedom Food' logo. Freedom Foods Ltd was set up by the RSPCA in 1984 as a charity to enforce strict welfare standards for farm animals. Although much of their work is to be lauded, there is a distinct difference between farm animals and farm fish. It was Nick Joy who first persuaded the RSPCA to develop the 'Freedom Food' standard for fish and his company was the first to win that award.

However, Mr Joy seems to have difficulty with someone thinking that the use of the word 'freedom food' suggests that it is food from the wild. Take eggs for instance: free-range hens are allowed to roam outside, presumably in the 'wild'. Likewise, consumers assume that meat with the RSPCA label comes from animals that are allowed to roam in fields. Thus it is not difficult to see how consumers might assume that RSPCA certified fish also have freedom to roam. They do not.

It is mandatory for all fresh or frozen seafood to be labeled correctly; noting whether it is farmed or wild and the country of origin. The problem is that once it has been cooked or has added ingredients, it becomes exempt from these regulations. Is smoking cooking? Is it right that Tesco, by adding 1.3% red pepper, mustard seed and fennel to their hot-smoked salmon don't have to state the origins of the fish? Legally yes, but morally, in my opinion, no.

Mary Morgan was right to query the provenance of her salmon with Trading Standards. They 'phoned her a few weeks later to say that the packs should have had 'farmed' on them. When

she next looked, she told me that they had added 'sea reared freedom farmed Atlantic salmon' to the packet. Success for one person in her persistence, but that doesn't change the fact that some of these salmon farmers appear to believe that the way that they rear their fish is superior to God's way.