

Culled! Seals slaughtered because they are eating fish first

by Emma Barrow



Dead Seals

Two pregnant seals lie dead and covered in blood - after being shot in the head to protect salmon farms that supply Britain's supermarket giants.

That brings the death toll, including pups, to 310 - all killed by snipers on the west coast of Scotland in the past 18 months.

The culls are to protect salmon farms so the seals don't eat the fish. Some have been found dying slowly on the edge of lakes after being shot in the head.

But conservation groups have branded the culls cruel and unnecessary .

John Robins, from Animal Concern, said: "If you buy Scottish salmon you are essentially paying for seals to be shot. It's a total disgrace."

The females, pictured above on a boat at Loch Alsh after being shot, were just weeks from giving birth. Their bodies were taken to a vet who found neither had any salmon in their stomachs.

They were slaughtered by marksmen at Marine Harvest, which sells salmon to Sainsbury's, the UK's third biggest supermarket. The fish farm has killed 43 seals in the past 18 months.

Figures released under the Freedom of Information Act also reveal Scottish Sea Farms, which supplies Marks & Spencer, and Hjaltland Seafarms, which works with Asda and Tesco, are also licensed by the Scottish Government to shoot seals.

Scottish Sea Farms was responsible for 54 seal deaths in 2011 and the first half of 2012, while Hjaltland shot 65 over the same period.

Shootings at other farms - some of which supply small UK businesses as well as foreign stores - takes the overall toll to 310.

The fish farms insist the culls are a last resort to prevent seals from attacking underwater salmon cages and eating thousands of fish in weeks.

But conservation groups say not all farms are using anti-predator nets as the first method of control. Marine Scotland say just 20 per cent of farms have nets. Nearly half use acoustic deterrents and a third use seal blinds to protect the fish.

Predator

Animal Concern's Mr Robins, who is also lobbying the US government to tighten its rules on food imports, said: "The Scottish government, the RSPCA and the Scottish Salmon Producers' Organisation (SSPO) all claim seals are only shot as a last resort.

"That's not just a fishy story, it's a great big whopper of a lie.

"Unless the farms install and maintain predator exclusion nets to humanely keep seals well away from the cage nets which hold the salmon, it is totally inaccurate to describe the shooting of seals as a last resort."

The fish farming business in Scotland produces 155,000 tons of salmon a year, with annual exports worth £285 million.

About 40 per cent of the world's population of grey seals can be found in Britain, and more than 90 per cent of them breed in Scotland.

Scott Landsburgh, SSPO's chief executive, said: "We have a responsibility to protect our fish.

"Persistent predators which are shot as a last resort by anglers, netmen and farmers equate to 0.3 per cent of the overall growing population.

"Nets are not as humane as claimed as they are indiscriminate and can kill marine wildlife."

An RSPCA spokesman added: "It is a sad reality of salmon farming that from time to time a predator may be able to bypass all efforts to exclude them, which may result in thousands of fish being killed.

"The RSPCA doesn't want any seals to be shot but there are occasions when there may be no other option. In these cases the predator must be culled in a humane way by a trained person. This method of control must only be enacted as a last resort. We are trying to find new ways to reduce the use of a lethal method of predator control."

A Marks & Spencer spokesman said: "Neither we nor our salmon farmers have any wish to see seals or any other sealife harmed."

"We have spent a large amount of time and money to avoid this happening - for example through the use of acoustic devices and weighted nets."

"Our farmers do not own or hold any firearms on site."

A Tesco spokesman said: "We are committed to responsible fishing and animal welfare. We work closely with our suppliers to ensure they meet industry and government standards."

Asda said its views were represented by The Scottish Salmon Producers' Organisation.

Sainsbury's said: "Our policy is in line with the requirements of the RSPCA's Freedom Food welfare standards. The effective exclusion of seals and the use of deterrents are the most responsible methods of managing seal activity. We are committed to continually improving exclusion and deterrent methods."

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WHERE THEY'RE MOST AT RISK

CANADA culls the most seals with hunters killing 300,000 a year.

Most are pups, clubbed to death for their skins when they are just a few weeks old. But the Canadian government claims they are also killed to protect cod stocks in the North Atlantic.

Greenland, Iceland, Norway and Russia also cull the animals for their skins, meat and oils.

The only country in the southern hemisphere to slaughter seals on such a large scale is Namibia in southern Africa - where more than 90,000 are killed a year.

The Namibian government claims the culls are necessary because seals eat more fish than the entire fishing fleet can catch.

If you buy this salmon you're paying for seals to be shot