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SATURDAY DISPATCH by John MacLeod

IT has been a bad summer for salmon-farming in the West Highlands – paradoxically, because the weather was so good. As hot, dry week succeeded hot, dry week, the sea grew warmer, and saltier and, in the crowded cages clotting every other bay, fish started to die.

By the last week in August, horrified locals on the Isle of Harris watched helplessly as Marine Harvest Ltd, one of Scotland's biggest producers, resorted to pouring thousands and thousands of litres of hydrogen peroxide into the sea, in a desperate bid to stop an outbreak of amoebic gill disease.

Angus Campbell, a former fisherman who now runs a successful St Kilda cruise business, fought last year to stop yet another fish-farm off his native village of Ploccapool. He failed. He could only stand on the shore and take photographs as tankers rolled in to medicate the clear Hebridean sea.

Telling a local paper that the company was losing 400 fish a day to the epidemic, Mr Campbell said: 'The community fought so hard to stop this development and now the local fishermen have to deal with this. What is the sense in destroying all the inshore shellfish on one hand and, on the other, designating a Marine Protected Area? It just doesn't make sense at all...'

Off the east coast of Skye by late August, fish were perishing in such quantities that residents of Balmeanach were forced to keep their windows shut, heatwave or no heatwave, against the stench of dead salmon.

All in all, it has been woeful publicity for what has long been a controversial industry – attacked for pollution, assailed for its impact on wild salmon and sea trout, and for cluttering up the coastal scenery.

And it's set to get worse – for the Scottish Government plans to increase production by 50 per cent in the next eight years, following a multi-million-pound trade deal struck in January last year between First Minister Alex Salmond and Chinese Vice-Premier Li Keqiang, at the height of their panda diplomacy.

Alex Salmond leapt at the chance to sell farmed salmon to the Chinese. But around Scotland's coastline, there are few signs of a cash bonanza for locals and, ominously, the environment is awash with disease and chemicals

FOR the first time, Scotland would be allowed to export salmon directly to the People's Republic – not least because Beijing is determined to spite Norway, its fish now banned since the Norwegians dared give dissident Liu Xiaobo the Nobel Peace Prize.

But this did not unduly trouble the SNP conscience. And the cash-return, even in the first six months, was prodigious. By August 2011, as Scott Landsburgh, of the Scottish Salmon Producers' Organisation, declared: 'From a standing start this year, China has become the fifth largest export destination for Scottish salmon. The value of exports to the whole Far East region has increased eightfold in 12 months.'

But the ramping-up of the industry is seriously bad news for the traditional West Highland economy – dependent on tourism and sustainable local fishing – and still worse for one of Europe's most unspoiled and clean environments.

For years, and especially when I settled in Harris, two decades ago, I doughtily defended salmon-farming, which then employed hundreds of island men. Some operations were still locally owned, and the salmon-

farming boom had killed off commercial poaching.

Besides, I did not care for those marble-mouthed lairds – few of them year-round residents – who lobbied most loudly against the new aquaculture. But the original dream – that every other crofter could end up tending his own cage by his own shore – was already fading.

Salmon-farming is high-risk, requires significant capital, and much outlay through two years, with no return. All the small producers have now gone since none, at the last, had sufficiently deep pockets to absorb the frequent local disasters.

These days, the Scottish Salmon Company – which has a factory in my own village – is typical. Ownership can be traced to Oslo and registry, for tax purposes, in Jersey. In fact, most of the industry (ironically, bearing in mind Chinese politics) belongs ultimately to Norwegian interests. Most is tax-domiciled offshore and little profit stays in Scotland, far less the Highlands.

And, for greed, such fish-farm consortia have worked hard to automate their sites and minimise the cost of labour. Salmon