

## 'Northern Climes, November 2007'

When is saying sorry just not enough? This question could be usefully addressed to Nick Joy, managing director of Loch Duart Ltd, the grandiosely-named 'Sustainable Salmon Company' which rears farm fish in cages near Scourie in north west Sutherland. Mr Joy has had a deal of practice in saying 'sorry', because of the record of escapes from his farms.

Most recently, in November, the company reported that it had lost 14,000 salmon after a work-boat damaged security nets whilst attempting to secure a walkway that had broken free. Mr Joy, reported in a Scottish newspaper, said: 'While we regret enormously the potential loss of these fish, both from a company and environmental perspective, we are so grateful to the men and women who put out to sea in these conditions and averted a bigger catastrophe.'

A more detailed account of the incident appeared in the aquaculture industry on-line newspaper, Fishupdate.com on 6th November: 'In Storm Force 10 conditions, one of the Loch Duart farm's walkways broke some of its moorings and started to drift from shore. Despite what were described as appalling working conditions, staff battled to secure the position. "However, due to lack of visibility in the severe weather, the landing craft fouled one of the nets whilst attempting to reattach one of the moorings. As a result, the company has said that a significant number of fish - perhaps as many as 14,000 - may have escaped.'

On the Beaufort Scale (which categorises weather conditions) a Force 10 Storm means: 'Wave height 29ft - 41ft; very high waves with long overhanging crests, the resulting foam, in great patches, is blown in dense white streaks along the wind direction. On the whole, the sea surface takes on a white appearance. The tumbling of the sea is heavy and shock-like. Visibility is reduced.' Wind speed, 55 to 63mph, with the possibility of gusts of up to and over 70mph.

Does Nick Joy and the 'Sustainable Salmon Company' expect its employees, both men and woman, to man the boats in such weather conditions? Were the 'men and women' who so bravely 'put to sea' exposed to unnecessary risk because the cage design was unable to withstand the storm? Where was Mr Joy during this incident - in the boat with his workers, sharing their danger? Perhaps we should be told?

The newspaper report also pointed out that, according to figures obtained from the Scottish Government under the Freedom of Information Act, almost 200,000 farmed salmon have escaped from their cages during the past twelve months, 'strengthening the argument of conservationists that these escapes are driving wild salmon to extinction.'

Regular readers of this column will remember that 15,000 fish escaped from cages in Loch Shiel in September, and that upwards of 100,000 escaped from cages in the Western Isles during the summer. Sid Patten, CEO of the Scottish Salmon Producers Organisation, quickly leapt into print to defend his members tarnished reputation over escapes: 'The industry is making huge efforts to improve containment standards of fish,' he said.

Commenting on the escapes, Bruce Sandison, a long-time observer of the business of salmon farming, said: 'Continuing levels of escapes of farmed salmon from cages are disgraceful, no matter how apologetic the farmers are. The situation is intolerable and it is time for government to introduce penalties.'

Perhaps an appropriate penalty would be £5.00 per escaped fish for the first offence, £10.00 per escaped fish from the second offence, and the withdrawal the farmer's operating licence for a third offence?

For more than a decade, this column has been exposing the 'dirty' side of the business of fish farming; the dramatic decline in wild sea-trout and salmon numbers in the West Highlands and Islands of Scotland because of the impact of fish farm sea lice on wild stocks as they pass by cages placed on their migratory routes; the increase in the incidence of toxic algal blooms in fish farming areas, almost certainly exacerbated by the thousands of tons of untreated waste fish farmers dump into the marine and freshwater environment each year.

Recurring public health scares about eating farm salmon; inaccurate labelling of farm fish products in supermarkets and restaurants; the misuse of chemicals to treat fish-packed cages; continuing disease outbreaks amongst farm fish; secrecy over the true numbers of escapes; complete confusion over the real number of Scottish jobs that the industry claims to support; the dependence of the industry on foreign workers to sustain the processing of farm fish.

The failure of the Scottish Environment Protection Agency to effectively police the industry; the deafening silence of Scottish Natural Heritage, the body supposed to protect Scotland's precious environment, about the impact of these floating feed lots. The dominance of a single Norwegian, global-wide, company in control of what is essentially a Scottish asset. The seemingly never-ending flood of strategy documents, plans, scientific reports and flannel that stream from government in support of the continued expansion of the industry.

If we must have fish farming, then bring the wretched business ashore and continue it in closed-containment units. No more sea lice problems for wild fish, or for farm fish. No more pollution of our marine and freshwater environment. No more toxic algal blooms that damage shellfish. No more disease transfer between farm fish and wild fish. No more disfiguration of Scotland's scenic coastline and lochs. More wild fish back in the West Highlands and Islands. Increased income from angling tourism for hotels, B&B's, guest houses and caravan sites, tackle dealers, gillies and boat builders. No more escapes - and no more need to send men and women out in small boats in a Force 10 Storm to clean up a fish farmer's mess. Do it now.

Rod McGill