

Council

CNL(04)71

Statement by the Salmon Net Fishing Association of Scotland

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The Salmon Net Fishing Association of Scotland welcomes this opportunity to table a written statement at the Twenty-First Annual Meeting of NASCO, and it will come as no surprise to the regular attenders at these meetings that our statement is once more on the subject of predation and, more precisely, seal predation.

Whilst we welcome and commend the present upsurge in interest being shown by the Scottish Executive and the various Agencies in the salmon/seal problem we would tactfully remind them that time to solve this problem is not on their side and implementing the Precautionary Principle should not be lost sight of.

At the start of 2002 there were an estimated 99,000 grey seals in Scottish waters. This apparent fall in numbers since last year (119,000) is based on a new population model rather than a real reduction in seal numbers. However, the welcome news is that this model reflects strong indications that the rate of increase in pup production is slowing due to limits on the carrying capacity of the main breeding sites. In the late 1980s pup production increased at over 6% per annum whereas in the past five years it has been less than 2% per annum. If conditions remain as they are at present, the total population size is predicted to increase by no more than 1% per year over the next ten years.

Although the minimum number of common seals in Scottish waters in 2002 was estimated to be 30,000, a small reduction on the previous year, the actual population is probably nearer 50,000.

These relative small reductions have not yet had any marked effect on the number of seals observed at netting stations, around the mouths of salmon rivers, in their estuaries and in freshwater, sometimes at a considerable distance from the sea. The latter area of conflict is becoming much more frequent. In addition, there has been no decline in the percentage of the catch observed to have been damaged by seals or the total number eaten leaving little trace. This loss could now be significant in relation to the reduced number of salmon returning to home rivers particularly in the winter and spring.

Placing further restrictions on fishermen to reduce their catching power seems a pointless exercise in the absence of a policy to control seal numbers particularly those which frequent bays and estuaries and enter freshwater.

Predation is a real problem and is probably one of the few associated with the marine environment that can be tackled with a reasonable possibility of a positive outcome.

My Association requests NASCO to encourage home governments to support investigations likely to deter seals taking up residence close to salmon rivers. The design, manufacture and trial of a new generation of scarers would seem to be a very worthwhile project with a reasonable chance of a successful outcome.