

NORTH ATLANTIC SALMON CONSERVATION ORGANIZATION

ORGANISATION POUR LA CONSERVATION DU SAUMON DE L'ATLANTIQUE NORD



Council

CNL(03)72

NGO Statement

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Opening Statement made by the Salmon Net Fishing Association of Scotland

Mr President, Distinguished Delegates, Fellow NGOs, Ladies and Gentlemen.

The Salmon Net Fishing Association of Scotland welcomes this opportunity to make a statement at this, the Twentieth 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.

Although the present numbers of grey seals (119,000) in Scottish Waters shows an overall modest increase in production, recent patterns suggest that in some areas the rate of increase may be slowing down. However, the most probable outcome is that it will take 10 or more years for the population as a whole to show a declining trend.

While the possibility of fewer seals must be welcomed, the ever increasing number of haul-out sites remains a matter of real concern. Outside their respective breeding seasons grey and to a lesser extent common seals, can be found hauled out in groups around the Scottish coast including the Western Isles, Orkney and Shetland and it is no coincidence that many of those locations were the very sites where salmon fishermen some 200 years ago began setting their bag nets to catch salmon on their homeward spawning migration. The topography of the bays and inlets through which the salmon choose to migrate when on passage could limit their escape and make their capture by seals relatively simple particularly as the pattern of catches suggested that the salmon may travel in relatively dense aggregations.

The closeness of some of those locations to the recently identified emigration routes followed by smolts on passage to their northern feeding grounds is also a matter of concern.

There would seem to be a need to examine the present regulations (Conservation of Seals Act 1970) to provide a defence when the only option left to protect salmon rather than fishing gear is to kill seals during their respective Close Seasons.

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 successful outcome. We would request NASCO to encourage home governments to support investigations likely to lead to a significant reduction in the level of seal predation.

Because the present Phocine Distemper Virus outbreak has had little effect on the Scottish seal population it is hoped that the Conservation of Seals (Scotland) Order 2002 can be reviewed without delay.