All at sea

With wild salmon stocks in peril, *Adam Weymouth* meets the Scottish netsmen who have lost their way of life

PHOTOGRAPHS BY COLIN McPHERSON

Previous pages and opposite, top: salmon netsmen at work at low tide at Kinnaber, near Montrose, in 2000

Middle: fly nets were commonly used on sandy beaches, as here at St Cyrus in 1996

Bottom: a box of salmon caught by James Mackay in 2007 at his Armadale Bay netting station

"It was the best job in the world. The things you'll see in the early hours of the morning — it's beautiful"

James Mackay, netsman

Last July, Will Skinner, along with his brother and son, sailed their coble into the bay beyond the village of Balintore on the east coast of Scotland and set a bag net. It was the first time they had done so in six years, since salmon netting was banned.

The bag net is an intricate system of nets staked to the sea bed, that blocks the path of migrating salmon and funnels them into a holding net, from where the netsmen haul them out. "It's a work of art," says Skinner, 62. One end is anchored at the low water mark, the other stakes are set at sea. Once there were hundreds of these netting stations all along the Scottish coast, the bedrock of communities and local industry.

With the season lasting from February until September, it was gruelling work, the netsmen out in all weathers. Many started as schoolboys during their holidays and kept on until retirement or until their bodies gave out. A crew of four, working five or six nets, could pull in several thousand salmon a season. Much was sold locally, the rest sent on trains to Glasgow, London or abroad.

Today, however, wild Scottish salmon has all but vanished from fish counters (Harrods was selling a few last summer, hand-netted on the River Tweed, for £245 a kilo). The number of adult salmon returning from the ocean to Scottish rivers, leaping waterfalls and rapids to spawn in the pools where they were born, has been dwindling for years. Whether this can be attributed to overfishing, to bycatch (being caught in the nets of trawlers harvesting other species), to warming oceans that exacerbate disease and change the location of their prey, or to a combination of factors, is difficult to say. But in 2016 the Scottish government enacted a three-year moratorium on coastal salmon netting after losing a court case brought by Salmon and Trout Conservation Scotland that claimed ministers were not meeting European laws on protecting wild salmon.

The netsmen have always argued that they have been made to bear the brunt of regulations, when there are many elements at play. The year before the moratorium began, river anglers killed more salmon than the netsmen did. Most angling in Scotland is now catch and release, although there is a debate about how harmful this is to the fish. Another factor is the sharp rise in the past 50 years in the population of grey seals (a natural predator of salmon) in the coastal waters through which the fish migrate. And then there is the proliferation of salmon farms along the north and west coasts that can spread parasites and disease to the wild salmon as they pass by. Farmed salmon is the UK's most valuable food export. Allegations of pollution and animal welfare abuses by Scottish salmon farms, highlighted by the recent hit Netflix documentary *Seaspiracy,* continue to be refuted by the industry.

When Skinner set his net last summer, it was not to catch salmon — for which he could have been fined or prosecuted. It was an act of protest. The bailiffs kept a keen eye on him through binoculars, and he released any salmon that swam into his nets, although he says it broke his heart to do so. He wanted to maintain his equipment and catch a few sea trout, but mostly he wanted to set a net where he still owned the heritable rights. Since the ban he has suffered anxiety and stress; sleep has been hard to come by. He is angry at how their livelihoods were taken. "That day when we put the net back in the water, me and my brother," he says, "it was probably the happiest I've felt in five years."

By the time of the moratorium only 17 coastal netting stations were still active. For years fishery boards had been buying ⋙

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Top: James Mackay's old netting station is full of expensive equipment he can no longer use

Above: salmon netters erect their nets at low tide at Boddin, near Montrose, in 2000

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up netting rights and mothballing them to conserve wild fish; other netsmen had retired citing old age and dwindling catches. Compensation was offered to those still operating to suspend their business for three years, but most netsmen saw it as derisory. Skinner received less than £8,000 a year. Re-examined in 2018, the moratorium was extended indefinitely, along with a recalculated ten-year compensation scheme. "I refused to take it because it's peanuts," Skinner says.

The following year the Salmon Net Fishing Association of Scotland (SNFAS) brought a case against the Scottish government, arguing that the prohibition and the compensation were unlawful, but this was dismissed. Noting expert evidence that Scottish salmon numbers had halved since the 1970s, the judgment found that the compensation struck "a fair balance".

James Mackay, 68, is a netsman and the chairman of the SNFAS. "It was the best job in the world," he says. "The things that you'll see in the early hours of the morning — it's beautiful."

Mackay was a relative newcomer compared with some of the netsmen who could trace their lineage back generations. He bought his fishing rights in 1987 and fished with his father out of Armadale Bay, on the north coast of Scotland, until 2016. The bay is enclosed by steep and rocky headlands, with a narrow passage out towards the ocean. A blondin — a mechanical ropeway — winched the salmon up the cliffs to waiting trucks.

Tacked up on the wall inside his bothy, a cottage-like shelter, are faded photos of the men fishing. A bottle of milk on the windowsill has separated into its constituent parts; it is unclear when this place was last used. Outside, timbers once meant for stretching and cleaning nets now list, like the masts of boats going under.

"In 2010 I harvested close to 6,000 fish," Mackay says. "That was more fish than was ever recorded at Armadale since 200 years. There was no scarcity of salmon, and I don't believe there's a scarcity of salmon yet on the north coast." While anecdotal evidence suggests some localised populations of salmon may have remained healthy, Atlantic stocks have certainly seen significant declines. But run sizes are harder to estimate now the netsmen are not fishing. The logbooks of their catches were detailed datasets spanning decades.

Few netsmen believe that their form of fishing will return. Mackay estimates he has £200,000 worth of equipment, which he can never sell on because nowhere else fishes like this. What was supposed to be his pension is slowly rotting in his sheds. His heritable title is worthless. "It's like someone says it's your house, you can keep the house, but you're not going to live in it. We'll tell you in ten years if you can stay in it or not."

And then there are the losses to culture and community. "These are working-class guys," says Magnus Davidson, a researcher in environment, economy and society at the University of the Highlands and Islands. "If we're talking about just transition to better ways of working environmentally, is this the best example of that?"

Davidson remembers when you could walk into the chippy in his home town of Thurso and get a wild salmon supper, battered, for a fiver. Farmed salmon has so completely replaced wild — and in doing so has become one of the cheapest fish in the supermarket — that few people have noticed the decline of a species, or the destruction of a heritage. To see abandoned cobles with weeds growing through broken slats, or the bag nets bundled in Mackay's bothy, is to see artefacts from when wild fish supported entire communities.

"There's a huge amount of cultural knowledge, indigenous knowledge, ecological knowledge, all wrapped up in these guys," Davidson says. "Even removing the debate around the ecological impact and the salmon numbers, we should be caring. We could still deeply mourn the loss of this industry."

On Loch Linnhe, close to where Ben Nevis thrusts into the sky, Lucy Ballantyne and her assistant are drifting a net out from shore, checking their catch for the presence of sea lice before releasing it. Sea lice are parasites that occur naturally and harmlessly on wild salmon if their numbers remain low, but in the confined environment of a fish farm they can thrive — and transfer on to wild populations. There are several salmon farms on this sea loch run by the Norwegian seafood giant Mowi. The closest is three miles away.

Ballantyne, a marine biologist with Lochaber Fisheries Trust, a charity dedicated to protecting the local wild fish, has been studying Loch Linnhe for 14 years. Since December 2020 the salmon farms here have frequently recorded lice levels above the code of good practice. Ballantyne says she has netted some young wild salmon that have more than 150 lice feeding on them: 13 is enough to kill a fish. She has calculated that up to 85 per cent of the "smolt run" — juvenile ocean-bound wild salmon — perished last year.

It hasn't always been like this. She once used this site to show people who are "anti fish farm" how well managed things can be. "I'd say, 'Look, it can work.' This year that's just been blown out of the water. This year I have cried over the status of some of the fish. It has got to the point where a job that I used to love has become one I almost dread."

Mowi says lice variations are influenced primarily by environmental conditions, with this spring and summer producing an unusually high abundance. But Ballantyne says the problem is cyclical. "Lice numbers on wild fish are consistently higher when the farms are in their second year of production," she says, in part because by then the farmed fish are bigger and carry more lice. This two-year cycle has been observed in Upper Loch Linnhe since 2002, while on nearby Loch Eil the cycle stopped once the fish farm was removed.

"There are many known pressures on fish and we accept that we must properly manage sea lice on our salmon so as not to be an additional source of sea lice to wild fish," says Ben Hadfield, Mowi Scotland's COO. "However … [placing] sole blame on just one pressure does a disservice to all stakeholders working together to ensure the protection of the Linnhe ecosystem."

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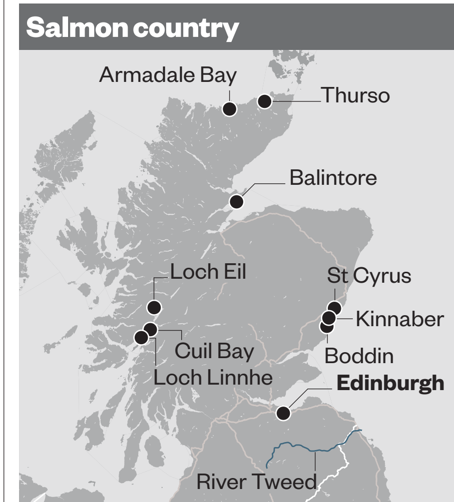
Lucy Ballantyne, biologist



Ballantyne is not suggesting that aquaculture is the only problem: wild salmon spend most of their adult lives in the ocean and their marine survival rate has decreased tenfold. But for her, that makes it all the more important to focus on what is close at hand. High lice numbers were reported on fish farms from Argyll to the Outer Hebrides last year. Yet only one farm is recorded as ever having been fined for an environmental breach — £2,000 for killing more seals than was licensed — since salmon farming began in Scotland in 1971.

"Take a fisherman in the river," she says. "We're making him put back every fish, and yet we're doing nothing about this farm here. It's just nuts. Surely the regulation has to come from Scottish government."

In 2019 Scotland produced more than 200,000 tonnes of salmon, from more than 200 farms spanning the west coast. The Scottish government aims to double the industry's economic contribution by 2030. Two reports into aquaculture have been commissioned by the Scottish parliament since 2016, finding that "urgent and meaningful action needs to be taken to address regulatory deficiencies as well as fish health and environmental issues before the industry can expand" and that "the status quo … is not acceptable".

Yet Salmon and Trout Conservation Scotland says there has been no meaningful action taken to address waste, sea lice or mortality, and that the results of a new review, announced last August, are not expected until at least late 2023. Last September the Scottish government said that it saw "no grounds" for halting the further expansion of fish farms.

At the other end of Loch Linnhe, Sandy McLachlan, like his father and grandfather before him, used to fish from a bothy that was used as a netting station for 400 years. As a boy McLachlan, now 69, would row across Cuil Bay each afternoon and lug a wheelbarrow of salmon up the hill to meet the four o'clock train. The next morning it would be on ice in Billingsgate Market in London. "We consumed it quite a lot, wild fish, and we miss it something terrible," he says. He does not eat farmed salmon.

The only time he has used his nets recently was when he was employed to catch thousands of escapees from a farm and toss them in a skip. (Escapees can harm wild populations by interbreeding with them and outcompeting them for food). He says he would fish again if the moratorium ended. "But to be honest with you, the numbers aren't there." These days McLachlan creels for langoustine, as do many of the former netsmen. It is a job he describes as "dirty, unskilled, unfulfilling".

He gazes out across the loch. "I'm not so fond of being here now, because it gives me sad memories," he says. "It's a shame. It's an iconic beastie. A beautiful fish. Things move on, but I'm not sure it's for the better." ■