



The Scottish Government
Attn: Mairi Gougeon
Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs,
Land Reform and Islands
St Andrew's House
Regent Road
Edinburgh
EH1 3DG

08 February 2024

Dear Cabinet Secretary,

Open Letter on the Decline of the Atlantic Salmon

The recent declaration by the International Union for Conservation of Nature that the Atlantic Salmon is now an endangered species has not come as a shock to many and should be a wake-up call to those organisations which, perhaps, have not put as much into its conservation as they should have. The Tay Ghillies Association, a Scottish Charity, has been monitoring salmon stocks since 1989 and the decline in numbers of this iconic fish has been a point of real concern for years. Of course, we welcomed the Scottish Government Wild Salmon Strategy in 2022, and its Implementation Plan (the Plan) in February 2023 which outlines the stressors on this wonderful fish and what might be done to stop the decline and, perhaps, allow some recovery.

However, before discussing the Plan, we would like to make some very important points which are often overlooked. Our desire to stop the decline of Atlantic Salmon is not about saving stocks to allow us to fish, it is far more than that. The Atlantic Salmon is an indicator species for our rivers and seas, and it is telling us that Mankind has interfered seriously in its environment. At sea, over-fishing and by-catch are destroying juvenile fish in their feeding grounds before they can return to our rivers. Salmon farms pollute our seas and have serious effects on the migration routes of juvenile salmon enroute to the feeding grounds, and adults returning to our rivers to spawn.

Closer to home, our rivers are polluted, over-abstracted by agriculture, hydro, and land-based fish farms, have too many redundant barriers and are overwhelmed by predators, many of which are an invasive species and protected by law! Our overall environment is not in a good place and the Scottish Government, its agencies designated to protect the environment, and the general public, should have real concerns about this.

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Beyond the environmental concerns, the decline in salmon has other far-reaching effects. Tourism, local businesses, and rural employment rely on the presence of salmon to ensure a steady economy. Their loss would be catastrophic in many areas and rural communities could well disappear. There would be a real deterioration in the health of many people – both physical and mental. Angling has been proven to bring considerable benefits to an individual's mental health and wellbeing and the physical exertion of wading and casting ensures a good level of fitness for thousands of people.

The Scottish Government, and many Members of the Scottish Parliament and the general public, also hold a view that salmon fishing is for “toffs” (and by default, therefore, no reason for them to do anything to stop the decline of salmon). They could not be more wrong. Salmon fishing clubs in Scotland have thousands of members in total, from every walk of life, from all ages, genders, ethnic groups, and with disabilities. Wholly affordable annual subscriptions allow free fishing for all members on the best beats on Scotland's salmon rivers and affordable day tickets are also available for non-members.

The Atlantic Salmon is only one species in Scotland, but its presence has far-reaching effects across the whole country which simply cannot, and should not, be ignored.

Turning to the Plan, we agree its content but feel very much that the Delivery Group, which has been formed to ensure real progress, is a “closed shop”. We would have liked to see organisations included which have the survival of the Atlantic Salmon very much at heart and, having no close links to Government stakeholders, would not be frightened to fiercely defend a point of view.

The Government promised to deliver the Plan at “pace”. We are now just past the first anniversary of the Plan (1 February) and we see no sign of significant progress. We wrote to the Marine Directorate last year asking for a progress report and sight of the Communications Plan for the Group. We were told there would be a progress report in February 2024 and the Comms Plan was being worked on. This is just not acceptable. Rural communities, businesses, hospitality, anglers, and environmental groups from all over Scotland have a real interest in saving the Atlantic salmon and want to see action and the timely delivery of the Plan. Communication is fundamental to keeping people informed and backing the Plan. Zero communication indicates zero progress and confidence in the Plan, the Delivery Group, and the Government, plummets.

Of particular interest to us is stocking of our rivers. The Scottish Government Stocking Policy, created by the Marine Directorate, is very clear on what stocking might be allowed, if any. We believe that techniques developed on the Carron in Sutherland go a long way to mitigate the issues raised by Marine Directorate scientists. We would urge them to engage with the Carron specialist (there has been no real engagement up to now, for some reason) and discover what he has done to ensure success. The current policy must be amended to reflect these techniques. Recent storms and subsequent spates seem to show the effects of Climate Change, and this may well become the norm. Many redds in the main stems and tributaries of our rivers will have been washed away, taking precious salmon eggs with them. There is,

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therefore, a strong case for mitigation stocking of fry and smolts from hatcheries practising best-in-class techniques. A pilot programme on one of the main Tay tributaries should then be initiated as soon as possible. We understand that stocking may not be the complete answer but might steady the decline until the new measures implemented in the plan start to show success.

Time is of the essence. Strong leadership is required to ensure the Plan delivers success in the desired timescales. The Tay Ghillies would urge you to do everything possible to ensure that the Scottish Wild Salmon Strategy Implementation Plan is delivered on time, giving our rivers and seas the chance to recover; our Atlantic Salmon the opportunity to grace our rivers, giving joy to tourists, businesses, hospitality and anglers alike; and giving Scotland's people a natural environment to be proud of.

Ignoring the issue or doing nothing is not an option. Time is not on our side.

Yours sincerely etc

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Bob Mason', with a horizontal line underneath it.

Association Secretary
Tay Ghillies Association

Copy to relevant:

Cabinet Secretaries
Ministers
Civil Servants
Directorates
Opposition MSPs
Angling Clubs
Non-Governmental Organisations
Environmental Groups
Press

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