

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Mark Hume

Calls to save salmon from across the pond

Royal-backed UK group calls results of salmon farming: 'a devastating catalogue of malpractice'

Mark Hume

Vancouver, BC — From Monday's Globe and Mail Published on Monday, Mar. 29, 2010 11:42AM EDT Last updated on Monday, Apr. 05, 2010 3:33AM EDT

The Salmon & Trout Association of the United Kingdom has His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales as its patron, and Ralph Percy, the Duke of Northumberland, as its president.

Founded 107 years ago, the organization works quietly to promote the proper management of aquatic resources, often focusing its efforts on influencing the highest levels of government.

As its name suggests, the association, which has 100,000 members, has a special interest in trout and salmon.

So it was only a matter of time before it took a stand on one of the most troubling environmental issues of the day: fish farming.

After a careful study of peer-reviewed science, the S&TA last week released its position paper on the impact of aquaculture on wild Scottish salmon stocks. And it is a stunning condemnation of an industry that is also under fire in British Columbia.

The S&TA does not equivocate. It states a review of the leading science “reveals a devastating catalogue of malpractice in the way salmon farming is impacting wild salmon, sea trout and the marine environment, and provides incontrovertible proof that it is a sword of Damocles suspended over some of Scotland's most iconic natural resources.”

The report accuses the salmon farming industry in Scotland “of precipitating an environmental disaster” and calls on government for the immediate implementation of a survival plan to save wild stocks.

It identifies the three biggest problems as the spread of sea lice from farmed to wild stocks; the interbreeding of escaped farmed fish with wild stocks and the pollution of the sea floor around ocean net pens.

“It has been a sobering experience researching the evidence surrounding the interaction between salmon fish farming and wild fish stocks,” says Janina Gray, S&TA's Head of Science. “The evidence is clear that aquaculture can have a significantly negative impact, in some areas, on wild salmon, sea trout and their environment. We must learn from the scientific evidence available, enforce the precautionary principle and take action before it's too late.”

Paul Knight, S&TA's CEO, said fish farming “can offer enormous benefits to mankind and significantly reduce the [fishing] pressure on our precious wild oceanic stocks,” but it must be done differently.

“The scientific literature unequivocally demonstrates that fish farms, as presently constructed and operated, are having a disastrous impact on native fisheries, the wider environment and the many public benefits associated with it,” said Mr. Knight.

“It must be the government's statutory responsibility, and the industry's moral one, to protect two of Scotland's most valuable and iconic natural resources – wild salmon and sea trout – before it is too late,” he said.

The report calls for industry to shift from open-net pens, to enclosed systems, “therefore cutting out any interaction between farmed and wild salmon and sea trout.”

It says government, industry and wild fish organizations should work out a timeline for that transition, and that they should do so with a sense of urgency.

The report says the precautionary principle should be adhered to at all times; a list of ecologically sensitive sites should be drawn up and “sea-based salmon farms must be moved away from locations with significant salmon and sea-trout migration runs, within estuaries, locks and offshore.”

In short, the organization makes pretty much the same key demands that environmental groups have been calling for in B.C. for years.

The provincial government and the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans have so far ignored those groups, dismissing them as loud, single-interest advocates.

But now, on the far side of another ocean, a group with impeccable peerage and an impressive track record of working with government has come to similar conclusions.

Fish farming urgently needs to be reformed. That's not some radical environmental group saying that, but an organization backed by Prince Charles and The Duke of Northumberland.

