



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

**North Atlantic Wild Sea Salmon
Fishermen's Association**

16 February 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure

North Atlantic Wild Sea Salmon Fishermen's Association

16 February 2012

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Miss Michelle McIlveen (Chairperson)

Mr William Irwin (Deputy Chairperson)

Mrs Brenda Hale

Mr David Hilditch

Mr Michael McGimpsey

Mrs Karen McKeivitt

Mr Cathal Ó hOisín

Mr Pat Sheehan

Mr Robin Swann

Witnesses:

Dr Paul Johnston

Paul Johnston Associates

Mr Martin McNeill

North Atlantic Wild Sea Salmon Fishermen's Association

Mr Andrew O'Hare

North Atlantic Wild Sea Salmon Fishermen's Association

The Chairperson: We will move on to our briefing from the North Atlantic Wild Sea Salmon Fishermen's Association (NAWSSFA) on salmon conservation. The officials did not provide a briefing paper in advance of the meeting, but I think that we will get quite a substantial briefing from them and, perhaps, some other information. I welcome the officials to the meeting. They are Mr Andrew O'Hare, who is a netsman; Mr Martin McNeill, who is also a netsman; and Dr Paul Johnston, who is a fisheries consultant with Paul Johnston Associates. I understand that Andrew is taking the lead.

Mr Andrew O'Hare (North Atlantic Wild Sea Salmon Fisheries Association): We have some briefing papers that Martin will distribute.

Mr Ó hOisín: I declare an interest because I have been and still am a member of a number of angling associations.

The Chairperson: Does anyone else have an interest to declare at this stage? Please work your way through your presentation, Andrew, and then at the end, if you are happy enough, members will ask questions.

Mr O'Hare: OK. Madam Chair, ladies and gentlemen, I will start by expressing our thanks to the Committee for providing us with this opportunity to make our presentation. We also thank the Committee support team for its assistance in the lead-up to this meeting. I will start with an introduction of our association and the presenting team, and I will then make a brief opening statement. Martin McNeill will then give us some background to our fishing heritage in Northern Ireland. Dr Paul Johnston will talk about some of the more scientific aspects of fishing. I will then finish with a closing statement, and I will be quite happy to take questions after that.

The association represents what remains of the salmon fishery along the Northern Ireland coast. In total, that amounts to two bag nets, two drift nets and one tidal draft net. Apart from being part of our livelihoods, we believe that those traditional fisheries are an important and integral part of the culture and heritage of our coastal areas. Northern Irish fishermen have harvested salmon for hundreds of years, and many of our seaside towns and villages were fashioned to support the industry.

Martin McNeill is a member of one of the oldest established fishing families on the north coast. The McNeills have been fishing salmon for at least 150 years. Martin operates a bag net with his father. Dr Paul Johnston has over 30 years' experience in fisheries biology and management. He was previously the manager of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) River Bush salmon project in the 1980s. He now works as an independent fisheries consultant and has a particular interest in salmon. I was born in Kilkeel, County Down, and I can trace my own fishing connections back at least 120 years. I operate a tidal draft net on the south Down coast. I will make a brief opening statement, and Martin will take over.

As individual fishermen, we have observed a serious decline over the past 10 to 15 years in salmon stocks returning to the Northern Ireland coast. We recognise that important steps must be taken to conserve stocks to ensure the long-term survival of the species. At the beginning of the year, we each received an invitation from DCAL to apply for our licences in the usual way. We have all applied and paid our fees, but, as yet, we have not been granted our licences. On the other hand, we understand that anglers are receiving their licences and tags for the coming season. We are very keen to engage with DCAL and other stakeholders in the consultation process on the proposals to conserve salmon stocks, but we feel that we are not being treated equitably in that process. We ask therefore to be issued with our licences, as required under the Fisheries Act. Indeed, if that had been done earlier, this debate would be much more advanced.

Mr Martin McNeill (North Atlantic Wild Sea Salmon Fisheries Association): First, I thank the Committee for giving our association, the North Atlantic Wild Sea Salmon Fishermen's Association, this opportunity to give the history and facts of our fishing effort and its impact on our overall stocks. We have attached a series of historical photographs to the presentation pack for your further information.

Fishing for salmon is ongoing and has been happening perhaps since the human race first occupied this land. Numerous salmon fisheries have been established around our coastline for the past 500 years. Those fisheries play a major role in supporting small coastal communities along the coast of Ireland. Initially, fishing consisted of fixed draft nets, tidal draft nets and drift nets. The fixed draft nets were known as fixed engines, where one end of the net was fixed to the shore and the other end was secured by anchors. The tidal draft net and the drift net were not allowed to be secured at any time.

All those fishery rights were passed from the Crown to Randall MacDonnell, chief of the house of MacDonnell of Antrim in 1603. Over the years, all those fisheries passed to different private owners.

The technique of bag netting was introduced from Scotland in 1834 and was adopted on many sites where the tidal flow suited its operation. That allowed the salmon to swim freely yet remain captured in the net. That gave them better protection from seals while captured and ensured they were free from mesh injuries and landed stress free. By 1876, all the fixed engines had been granted certificates that were issued by Parliament, and those remain the legal foundation for the entitlements of the North Atlantic Wild Sea Salmon Fishermen's Association to fish. Fixed sites and the lengths of the nets were established for their operation. During that time, drifting continued in areas where the

tidal flow best suited those methods, and it continued to play a major role in employing and supporting the local communities.

Also during that time, angling for salmon in the rivers became a pastime and a sport, initially for the wealthy, but now everyone has access to it and is able to enjoy this recreation. We fully accept that, over recent years, salmon stocks have been in decline. So, too, are the fishermen, both in the number of nets and fishing effort. Two bag nets, two drift nets and two tidal draft nets remain. My family has reduced its fishing effort to two bag nets, which operate in the same spot as was used 500 years ago and which use the same methods as those that were adopted in 1834.

The few remaining nets operate under strict laws on not only their length but the time that they operate. For 48 hours each week throughout the fishing season, those nets are taken ashore to allow salmon a free run. The fixed nets are situated away from the rivers, and the drift nets are not allowed within one mile of the mouth of a river. Those few remaining nets keep our culture and heritage alive and allow us to hold on to a skill nearly lost forever.

Thank you for listening. I hope that that brief outline of the history of salmon fishing has been helpful in understanding our desire to preserve our heritage. For the Committee's information, we have appended a further detailed note written by Reggie Montgomery MBE from a well-known fishing family, the Montgomery family from Portballintrae. Thank you. I will now pass over to Dr Johnston.

Dr Paul Johnston (Paul Johnston Associates): Thank you, Martin. I have quite a lot to get through. However, before I get into it, I should say that you might have noticed —

Mr Swann: Before we go any further, can I clarify a couple of points? Andrew, in your introduction you said that there were two bag nets, two drift nets and one tidal drift net.

Mr O'Hare: The association has two bag nets, two drift nets and one tidal. However, there are six licences. As regards the second draft net, the gentleman who works with that is with us today, but he is not a member of our association.

Mr Swann: I just wanted to clarify that.

Mr Ó hOisín: To further clarify, is one of those a National Trust net?

Mr O'Hare: No.

Mr Swann: How many members are in the association?

Mr O'Hare: We have five members — one for each net.

Dr Johnston: Members may have noticed the photographs in our presentation. They show Carrick-a-Rede Fishery, which ceased operation in around 1999 or 2000, I think. I am showing the photographs because the Carrick-a-Rede rope bridge, with which you are all familiar, is one of the most iconic tourist features of the coastline. There would be no Carrick-a-Rede foot bridge if it were not for salmon fishing. The bridge was put there by the salmon fishermen. I understand that it now has 300,000 visitors a year paying £5 a go. That is a little aside that I thought I would mention.

I am going to talk about the status of our salmon stocks, fishing effort and angling and the impact that they have. I will look at it under a number of headings. First, I will look at the fishery management areas. I know that the legal briefing earlier mentioned the two areas —

The Chairperson: Excuse me, Dr Johnston, would you mind speaking up for the Hansard recording?

Dr Johnston: Do I need to speak louder?

The Chairperson: Yes, if you could.

Dr Johnston: I beg your pardon.

I then want to discuss the problem that we have with our salmon stocks at the moment and to look at the cause of that problem. I will then look at netting and angling in perspective, and then I will briefly consider some conservation measures and conclude.

I know that some of you are very familiar with the life cycle of the salmon, but, for those of you who are not, I will outline it. Salmon spawn in fresh water in our rivers and lay their eggs in the gravel in the riverbed. Those hatch out and grow for usually two years before going out to sea as salmon smolts. They are about five or six inches in length. They migrate out to the north Atlantic, and most of our salmon come back after one year out at sea. At that stage, it is called a grilse. A smaller fraction of the population spends another year out at sea and tends to come back earlier in the year as bigger fish. Other countries have a much larger spring run of salmon, but we have a very small spring run left in this country in a few rivers. The spawning stage then starts again.

I will briefly look at the fishery management areas, because I will mention them as we go through the presentation. There are two fishery management areas for salmon in Northern Ireland: the Loughs Agency area, which includes the Foyle system; and the Carlingford catchment area. All waters draining into those two areas are covered by the Loughs Agency, which is a cross-border organisation that is sponsored by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) in the North and the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources in the South. DCAL has responsibility for all the other inland waters in Northern Ireland and the coastal salmon fisheries. The main area of salmon fishing at sea is along the north coast, and Andrew carries out some draft netting activity in a small area in County Down.

I will move on to the problem. I have a graph that shows the total reported salmon catch for Northern Ireland. That catch is reported internationally to the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES), and 50% of the Foyle catch goes to Northern Ireland and 50% is allocated to the Republic. That catch includes the catch by the members of this association and 50% of the Foyle catch. There has been a decline pretty much continuously since 1970, but there has been a very steep decline to current levels since about 2000. The problem is not unique to Northern Ireland or Irish stocks. There is pretty much a worldwide decline in Atlantic salmon, and I have a graph that shows the total world landing figures since 1970. The southern north-east Atlantic region is in particular trouble at the moment. That region includes Great Britain and Northern Ireland along with other countries such as France and Spain.

The recent decline in stocks is due not to overexploitation but to a marked decline in the natural marine survival before any netting or angling. I will give some figures from smolts tagged in the River Bush. I initiated a programme in the 1980s to measure the survival of young salmon going out and returning to our home waters before any exploitation along the Irish coast. From 1986, when the programme was started, the survival rate ranged between 25% and 35% at an average of about 30%. All of a sudden, when the fish went out to sea in 1997, the survival rate dropped very markedly to about 5%. In other words, about a sixth of the number of fish that were coming back 20 years ago are doing so now. A salmon summit in La Rochelle last October looked at the most recent research that has been done on that problem. It confirmed that salmon are dying at sea in alarming numbers. The secretary of the North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organization (NASCO) said:

"unless we adopt conservation measures identified during the Salmon Summit there is a real risk that southern stocks will become extinct by 2040".

That includes our Irish stocks. Press releases from that conference entitled 'Race to save the salmon' and 'The mystery of dying salmon' are in members' information packs.

Much of those conclusions are based on the Salmon at Sea (SALSEA) research programme, which has been running for, I think, about five years. That is an international effort that looks at what is happening out at sea. An awful lot of research has been done over the years on our freshwater stages of salmon, which are much more controllable. However, it is very difficult to get a handle on what is happening out at sea, and it is a major international effort.

The programme has given us a fantastic amount of information on the destination, migration routes and feeding of salmon at sea. It looks as though the current phase of low survival may be due to changing sea conditions, such as surface temperature and the availability of food organisms. Things are changing out there with climate change, which appears to be having an impact. In any case, that is one of the main theories to explain the problem.

That research is summarised in a very readable article in 'Trout & Salmon' magazine by Professor Ken Whelan, a past president of NASCO. That article is also in your packs.

I am now showing you photographs of the 'Celtic Explorer' research vessel of the Marine Institute down South. The photographs also show an international team setting off on one of its research trips and setting a net to capture salmon at their feeding grounds at sea.

I will now turn to the impact of netting and angling and how they interact. I have a graph that shows the number of licences that were issued in the Foyle and DCAL areas from, I believe, 1990. The number of licences in Foyle declined gradually for quite a period. In 2007, Foyle reduced its number of nets quite dramatically at the same time as the Republic limited its netting out at sea. So, the numbers came down from about 150 to 28 in 2007. The Foyle Fisheries Act enables them to suspend fishing on a seasonal basis. They did that, and there has been no netting of salmon in the Foyle area since 2009.

Although there were 52 or 56 extant licences in the DCAL area in the early 1990s, just over 30 were being fished. That gradually declined through to 2001, when DCAL introduced a voluntary buy-out compensation scheme, which I was involved in promoting at that stage. There was about a 90% uptake of that scheme, which reduced the number of licences to six, which is where it currently stands.

So, there was a 90% reduction between 2001 and 2003 in the DCAL area and an 81% reduction in the Loughs Agency area from 150 to 28. In addition, netting in the Loughs Agency area has been suspended since then. On the other hand, angling has proceeded in both jurisdictions without significant restriction.

There are limits on the killing of spring salmon, but there are no effective limits, apart from daily bag limits, on the killing of grilse, which is the majority of our population.

It is important to note that salmon netting is not unique to Northern Ireland; it is still practised throughout these islands. Information that I have suggests that there are 50 licences in Scotland and 275 licences in England and Wales. I am not sure about the number in the Republic, but figures for the salmon catch in 2010, which are the most recent that I have, show that over 14,000 fish were caught.

I have a slide that shows the location of salmon netting licences in salmon netting stations in Scotland. Blue dots on the graph represent fixed nets, principally bag nets, and green triangles represent what are called net and cobble fisheries.

I have a graph that shows salmon catches in the Foyle area. The net catch is shown in blue and the rod catch is shown in red. That fishery was particularly productive until about 2002. Over 40,000 salmon were being killed by nets in the Foyle. There is also a very productive rod fishery. The netting

has scaled down to zero, with the effort, but the rod catch has continued fairly constantly. So, from 1990 to 2006, the net catch was, on average, about five times the rod catch. That situation reversed when the rod catch during that period was about twice that of the net catch. The netting has now been phased out completely. The point that I am making is that there has been a very substantial reduction in the netting effort in the Foyle area and in the net catch, whereas the rod catch has continued fairly constantly.

The situation is the same in the DCAL area. Until the buyout, the salmon catch by nets was in the 8,000 to 12,000 range, and the rod catch was much lower. After the buyout, the two run pretty much parallel. The net catch has dropped by about 77%, whereas between the early phase and the later phase, the rod catch has reduced by about 26%. So, the rod catch is now pretty well on a par with the net catch. In fact, in two of the past three years, the rod catch has exceeded the net catch. The popular view is that loads of fish are being caught in nets out at sea, but that is not true.

That does not include the catch-and-release element. Quite a lot of the fish that are caught by anglers now are released, and those numbers are on top of the figures that I have shown. The rod catch in the past couple of years is probably about 25% higher than is shown in my presentation.

The Chairperson: Could you just explain the concept of catch and release?

Dr Johnston: I will be expanding on that in a moment. It is basically that, when an angler catches a fish, he releases it back into the river without killing it.

The Chairperson: Does that cause any stress for the fish?

Dr Johnston: There can be very significant stress, yes.

I have a graph that is a combination of the two previous graphs that shows that, across Northern Ireland, and in the Foyle area, the rod catch has remained relatively constant in comparison with a very significant reduction in the net catch.

The exploitation of local stocks by nets has been reduced significantly. However, that has not been reciprocated by an equivalent reduction in rod catch.

Several conservation measures on netting could be taken. I will not expand on those, however. For example, the fishing season could be shortened, or, given that nets are off for two days at weekends, the weekly close time could be changed. That could be extended. Quotas could be applied. There could be a voluntary cessation or moratorium. That is what has prompted all the recent discussions.

I am not sure how effective voluntary catch and release for angling would be. At present, there is mandatory catch and release on specific rivers in the South of Ireland. You are not allowed to keep salmon from some rivers. There are very specific methods to be used to cause minimal harm to fish. In the South, some rivers are closed to angling completely, because their salmon stocks are well below conservation limits. All those issues need to be considered.

The Chairman asked about catch and release. I will talk about that for a moment or two, because we have concerns about it. Voluntary catch and release is now practised widely by anglers, which is highly commendable. In both jurisdictions, it is estimated that an additional 25% of fish are released. It is a very commendable initiative, and it can be an effective conservation measure. However, it has to be done very carefully. I have attached a very good Loughs Agency leaflet on catch and release. Basically, fish should not be taken out of the water. I have a photograph that shows a couple of guys handling the fish properly and gently. However, there are all sorts of other issues. Traditionally, salmon anglers use double and treble hooks with barbs. The recommended method for catch and release is to use single, barbless hooks, which can be removed easily and cause minimal damage to the fish.

Worm-fishing also needs to be considered. Often, a fish swallows bait down its throat. That fish will be dead, so there would be no point putting it back. The point that I am trying to make is that it is not a simple case of tearing the fly out of the fish's mouth and throwing the fish back into the water. It is a very specialised exercise, and people need to know what they are doing. There is a lot of detail in the brochure, which is in your pack. There are other practices from the South, where an incentive scheme is operated that encourages people to practise voluntary catch and release. If they can validate their catch, people who release the most fish get an award at the end of the season.

Poor handling of fish will result in mortalities and losses to the spawning stock. That has been recognised by NASCO, which was referred to earlier. In your pack, there is a piece about NASCO that states clearly that there is a wide range of mortalities. High mortalities can result when fish are handled by inexperienced anglers. Therefore, we have concerns that the proposal for voluntary catch and release this year is not robust enough to be effective. It is voluntary, not mandatory. Believe it or not, it is still legal to sell a rod-caught fish in the DCAL area of Northern Ireland. As far as I can find out, this is the only region in these islands where you can do that legally. So, although DCAL has asked anglers to participate in voluntary catch and release, there is absolutely nothing to stop them killing what they catch and selling it.

I will talk for a moment about the carcass tagging scheme, which was introduced in 2002. Through that scheme, all fish that are killed by nets or rods have to be tagged. The tag, which is called a lock seal tag, goes in through the jaw. It has a number that identifies that fish specifically. So, it is illegal to be in possession of a dead salmon without a tag. There is a requirement to make an annual return to DCAL, and it is the same in the Loughs Agency area. That applies to net licences and rod licences.

Angler returns in the DCAL area have been less than 25% since the scheme was introduced. That means that DCAL gets a return on only 25% of the licences that it issues. So, only 25% of anglers are reporting what they catch. It is slightly better in the Loughs Agency area and is increasing year-on-year. It is up to about 50% at the moment, and a big campaign on that is ongoing to emphasise the importance to the management of the system of getting good returns. The salmon fishermen's association members are 100% compliant with the carcass tagging scheme and have been since day one. DCAL has acknowledged that in various reports.

I referred to what we can do in fresh water. There is lots that we can do there. However, in this whole debate, we need to focus on what we can change. We must maximise the spawning stock and the production of young fish in our rivers, and, to do that, exploitation in all its forms must be reduced to give stocks a chance to recover to sustainable levels. We are all aiming for the same outcome, namely the survival and sustainability of our salmon stocks. I will read a few sentences from Professor Ken Whelan's article in 'Trout & Salmon' magazine. Some of you have heard this before, but he said:

"What are the management implications of this research over the decades to come? And, most importantly, what exactly can we do to protect and support our salmon at this time of change? Salmon and their ancestors have been around for the past 60 million years, encountered immense challenges over that time and adapted very effectively to deal with them. That is what they do and what they are made for.

There is no doubt that in the face of severe challenges the abundance of any animal population is bound to drop, initially at least. The fish are making mistakes: they are getting lost, they are dying because they are in the wrong place at the wrong time, failing to find food or encountering increased predation. But, critically, as a population they are learning — learning how and when to adapt. Such adaptation takes time and we have no idea how long it took for past adaptations to take effect. Our challenge is to lift the man-made pressures currently on the populations at risk so as to give them time and space to adapt and to recover."

Mr O'Hare: I will finish with a short closing statement, and we will then be happy to take any questions that the Committee may have. We have a long history of co-operating with the various agencies and facilitating research programmes. We have discussed the issues with DCAL inland fisheries officials over a considerable time, and we met in December 2008 with the then Minister, Gregory Campbell. At

that time, we were informed that DCAL would bring forward conservation proposals on salmon in the local jurisdiction for discussion and comment by all stakeholders and interested parties. However, we heard nothing further from DCAL until January this year.

We are disturbed that salmon netsmen are being portrayed to DCAL officials and the media as a major factor in the current shortage of fish. However, we are pleased to note that the Minister redressed the balance to some degree in the 'News Letter' article on 3 February. Attempts have been made to portray our small group as ruthless exploiters of a diminishing resource. We hope that you see from our presentation that nothing is further from the truth.

We are not the cause of the crisis that we all find ourselves in. As a group, however, we are mature enough to recognise that we are in a crisis and are prepared to work with all stakeholders towards an enduring solution from which we can all benefit. To that end, any measures must be balanced, meaningful and, above all, enforceable. They cannot be mere expressions of an aspiration or wishful thinking that a large and disparate group of individuals will behave in a unified manner.

Our message is one of commitment. We are committed to the preservation of our heritage as fishermen. Our overriding commitment, however, is to the survival of the wild salmon, without which such heritage would be worthless. To that end, we would welcome the opportunity to meet the Minister as soon as possible.

There may be no quick fix, although I am confident that a solution will be found if we work together. When we do reach the solution, however, we are determined that we, or our children, will be ready and able to take our rightful position. Once again, I ask you to respect our rights and issue our licences, so that this process can move forward.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much. Thank you also for your presentation, which was very detailed.

Dr Johnston: I am sorry about that.

The Chairperson: No, I appreciate that, and I think the rest of the Committee will too. I act as an independent observer in all this, but, with that in mind, I am very aware that there has been an incredibly strong campaign between two factions. The whole purpose, which is the sustainability of the salmon stock, has been lost in that. Your presentation indicates your concern about that and the efforts your organisation has made to try to address those issues.

Your conservation measures include the possibility of having mandatory catch and release, which is occurring in the Irish Republic. How is that policed?

Dr Johnston: It is not across the board in the Irish Republic; it is on selected rivers. I assume it is policed in the normal way by fisheries officers on the riverbank. However, it would not be publicly responsible for anybody to break ranks, so, in a sense, it would nearly be self-policing, in that if one angler saw another kill a fish, he would take a very dim view of it.

The Chairperson: How are you regulated as netsmen in comparison with anglers?

Mr O'Hare: We are subject to the same Act, the Fisheries Act. Our activities are highly visible. Most of us operate out of boats, some quite close to the shore. The DCAL-appointed bailiffs police us. We would be fools to try to take any action contrary the Act. I would say that we are pretty effectively policed. We are self-policing as well. You can see our commitment to the fish. We are not exploiters. We are very keen on our heritage and the long-term survival of the fish.

Mr McNeill: On occasion, DCAL bailiffs have even come out in the boats with us to check our operation and see that we are doing everything legally. We quite often meet them at the slipway and they check that our fish are tagged and our logbooks filled in. They also have the right to check our storage of salmon and that the fish in our logbooks are in our cold rooms, which they do. They also go to the wholesaler and check that the fish that we have sold is the exact amount of fish that he has received. They check his logbooks as well.

The Chairperson: So, you can be very specific about the numbers of fish that are caught.

Mr O'Hare: We can be absolutely precise.

The Chairperson: Is it the same for the rodsmen?

Dr Johnston: As there is only a 25% return — the rate has been variable, but that is the average — the correction factor has to be applied. It is not just a case of scaling it up to 100%; it is done by government scientists, and I do not know what the conversion formula is. The system on the Foyle is slightly different; it is a published system, and I am au fait with that. However, because it is only a 25% return, it has to be scaled up, and the formula is based on a locally worked-out conversion factor.

Mr Ó hOisín: We are talking about the north coast nets and their impact on fish for the special areas of conservation (SACs). This question would probably be best for Dr Johnston. The runs of fish have varied and moved further north and west, but what evidence is there that the 50 Scottish nets or any of the 275 English and Welsh nets are having an impact on fish numbers in Irish rivers?

Dr Johnston: I am afraid I do not have any information on that. The reverse was the case in relation to the Irish drift net fishery along the west coast, which was of great concern a few years ago. I am sorry, but I do not have any information on that.

Mr Ó hOisín: The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has been threatened with infraction fines from Europe. Those should be applied across the board. If there are, for want of a better way of putting it, Irish fish being caught in other waters, what can be done?

In your presentation, Dr Johnston, you said that exploitation in all its forms must be reduced, which I agree with. I have been an angler for more than 40 years and witnessed the gradual reduction in the number of salmon fisheries. In recent years, we have seen a complete collapse in the number of salmon fisheries in inland waters and rivers. That is due to a number of reasons. You are right, gentlemen, that it is not solely due to offshore nets or high seas fishing; it is also due to things like habitat destruction, gravel extraction, pollution, eutrophication and poaching.

There is general agreement that salmon stocks are at a critical level, and we have to identify how to preserve them. There are a number of good suggestions as to how to do that, such as quotas. Would the salmon anglers not agree that a suspension, be it voluntary or mandatory, of all forms of salmon exploitation in the short term might be one way of ensuring that we get back to a position of abundance at some point? There are no definites in this argument apart from the fact that the salmon is virtually an endangered species.

Mr O'Hare: As netsmen, we hope this presentation has, with Paul's help, shown our commitment to and understanding of the issues. I cannot say in this forum what we would do, but I can assure you that if we were issued with the licences we would revert very quickly and comprehensively with our actions for this year. I do not feel that, as individuals, we can say what we would do, but you can tell

from the tone of our presentation that we are committed to finding a solution. Does that answer your question?

Mr Ó hOisín: I want to pursue this one. What do you mean when you say that you will revert with your actions for this year, Andrew?

Mr McNeill: The north Atlantic Wild Sea Salmon Fishermen's Association would have to meet first to see what we will do. We are prepared to do something, but we would like our licences, and we will then be back to DCAL very quickly.

Mr O'Hare: I know that we may be circumventing the question slightly, but the entire association is not here, so I am very cautious. We will take any requests that are made to us extremely seriously and will revert promptly with a response. I cannot be more explicit than that at the moment.

Mr Ó hOisín: Will the association accept the Department's difficulty in that we, potentially, face significant infraction fines here? This has to be addressed.

Mr O'Hare: We understand your position, but if someone would sit down and talk to us as a group, I think that we could come up with a solution for this year at least. That is as explicit as I can be, I am afraid.

Dr Johnston: I will add a couple of answers to Mr Ó hOisín's question about the other causes. He is quite right: there are a number of causes that affect salmon in fresh water, but there is no doubt that the major factor causing the problem at the moment is the decline in survival at sea. These gentlemen turned down significant sums of money in the voluntary scheme 10 years ago because they want to preserve their right to fish. It is not something that they take lightly. They want to preserve their right, but they recognise that there is a real problem here.

Mr Irwin: Thank you for your presentation. My knowledge of fishing is limited, but your presentation has enlightened me and given me a different line than that which some of the press was coming out with. I am concerned about a couple of issues. At this time, are you tied to a specific number of fish that you can catch? Do you keep a record of that?

Mr O'Hare: We have to report all the fish that we catch, but there is no quota system at this point.

Mr Irwin: But you have to report all the numbers?

Mr O'Hare: Absolutely, 100%. They have to be tagged and logged.

Mr Irwin: Do you have any idea of the numbers from last year?

Mr O'Hare: The figures are in the public domain. They were published in the 'News Letter'.

Mr Irwin: I was shocked to see that they reckon that up to 75% of fish caught by anglers in catch and release die. Is that right? You said that 25% live; is that right?

Mr McNeill: It is the other way round.

Mr Irwin: OK.

Dr Johnston: What did you say?

Mr Irwin: How many fish die because of catch and release?

Dr Johnston: There are a range of reports on that, and it depends on a lot of things such as how fresh the fish is and the water temperature. Some fisheries in North America close down if the temperature rises above 18°C or 19°C because the fish are so stressed. There are various reports, and some say that there can be 90% survival to spawning. However, some put the figure much lower. Basically, it comes down to the individual who is catching the fish.

Mr Swann: Gentlemen, thanks for your presentation. Dr Johnston, you said during your presentation that you were quite instrumental in the early 2000s buy-out scheme for all the nets. How do you reconcile that with your saying today that the five nets that you are promoting and defending should not have done what the others did in 2000?

Dr Johnston: That was a voluntary buy-out scheme. One reason why I find myself sitting here is that I was going to those guys and saying, "Look, it is a voluntary scheme. If you do not want to participate in it, you can retain your right to fish annually." Now it is coming to the point at which they are almost being forced into a corner and told that they are going to stop fishing. That is why I have no difficulty in defending those guys.

Mr Swann: What is the difference between the scientific evidence behind the voluntary buy-out scheme and that which is being put forward now by the Department?

Dr Johnston: The difference now is that the situation is more critical. There may be some evidence to which we are not privy with regard to which fish are being exploited in those nets. I understand that genetic work has been done to look at the origin of those fish with respect to special areas of conservation. We do not have that information.

Mr Swann: I am just trying to get a balance. I appreciate what you said in your presentation. The scientific evidence behind the voluntary buy-out scheme in the early 2000s was less critical than it is now. However, yet and all, you do not see a problem. I am not —

Mr O'Hare: We are not saying that we do not see a problem, Mr Swann. We see a problem across all the areas of exploitation, including angling. What we are trying to get across to the Committee is that we are prepared to take part in whatever action is deemed necessary. However, as stakeholders, we want to ensure that it is, as I said, enforceable and holistic and is applied across the entire spectrum of salmon exploitation. As Dr Johnston showed, if the angling effort is not reduced significantly, the numbers are so low that that exploitation is now critical. We want to be part of the process. We want to ensure that whatever action is taken is effective. We have an interest in finding a solution. We want to find a solution.

Mr Swann: You mentioned anglers in reference to catch and release. Mr O'Hare, I believe that you were somewhat critical about how that could be enforced among a large unwieldy body. Is that your opinion of how catch and release could be enforced among the Northern Ireland angling fraternity?

Mr O'Hare: I think it remains to be proved against a background of tag returns of only 25%. As Dr Johnston indicated, catch and release can be a very effective measure. However, it requires laws. Bailiffs must have the law behind them to allow them to enforce that. In other words, in my view, it should be an offence to have a barbed hook at the riverbank. It should be an offence to have a dead fish in your possession. A dead fish should be returned. We are here to see a complete solution to the problem.

Mr Swann: Sorry; did you say that a dead fish should be returned?

Mr O'Hare: Yes, if you kill a fish. You should not be in possession of a dead fish for any reason.

Dr Johnston: I would like to add to that, if I may. I am fairly certain that in the rivers in the South where there is mandatory catch and release, if you catch a salmon and it is bleeding badly, which happens occasionally, or if it is hooked and cannot be unhooked without causing harm, that fish has to be killed and thrown back.

Mr Swann: Are you pretty sure of that?

Dr Johnston: I am pretty sure about that.

Mr Swann: Now, there is a difference between being pretty sure and being certain that you should return a dead fish to the water.

Dr Johnston: I have some leaflets here that —

Mr Swann: I know from working with a number of angling clubs that a large number of them across Northern Ireland now practice voluntary catch and release. I am trying to get a balance between the presentations that I have received this morning. Mr O'Hare, you seem critical of catch and release. Dr Johnston, you are saying —

Mr O'Hare: Excuse me, Mr Swann. I am not critical of catch and release.

Mr Swann: Sorry; I meant that you are critical of the enforcement of catch and release.

Mr O'Hare: I want to see catch and release be more than a mere aspiration. I want to see it policed and enforced, so that we can have some comfort that it is effective.

Mr Swann: What would you need to see before you could believe that catch and release is effective?

Mr O'Hare: I would like to see legislation. Why should it be voluntary? I am not sure what —

Mr Swann: According to the Department, it is because that legislation cannot be brought in on time. It is the same with regard to issuing licences. Your licences are issued under the same Fisheries Act (Northern Ireland) 1966 that issues angling licences.

Mr O'Hare: So you are saying that you can issue our licences?

Mr Swann: This body is not responsible for issuing your licence; that is the responsibility of the Department.

Mr O'Hare: I am not sure what your point is, Mr Swann.

Mr Swann: This Committee does not issue licences; the Department does. This is the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, not the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure.

Mr O'Hare: But you are saying that licences are being issued to anglers.

Mr Swann: Yes. It is in your presentation.

Mr O'Hare: You have no difficulty with the voluntary catch and release system.

Mr Swann: I have no difficulty with that whatsoever.

How much does your licence cost?

Mr O'Hare: It is around £300.

Mr McNeill: A fixed-engine licence costs about £760, give or take £20.

Mr Swann: What is the value of the entire market? I am not asking anyone to declare individual markets. What sort of market are we talking about?

Mr McNeill: The price per kilo?

Mr Swann: Aye, the price per kilo.

Mr McNeill: Fish could be £8, £10 or £15 a kilo, depending on grades.

Mr Swann: Does your association have any idea of the value of the entire nets market?

Mr McNeill: You are talking about £25,000 or so among all the fisheries.

Dr Johnston: At current stock levels.

Mr Swann: That is across all six operational areas?

Mr O'Hare: Yes. The point that we are trying to make, as a group, is that there should be co-operation between the various participants in the industry. Every time we try to reach out, we seem to get pushed back. People seem to feel that they are in competition with us, or that it is a them-and-us situation, which disappoints us.

Mr Swann: Have you applied for your nets?

Mr O'Hare: Yes.

Mr Swann: Has the Department issued them yet?

Mr O'Hare: No.

Mr Swann: Is the earliest day on which you can put them down St Patrick's Day, 17 March?

Mr O'Hare: Yes. I think that the licence has to be issued on 1 March. The season opens on 17 March.

Mr McNeill: We should have our logbook and our tags on 17 March ready to go.

Mr Swann: Is that the earliest date on which you can put down your nets?

Mr McNeill: Yes.

Mr Swann: I have looked at some of the correspondence that you have sent to the Department. If you do not receive your licences by that date, what are your intentions?

Mr McNeill: Our legal team will pursue it.

Mr Swann: You have a legal team ready to go?

Mr McNeill: Yes.

Mr Swann: And your entire industry is worth £25,000?

Mr McNeill: Yes.

Mr O'Hare: It is about our heritage, Mr Swann. You seem to be missing the point somewhat.

Mr Swann: You referred to culture and heritage in your presentation. How do you promote that as a culture or a heritage? Is it open to people to come and observe it?

Mr O'Hare: People are more than welcome to do so.

Mr McNeill: There are postcards of me and my father that can be bought in places such as Eason's. We have been on calendars, and the tourist board has used photographs of my father. It might have been the South of Ireland tourist board, I am not sure. Photographs of us have been used to promote tourism in Ireland.

Mr Swann: Are you visible from the shoreline?

Mr McNeill: Yes; the tourists sometimes come down to watch us take our catch ashore.

Mr Swann: You said that you believed that there was a them-and-us situation, Mr O'Hare. I believe that you have a number of representatives on the Salmon and Inland Fisheries Forum (SIFF). Is that not an effective body through which to communicate?

Mr O'Hare: I am not a member of that forum, so I cannot answer that question.

Dr Johnston: I am on the forum, but I do not represent this group; I represent the Institute of Fisheries Management. I joined the forum only in the past year. The salmon issue has not been discussed in any detail during my time on the forum.

A letter arrived from the Department at the previous meeting. I think it arrived with the chairman the day before the meeting, with a request to discuss it at the meeting. However, it was a very far-reaching issue and we felt that we did not have time to discuss it fully. We need to put it on the agenda for the next meeting.

Mr Swann: As a point of clarity, has the salmon issue not been raised at the forum to date?

Mr McNeill: At the last meeting, on 8 January —

Dr Johnston: I am pretty certain that it has not been raised about any restrictions or limits on effort with regard to netting, angling or anything. I have been at about three meetings over the past year and we talked about other issues that concern the forum. The forum covers salmon and inland fisheries, not just salmon.

Mr Swann: I am sorry to labour the point but we are getting a presentation from the Department later on. The Salmon and Inland Fisheries Forum, which is the representative body that is meant to be taking your interests forward to the Department, has not expressed the same concern about the future of salmon as your group of netsmen has.

Mr McNeill: It is there only in an advisory capacity. It has no powers. It is there just to advise DCAL.

Mr Swann: In its letter, the Salmon and Inland Fisheries Forum recommended that you are provided with your licences.

Mr McNeill: Yes, that was at the last meeting in January.

Mr Sheehan: Is there any conflict between the net fishermen and the people who operate salmon farms?

Mr McNeill: No. There is a salmon farm in Red Bay. There have been escapes of farm salmon, and we caught a lot of them and got them lifted out of the water, which was a good thing for the sake of the wild salmon. Dr Johnston could tell you more about what happens if they breed.

Mr Sheehan: I wanted to come to that point. One of your graphs shows a dramatic decline in salmon stocks in the River Bush between 1996 and 1998. Was it yourself who carried out that experiment?

Dr Johnston: That is the marine survival survey, when the first downturn occurred. I would add that that happened in other rivers in other countries that are monitored and where they have the ability to do that same type of work. It happened to them a bit earlier, and the River Bush thought that it was getting away with it, but it eventually happened there as well.

Mr Sheehan: Has there been a scientific link between the advent of salmon farms and the decline in fish stocks in rivers?

Dr Johnston: Not here, no. There has been a major issue in the Republic about sea trout populations. That has been related to a parasite called sea lice, which attacks sea trout. Because sea trout stay locally around the coast, they have succumbed to that. There is also evidence that there have been impacts on local salmon stocks where there has been salmon farming in very enclosed bays. The stocks in rivers going into those bays have been impacted.

Mr Sheehan: What about the escapes of fish from farms? I remember a couple of years ago there was big escape up in Glenarm.

Dr Johnston: A scientific paper published by our local scientists establishes with certainty that those fish have interbred with the wild fish in the Glenarm river. The paper does not comment on whether that is a bad or good thing but it demonstrates that it can happen and did happen.

Mr Sheehan: So, there is no evidence that that may have an adverse or negative impact on the wild salmon gene pool?

Dr Johnston: There is no evidence from that piece of work. It is not desirable, but we are not talking about a different species; it is the same species. I have confidence in the strength of the gene pool in our local rivers, so, unless there were a massive influx that meant there were many more fish in the river than originally, the gene pool could cope with that and eradicate those genes through time.

The Chairperson: To conclude, I thank you very much for the presentation and the time that has obviously gone into it — I am sorry. I apologise, Mr McGimpsey.

Mr McGimpsey: Not at all.

I appreciate your giving the presentation. I found it very interesting. As you are aware, 10 years ago, I had some involvement in this area. It is fair to say that the continued decline in north Atlantic salmon has clearly been dramatic. In those days, we took a number of steps that we thought would preserve and grow the stock, such as getting the Rivers Agency to no longer treat our rivers as drainage channels but provide the environment for salmon to spawn. We also put large numbers of juvenile salmon into the rivers — I do not know whether that is still going on — to feed the stock.

The other thing that we did was buy up the nets. Most of the nets appear to have been bought up, apart from those in your small group, yet still we have this massive decline in salmon. As you say, it is happening not simply in Northern Ireland but throughout Ireland and western Europe. That relates to the fact that the north Atlantic is not sustaining the fish anymore, because, as I understand it, its temperature is rising and salmon need cold and clean water.

Paul, you offered a glimmer of hope when you said that the salmon will adapt if we give them some time, just as fish, animals and all flora and fauna will adapt if they are given the time. That would allow them to survive what is looking like virtual extinction. At what point do you think we will be looking at a moratorium in Northern Ireland for nets, including the buy-up of the nets, and looking at anglers and implementing a universal, 100% catch-and-release policy to give salmon stocks the opportunity to recover? It appears that the steps that we have taken so far have helped, but, if this cycle continues and you were to look at the scenario 20 years hence, you would see that we are looking at a very grim future for salmon. We will not be able to talk about catching salmon, because there will not be any.

Mr McNeill: There would be no point in a total buy-out of salmon nets while there is still the chance of salmon being killed in a river, because the river is the salmon's breeding ground, so, to be honest, that is where the conservation would need to start.

Mr McGimpsey: That was the idea when the Rivers Agency used to dig out all the gravel beds and make nice drainage channels, ignoring the fact that the rivers were used for breeding salmon. A lot of good work has been done to preserve and support the environment for breeding salmon. We have had action on pollution of the water, including agricultural pollution and so on. It seems that we can get enough salmon bred here to go off into the Atlantic, but the returns are so small — they are down to less than 1%, which is not sustainable. So, you have to get to the point of stopping the fishing of salmon that come back.

It is not just north Atlantic salmon that are affected; dozens and dozens of species worldwide are facing this situation. We are facing this situation, and surely there is something that we can do about it. There will come a point where we say, "enough is enough, we cannot take any more salmon". It is not required for food; you can breed or farm enough salmon to satisfy the market. Therefore, it is about your livelihood, but I understand that it is also a pastime and a recreation for large numbers of people. Surely we are going to reach the point where we stop the netting and have 100% catch and release until the stocks begin to recover, providing that you are right about a period for adaptation.

Dr Johnston: That is a theory, but it is not held by everybody. I talked about the fish that spend a longer time — two years — out at sea. Another theory is that things will maybe go that way; the fish may revert to that type of migration pattern and spend longer out at sea. I am not a geneticist, but my view is that we have to give the fish a chance, and I hope that it has come across in the presentation that these guys recognise that the situation is very serious and that exploitation has to be reduced across the board. However, we all hope that, in the future and however long it takes, anglers will be able to go out and catch salmon and that the small industry of netsmen that remains will be able to take salmon as well.

Mr O'Hare: As an association, we are trying to leave the Committee with a sense of our commitment. We are aware of how serious the problem is, and we are aware that measures need to be taken. We want that to be an inclusive process, and we want to be part of that process. We are absolutely prepared to play our part. It frustrates us when we get pushed back and are somehow seen to be outside the process.

Mr McNeill: There would be no point in banning salmon nets while there is still catch and release, because, with that, there is still the chance that fish will die.

Mr McGimpsey: I understand that, but I am talking about giving the species the best chance possible and trying to satisfy conflicting demands. We appeared to satisfy most of the demands of net fishermen by buying out their nets and paying them a reasonable price. We also came to an arrangement with anglers that they go for catch and release so that they get some of the sport out of it. I understand that letting the fish go is stressful for the anglers as well as for the fish, but we need to get to that point. Is it worth reaching that point?

Mr McNeill: How could we have confidence in that when only 25% of them are showing their returns?

Mr McGimpsey: That is down to policing, too.

Dr Johnston: The point we are making is that, if the netsmen were not to fish or were to take some other radical action, they would want to be as confident as possible that the fish that they are catching will survive and spawn. I am trying to get across that catch and release is not straightforward. It has to be done properly.

Mr McGimpsey: A number of steps need to be taken, and you mentioned some of them. However, other things need to be done. A lot of that is outside our hands, but we play a part in the Atlantic's environment.

The Chairperson: Thank you for your presentation and for taking questions.

Mr O'Hare: Thank you very much for your time; we appreciate it.