



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

**COMMITTEE FOR
CULTURE, ARTS AND
LEISURE**

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

Ulster Angling Federation

12 January 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Miss Michelle McIlveen (Chairperson)
Mr William Irwin (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Dominic Bradley
Mrs Brenda Hale
Mr Michael McGimpsey
Mrs Karen McKeivitt
Mr Oliver McMullan
Mr Cathal Ó hOisín
Mr Robin Swann

Witnesses:

Mr Jim Haughey) Ulster Angling Federation
Mr Robbie Marshall)

The Chairperson:

I welcome to our meeting Mr Jim Haughey MBE, who is the chairman, and Mr Robbie Marshall, who is the development officer. Gentlemen, you are very welcome this morning.

Mr Robbie Marshall (Ulster Angling Federation):

Thank you very much, madam Chair.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much for coming. I ask you to make your opening statement. I am aware that you will want to go into private session to discuss another matter. For the record, we have Hansard here this morning to record the first part of your presentation and the questions that will come out of that. Are you happy to commence?

Mr Marshall:

Yes. Thank you very much for taking the time to see us this morning. The federation appreciates the opportunity to talk about the future of angling in Northern Ireland. I will give you some background information that is based on our briefing paper. The Ulster Angling Federation is the representative body for game angling in Northern Ireland. That includes trout and salmon. We have a membership of some 60 clubs, which have a total individual membership of some 8,000 members. We represent anglers in discussions with public bodies, Government and other non-governmental organisations, and we have been in existence since 1930. We receive no funding from any Government body; we rely completely on our member clubs for funding.

As you are probably aware, angling very much depends on the quality of our water and habitat. If those two things are right, the fish largely look after themselves. As someone said to me recently, salmon and trout were fine until man started to mess around with them, and that is probably very true.

Our local angling clubs have worked extremely hard over the years to protect the rivers in all sorts of ways and to enhance them. I was at an angling club AGM last night on the Clady. I forget how many hundreds of tons of gravel have been shifted there in the past year to facilitate spawning salmon. All of that is done on a voluntary basis; they do not get paid for it. The payment of club members is to see the fish returning in sufficient numbers to spawn and provide sport and recreation for future generations.

A huge effort is now under way to protect and conserve our wild trout and salmon. Many of the sea nets have been retired, as Mr McGimpsey well knows because he was responsible for it quite a number of years ago, although some nets remain.

Government reports have highlighted the impressive record of angling in promoting a healthy outdoor activity and its unmatched record of eliminating sectarian influences. Our angling clubs are also responsible for selling a large number of day tickets to visiting anglers from outside the Province and also to anglers who are not members of a particular club and take the opportunity to be able to fish certain rivers by purchasing a day ticket.

The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) commissioned a report in 2007 by PricewaterhouseCoopers. That report said that there were the equivalent of 780 full-time jobs represented in the angling sector, which was worth some £40 million to the Northern Ireland economy. So, for the amount of money it is worth to the economy, it is time that angling was taken a bit more seriously by DCAL in the effort that it puts in.

The DCAL report and the APM report in 2009 that we mentioned talked about the availability of a naturally sustained fishery providing additional social value to local communities. Although they are less tangible and thus much more difficult to quantify, these benefits may include better health through increased exercise and stress management and a reduction in crime and antisocial behaviour due to the provision of alternative recreation opportunities. I can vouch for that personally. I am a member of several different clubs, and at one club in particular there are at least three young guys fishing with us who were up to antisocial behaviour but are no longer doing that sort of thing. They are quite happy to spend the day on the banks of the river or the lake, fishing away quite contentedly. They have also been taught the value of our wildlife and our environment, and they have been brought skills such as fly tying, where they go out and tie their own flies and then go and catch fish, which is very satisfying for them.

One of the conclusions of that particular report was that, through the promotion of angling participation, significant savings in other Departments and agencies could be realised, especially, as I said, in those that deal with crime and health.

The potential for angling in Northern Ireland is great. We have a lake in Fermanagh — Lower Lough Erne — that could be one of the best trout lakes in Europe, just as good as any of what used to always be referred to as the Great Western Lakes in the Republic: Lough Conn, Lough Corrib and Lough Mask. However, it needs to be given a chance and properly regulated and looked after. Whilst some of our resources are smaller than those, we have other very good rivers that get reasonable runs of fish and, as I said, are well looked after by our angling clubs. The Tourist Board needs to look again at the angling product in Northern Ireland and give it more coverage.

Mr Jim Haughey (Ulster Angling Federation):

At present, there are some barriers to development that we feel need to be addressed. In previous years, DCAL has done some excellent work in this field. A few years ago, some expenditure was invested, through a salmonid enhancement scheme, to try to make good the damage done in rivers by some of the arterial drainage schemes of yesterday. There was also the buyout of Fisheries Conservancy Board (FCB) nets, which was a very significant event. That was a groundbreaker not only in Northern Ireland but in the United Kingdom and even in Europe. At that stage, Northern Ireland was very much leading the way in that field, but, unfortunately, we have fallen behind recently. We feel that there is a great stasis in the administration in DCAL at the minute. It does not seem to have any plans or intentions. There seems to be a lack of interest, and the pervading attitude seems to be, “They are only fish.” We recently asked to meet the Minister to discuss the mixed stock netting of salmon at sea. However, the Minister told us that she was too busy to see us.

We have been attending the salmon and inland fisheries advisory forum, which we have sat on for two years. The forum was supposed to advise DCAL on policy. However, we have never been told what its policy is on anything, so it is a wee bit difficult to give it advice, and it has never asked us for any advice on any matter of import. It has asked us for some comment on some fairly low-level matters. It appears that the forum was brought into existence after the demise of the FCB so that the Department could hold its hands up and say, "We are consulting the stakeholders." In point of fact, there is not any movement there at all.

The licensing of angling in both North and South of Ireland has been a wee bit complex in recent years, and there has been a move to simplify that. The equivalent bodies of DCAL in the Loughs Agency area and in the South of Ireland have been talking about it for some time. However, DCAL has not shown any interest, and our understanding is that the Loughs Agency and the South of Ireland people are going ahead on their own and that DCAL will not be taking part in that.

Mr Marshall:

There appears to be an administration failure. We saw it with the FCB back in 2007, and we do not want to see a repeat of it in DCAL. Madam Chairperson, I think you spoke about the service agreement. It has taken DCAL and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) two years to get that agreement in place. In between times, there were a number of fish kills and arguments about who was supposed to do what, and so on and so forth. I have to say that from working in the commercial world, I know that if I took over something and it took me two years to sort it out, the customers would not be very happy.

Perhaps one of the best examples of that is the well-publicised incident that took place during the construction of the A4, when quite a bit of pollution went into the Ballygawley river. The river was part of DCAL's salmon enhancement plan, on which in excess of £0.5 million was spent, and quite a bit of that was spent on the Ballygawley river. However, all of that work in the river has been wiped out. It would be very lucky if there was any salmon spawn in it until somebody decides to fix it. I have asked NIEA and DCAL who is going to sort the problem out. However, each Department just looks at the other and says that it does not know. The river is still being impacted on, even though the work has finished and the contractor is off-site, and we have been left with a mess that has to be fixed.

Another incident involved a senior official at Loughs Agency. As you know, Loughs Agency looks after Carlingford and Lough Foyle, around the Derry area. So the official asked DCAL whether he could get warranted for its part of the Province, because he was travelling between both areas, which meant travelling in the DCAL area. He saw a number of incidents that somebody should have been looking into. When he asked for that, the Department said no or did not come back to him. That

is despicable. When somebody wants to try to help you and you do not even bother to ask, it is poor.

Mr Haughey:

There has been a great move to introduce hydropower in our rivers. Unfortunately, the conditions that are being put on the schemes are not providing adequate protection for our rivers and fisheries. There is a legal problem: DCAL is constricted by legislation as to what it can advise on. NIEA seems to be quite happy with that. Some of the protective measures are falling down the crack between the two Departments, and it remains unresolved. We are really quite worried about that.

In 2001, this Committee held an inquiry into inland fisheries. One of its main recommendations was that any proposals for new hydroelectric systems should have an independent environmental impact assessment carried out. That is not done. Quite a number of the assessments of hydroelectric schemes are not sensible. We do not oppose hydropower, but the conditions that are being put on the hydroelectric schemes are not sufficient to provide adequate protection.

Mr Marshall:

I want to make a couple of points about departmental disinterest. We have said in Committee, to the Department and to anyone else who is prepared to listen that the Fisheries Act (Northern Ireland) 1966 is outdated and no longer fit for purpose. The Minister has said that she does not have the staff to do it, but it really needs to be updated. It has been overtaken by so much European legislation. There is an issue with the 1966 Act. I do not know exactly the issue, but it was where DCAL officials went to enter the premises of a licensed fish dealer. He refused them entry, and the matter subsequently went to court. It has been highlighted that the legislation is not strong enough. There have been proposals from DCAL officials on the ground, some of whom do a very good job. Despite that, however, nothing has been done. They have told the people in policy in DCAL what they need, but it has not been acted on.

A departmental official was suspended this year because he was stealing from his Department. He has subsequently been reinstated —

The Chairperson:

I am not sure that we can discuss that.

Mr Marshall:

The fact is that he was. He has been reinstated at a lesser grade. That is what has happened; that is fact. Now, I have a degree in management —

Mr Swann:

That would be better in a closed session, Chair.

The Chairperson:

I think so. Perhaps you would like to return to that in the closed session.

Mr Marshall:

OK, fair enough.

The Chairperson:

It is to protect you as well.

Mr Marshall:

That is OK.

Mr McMullan:

To protect myself, I do not think that we should be talking about anything regarding litigation at all. It is not in our remit today. I see where you are coming from, but, to protect myself, I do not wish to be included in anything to do with litigation.

Mr Ó hOisín:

Likewise.

The Chairperson:

Do you want to continue without that information? I am not sure that we need to know that at this stage.

Mr Marshall:

That is all right.

Mr Haughey:

The United Kingdom is a member of the North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organization (NASCO). It was formed to protect the salmon on the high seas. All of the countries of the north Atlantic are members of it, and Northern Ireland attends under the banner of the European Union. That organisation has protocols to protect the salmon, one of which is that there should be no mixed stock netting, as it is called, which is where salmon from different rivers are netted as a group. That endangers the stocks of salmon. That has become quite an issue in recent years because stocks are

continually falling and the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) has advised for a number of years that netting of mixed stock should not be happening. NASCO has adopted that, and netting of mixed stock should not be happening at all. Unfortunately, DCAL has refused to stop the mixed stock netting. That is in breach of the protocols of NASCO, but, more seriously, in the past three or four years, the permission by DCAL of mixed stock netting at sea for salmon is now in breach of the habitats directive.

A recent Salmon at Sea (SALSEA) programme report confirmed the advice from ICES down the years that our salmon stocks are at a low ebb and there is no immediate prospect of improvement. As a result, the Ulster Angling Federation has submitted an objection to the European Union, asking it to commence infraction proceedings against the Government of Northern Ireland — or more likely, the United Kingdom — for breach of the habitats directive. There are two clear precedents for such action in the South of Ireland and in the Foyle area, so we anticipate that that will go ahead. We understand that the fines would be levied on the United Kingdom and that there would be some sort of deduction from the Northern Ireland allocation. However, as I said, there are two clear precedents for that, so we anticipate that that will be successful.

Mr Marshall:

To wrap things up, I want to mention the nitrates directive that was discussed recently by the Public Accounts Committee. It referred to investment by farmers in slurry-handling facilities to help meet the nitrates directive. The Committee claimed that that was a poor investment, as there has been no improvement in water quality. We dispute that. It takes a long time for water quality to improve. Doing something overnight does not fix what has happened for the past 10 or 15 years, so it takes quite some time for that to work through the system. We anticipate that you need to look at water quality over a much longer period — say, 10 years — before coming to a conclusion.

Finally, a word on planning: fisheries are not at all well-protected in planning. We are seeing housing developments along the edge of rivers and on floodplains. The recently publicised flooding in Beragh, which will cost more than £1.5 million to fix, was a result of people being allowed to build on a floodplain. When the water comes up they then wonder why houses flood. It just does not make any sense. DCAL does not appear to be making enough representations to Planning Service on these issues, or Planning Service is ignoring them. An ordinary lay person would consider it crazy to build on a floodplain.

Looking to the future, DCAL's administration on fisheries has come to a complete standstill. There is no movement. People are getting more and more frustrated. There is a growing movement among a body of anglers in Northern Ireland about the netting issue. From what people are saying, it

is starting to turn quite nasty. That needs to be nipped in the bud. Something needs to be done. People have got to the end of their tether with DCAL over the fact that it does not seem to function.

We have a good product. Our wild fisheries are in reasonable order — our local clubs have seen to that. We believe that our wild fisheries can continue to have a positive economic and social impact on Northern Ireland's economy and society. However, for that to be done there needs to be a complete overhaul of DCAL's administration of, and policy on, fisheries. We have already heard from Mr Haughey, who sits on the salmon and inland fisheries committee, that it is supposed to advise on policy, yet it was not even advised what the policy is. So we need a new, proactive, progressive and much more forward-looking leadership.

Mr Haughey:

I reiterate that we feel that there is a product there that is socially and economically very beneficial. We can protect and enhance it, and it can continue to make a contribution to Northern Ireland. However, the way things are going at the minute that will not happen. The anglers watched the Fisheries Conservancy Board fall to pieces over a period of about three years. That was absolutely agonising, and we see the first signs of the same thing happening in DCAL. Nothing is happening. There is no interest on the administration side. All enquiries are stonewalled. This is a Department that is not functioning on the fisheries side, and radical steps are needed. We suggest separating the administration and technical sides. There are technical people in DCAL who are doing a fine job. However, we suggest that the administration side needs to be suspended and a commissioner, or perhaps the Loughs Agency, put in charge. Something radical needs to be done. We cannot go through another Fisheries Conservancy Board agony again, and it looks like that is the way things are going.

The Chairperson:

Thank you. Your passion and concern around these issues is not in doubt. That was obvious from your paper and your presentation. You have raised many issues that we will need to contact the Department about and get its response on. For your information, we received correspondence dated 10 January from the Minister. I have already gone through that with the Committee, but for your information, that letter acknowledged that monitored rivers had failed to achieve conservation limits; that the Loughs Agency had indicated that some of Foyle's catchment stocks are below manageable targets; and that the survival of salmon during the marine phase of their life cycle had declined from 30% in 1997 to under 5% today. It states that the current position is untenable and could lead to infraction fines being imposed by the EC, and the Department has asked for support for a range of voluntary conservation measures to minimise the exploitation of salmon during 2012. The letter states that the Department plans to consult on a range of options on the future of commercial salmon

fishing and recreational salmon angling. You are obviously laughing in response to that: can I have your comment?

Mr Haughey:

The Department has been saying that for five or six years. To tell you the truth, we have given up. We have gone to so many meetings and written so many letters, and that is what they tell us every time. That is just bluff and bluster. They have been telling us that for something like five years.

Mr Marshall:

At a meeting on Monday night, I read a report that was produced in 2007 by the Government's own Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) body. At that stage, it was advising the Government that stocks were unsustainable and that mixed stock fisheries must be stopped.

Mr Haughey:

For four years, DCAL has been in breach of the habitats directive in issuing salmon netting licences.

The Chairperson:

In relation to the habitats directive, you have obviously requested meetings with the Culture Minister and been refused. Have you met the Environment Minister?

Mr Haughey:

Not on that issue.

The Chairperson:

Have you contacted the Environment Committee?

Mr Marshall:

Not on this issue.

The Chairperson:

I ask because the issue that you have raised with Europe is particularly around the habitats directive, and I wondered what discussions you have had with other officials in and around that.

Mr Marshall:

We have not gone to the Environment Committee or the Environment Minister because we understand — and correct me if I am wrong — that DCAL is responsible for issuing those licences. It can stop the issuing of a licence at any stage. DCAL has only to ask its own people, who have been

saying for long enough that it is in clear breach of the habitats directive, yet the Department continues to issue licences to netsmen who are taking fish. The Department itself has said that those fisheries are interceptory mixed stock fisheries. They are taking fish that are bound for the Finn, the Foyle or other rivers that are not meeting conservation limits. That is in clear breach of the habitats directive.

The Chairperson:

It is also my understanding that the Environment Minister has responsibility for the oversight of the directive. That is why I was wondering whether you had gone down the route of going to the Environment Committee or the Environment Minister in advance of going to Europe.

Mr Marshall:

No.

The Chairperson:

Obviously, that action is going to be incredibly costly.

Mr Marshall:

We met DCAL officials and told them that, unless they were prepared to do something, we would go to Europe.

The Chairperson:

When did you do that?

Mr Marshall:

We did that back in —

Mr Haughey:

The early part of last year —2011.

Mr Marshall:

And before that.

The Chairperson:

Have you received information back from Europe?

Mr Haughey:

Yes, it is under consideration at the moment.

Mr Marshall:

It is on the agenda for this month.

Mr Haughey:

We have met a series of Culture Ministers. We met Nelson McCausland and Mr Campbell. This is the first Minister who has refused to see us. One of our frustrations is that we have attended meetings and written letters until we are blue in the face, but nothing has happened. That is the problem: nothing is happening.

Mr Marshall:

At a meeting with DCAL, I said that we were being left with no alternative other than to go to Europe if the Department was not prepared to move, because that was the only place we had left to go to. The response I got from an official was that we would have to prove it, and Europe might not find in our favour. That was DCAL's attitude.

Mr Ó hOisín:

I declare an interest as a lifelong angler — sea and game, I do not hold with that other pursuit at all. I am also a member of a number of associations and clubs.

There was a fairly extensive rant against DCAL there. If things are as bad as they are being made out to be, we should certainly be looking into that. There are a number of issues. The unfortunate thing in dealing with fisheries, as we know, is that it is a responsibility that has been tacked on to this Committee. It is something that we have to address more seriously. Mr Haughey, I think you were part of a delegation, along with me, to the Loughs Agency about three years ago to look at netting in the Foyle.

Mr Haughey:

I may well have been.

Mr Ó hOisín:

I think you were. That issue, for the most part, has been dealt with relatively successfully.

Mr Haughey:

Was that the time that we went with Michelle Gildernew?

Mr Ó hOisín:

Yes, I think you were there that day.

My concern is about the moneys that are potentially being lost in the inland fisheries sector. Quite a number of our clubs are renting their stretches of water from what I call absentee landlords. I know that in my own constituency, there is a very small club in the Lower Bann with some 30 members that pays somewhere in the region of £9,000 for a 100 metre stretch of water, which they have stocked extensively — 120,000 fish — to the Honourable the Irish Society. You mention the Finn, the Mourne and the Strule; the money made from those go to the Duke of Abercorn. Likewise, there are issues on Lough Neagh as well.

Mr Marshall:

Well, not entirely to the Duke of Abercorn.

Mr Ó hOisín:

Well, quite a significant bit does. What work are you doing to address that? That money should be going directly back into conservation schemes. A lot of the clubs, in fairness to them, have introduced catch-and-release schemes, so they are doing their bit. The case that I mentioned in the Lower Bann works out at £300 per member per year. The charge on other rivers is similar or even more.

The second issue that you have not addressed, which is something that you may want to bring up with the Department of Agriculture, is the extraction of gravel from riverbeds. In my own river, a stretch where there was somewhere in the region of 40 redds a few years ago was stripped of gravel down to the bare rock. That effectively left the area as a desert for spawning salmon.

Those are a couple of issues, but there are certainly a number of other issues that we want to bring up with the Department and the Minister.

Mr Haughey:

In response to your first point about landlords, in broad measure, we might agree with you. However, to be blunt, we fight so many battles on so many fronts that we are very reluctant to take up that fight. We do not need to make more enemies at the moment; we need to make more friends.

Mr Ó hOisín:

I am not sure that they are our friends.

Mr Haughey:

At the minute, we try to work with the owners rather than against them. Gravel has been a problem in the past. The Loughs Agency recently passed a regulation that outlawed the removal of gravel, except under specific circumstances and upon the issue of a licence from the Loughs Agency. I do not recall what the situation is in the DCAL area. I understood that the Department was or has been introducing a similar regulation, but I am not sure if it has yet happened.

Mr Ó hOisín:

Not as far as I am aware.

Mr Swann:

The letter that we received this morning from the Culture Minister also states that AFBI has determined that drift nets and bag nets fishing for salmon on the County Antrim coast are intercepting mixed stock. You told us that DCAL said that it was up to you to prove a breach of the EU habitats directive. Surely by admitting that those nets are catching mixed stock, AFBI is, in fact, admitting that those nets — licensed by DCAL — are in breach of the EU habitats directive.

Mr Marshall:

All that I can say to that is that AFBI said it in 2007 as well, and DCAL has chosen to ignore it to date.

Mr Haughey:

This is a perfect example —

Mr Swann:

Sorry. This is a letter from the Culture Minister stating that AFBI has determined a breach. I am just asking —

Mr Haughey:

This is a perfect example of the breakdown in the administration in this Department. That letter is ludicrous. The meeting that this gentleman and I attended three years ago with Michelle Gildernew was on the same issue. That meeting took place about February or March and there was a meeting of the cross-border body coming up, in which MPs from each jurisdiction meet —

Mr Swann:

The British-Irish Council.

Mr Haughey:

We put a great deal of pressure on Michelle Gildernew to table that mixed stock fishery issue at the meeting. To her credit, she did and that was resolved. As a result of that meeting, the Loughs Agency banned all netting in the Loughs Agency area. DCAL should have done the same but sat on its hands and did nothing. That letter is nonsense because the AFBI report which states that it is a mixed stock fishery was commissioned by DCAL. When it comes to administration by the Department, one hand does not know what the other is doing. It is a joke.

Mr Swann:

So this is not recent?

Mr Haughey:

No. That AFBI report was in 2007.

Mr Marshall:

It said that in 2007.

Mr Haughey:

Before that, everybody knew that it was a mixed stock fishery. That letter served only to confirm it. That was only a means by which DCAL could delay making a decision for another year or two. Everybody knew what the situation was.

Mr Swann:

In your closing comments, you raised the issue of which was more fit for purpose — DCAL's fishery department or the Loughs Agency. How big a difference is there between DCAL and the Loughs Agency's management of their respective areas?

Mr Marshall:

There is little comparison. As a brief example, I asked DCAL to give me its enforcement actions for 1 January until the end of November. First, I got an e-mail saying that DCAL collects the figures on a quarterly basis, but that it had only got from 1 January to the end of March done. That gives you some idea of what is going on in there. I went back to them and asked: "If you collect these on a quarterly basis, where are the last two quarters? They should be done as well." Eventually, I got the figures up to the end of September.

In the Loughs Agency area, during the period 1 January until 18 November, 161 illegal nets, 12 boats and two cars were seized; 72 pollution incidents were looked into; nine sets of statutory samples

were taken and 51 business premises were examined for illegal fish.

Up until the end of September, DCAL visited five licensed dealers and took 61 illegal nets with a total length of just over 30,000 metres, which averages out at about 500 metres per seizure. There is just no comparison. In its defence, DCAL has only 11 people on the ground, which is clearly not sufficient to do the job. The Loughs Agency has some 35 people on the ground and brings in additional staff at the height of the season and the salmon runs. Its total focus during July, August and September is the protection of the rivers from poaching. You can see just how much it has done.

Mr Haughey:

I want to differentiate between the technical people in DCAL and the administrative and policy people. The technical people beaver away and, by and large, work very well. We have differences of opinion with them, and we always will. It is on the policy and administration side that the thing seems to be falling apart at the seams.

Mr McGimpsey:

We detect that you are not particularly pleased with the Department, and I can understand your frustrations. I was the Minister many years ago, and I looked at tourism, which I deemed to be very important. It was along the lines of unlocking creativity and the Titanic. Tourism was one of those things that Northern Ireland society could greatly benefit from. We had a tourism product that I saw as being second to none.

Northern Ireland escaped most of the worst pollution that we had seen in the rest of GB and Europe: it was relatively untouched and largely used by local anglers as a form of recreation. There was an area of huge tourism potential, and the Department therefore invested in it. We bought out salmon netters on the River Bush and the River Bann. We could not do the same in the River Foyle, because of the Foyle agency, but that was taken up later. We expended very large sums of money in stocking rivers with salmon and trout, and we worked with the Tourist Board to sell this product with fishing competitions and all the rest of it.

The story that I am hearing now is that a lot of that appears to have gone west, which is a pity. Working with the Tourist Board, for example: what is it up to? Working with the Department of the Environment is important, and the Rivers Agency and so on. We have an area with 100,000 anglers. That is bigger than football and Gaelic games; it is the biggest recreation in Northern Ireland. So, this affects a very large number of people, and we have a tourist product that has massive potential. This is something that we need to get around.

I cannot understand why the Minister will not meet you; the Committee should write to the Minister suggesting that there be a meeting. We should be taking these issues one at a time. For example, stocking rivers with salmon. One of the big issues that we had in those days was that, as fast as we stocked it, the cormorants came along and ate the fry. We were losing about 90% of the stock before it ever got near the sea. And then, of course, there was the environment of the Atlantic for salmon. Salmon like cold water and, with the Atlantic warming, the environment was working against them, which meant we were getting a tiny return. Then, as the salmon arrived back, they were being netted. So we bought out the nets, but illegal nets are still an issue that has to be dealt with. I am surprised that we are still on that issue.

I see in the letter that the Minister talks about a voluntary cessation of salmon fishing in the DCAL jurisdiction. Are we talking about netters or commercial fishermen? This is an industry that is on its last legs. It also affects the eel fisheries in Lough Neagh. That is a very important commercial activity that is declining like mad; it has virtually disappeared.

There are lots of reasons why we need to get behind organisations such as yours. We also need to get behind DCAL, because it has the capacity to do that, to bring together the Department of the Environment and the Tourist Board, and to ensure that licences follow demand but also follow conservation and to ensure that we enhance this product.

After listening today, I am very disappointed at what has been going on over the past number of years. It seemed that we were making progress a few years ago. It sounds like we are in for EU fines. We have seen £200 million of potential EU fines for the Department of Agriculture alone. What sort of fines are we looking at now? This affects every country in the EU on the Atlantic seaboard. They will all feel extremely aggrieved if we behave in such a slapdash fashion. We do not want another series of EU directives and fines to come down the line. DCAL does not have the money to pay; the Executive end up paying and that comes out of areas such as the health service.

I am not arguing with what you are telling us. I can ask you questions about it, but I understand where you are coming from. Basically, you need some reaction and co-operation. It is as simple as that, and that is what devolution is all about. We are here to ensure that. Therefore, it seems to me that it starts with DCAL. The Minister will be advised: "Don't meet them". That, I imagine, is why she is not meeting you. It is not because she does not like you or is anti-fishing. It is nothing like that. She will have been advised: "Don't do that". So, we have to write back to her and suggest that she ignores that advice and talks to you. We will then take it from there. DCAL also has the capacity to bring together the Tourist Board for tourism and the environment around the issue of pollution, which is another important matter.

Finally, anyone who has any doubts about the hydropower issue, which you mentioned, should go and look at the Ballyshannon hydro station. It has been there for 50 or 60 years and not a salmon has passed it in that time, and that was one of the most important salmon rivers in Ireland. That is an example of what hydropower is: on one hand it is green energy and on the other there is a massive cost.

The Chairperson:

That was more comment than question.

Mr McGimpsey:

Yes.

The Chairperson:

Before we move into closed session, are members content that we write to the Minister, asking about a meeting with the group? Are they also content that the Committee staff look at the Hansard report to identify issues that were raised during today's discussion and in the briefing paper that was supplied, to raise those issues with the Department?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Marshall:

Before you close, Madame Chairman, I will give you a further example. The Loughs Agency has been very proactive over the past couple of years, particularly in bringing in new legislation. Four years ago, it brought in legislation that banned people from selling rod-caught salmon, because they were using that as an excuse. I spoke to DCAL about that matter. I spoke to the Department's head of policy and said that there was a loophole. I was assured that it was under control and that, because in DCAL's area of responsibility there is still no legislation stating that you cannot sell a rod-caught salmon, that loophole would be closed. In simple terms, that means that somebody can take a rod-caught salmon, say that they caught it in the River Bush or the Bann, and go ahead and sell it even though they might have taken it from the Faughan or another Loughs Agency river. That should have been sorted out years ago. I was promised that it would be, and it still has not been done. That is just another example.

The Chairperson:

OK. Thank you.