

20151028 Kill Licence Restrictions Objection

I am writing this objection once again on behalf of my constituents who are net fishermen in Annan.

The Annan netmen fish within estuary limits, which means that the proposed restrictions in relation to fishing outwith estuary limits will not apply to them. However, the designation of the River Annan at Grade 3 means that they would now have to comply with the compulsory catch and release measure. An initial point to make would be the lack of evidence in designating the River Annan under grade 3 – for three of the last five years the river has been a productive salmon river. Only when there has been a dramatic increase in rainfall, leading to fresh-water in the estuary and subsequently resulting in the salmon avoiding the area has it ‘appeared’ that stocks are low.

I have been working on behalf of the netmen, who are already coming under increasing pressure due to restrictions being placed on their activities, ostensibly to meet conservation targets. A decision was made by the Annan Common Good Fund Sub Committee of Dumfries and Galloway Council earlier this year to apply a total allowable catch of 150 salmon, implement a carcass tagging system and terminate the Stake net licence early. The total potential effect on common good income is a potential reduction of £11,873. If the Kill Licence Restrictions proposed by the Scottish Government were to go ahead then the effect would be even more devastating.

The Solway Firth has unique methods of fishing. Haaf-Netting was introduced by Norse-Gael settlers around 900AD. The Norse-Gaels originated in Viking colonies of Ireland and Scotland, when Norse-Gaels faced problems and fled south, the tradition of Haaf Netting followed them, bringing with them this unique way of fishing. It is a heritage that has almost died out and now only exists on the Solway. Stake Netting and Poke Netting are also ancient forms of fishing in the Solway Firth and should not be allowed to decline but should be preserved for future generations when Salmon stocks improve. The net fishermen in Annan have heritable rights that go back centuries and are restricted to those living within the boundaries of the ancient Royal Burgh – these heritable rights date back to the Burgh Charters of 1538 and 1612.

There is a huge concern that the ancient skills and historical traditions of net fishing in the Solway which date back centuries could be lost due to the imposition of compulsory catch and release, which cannot be guaranteed with the fixed nets.

The Report of a Themed-Based Special Session of the Council of NASCO (June 2014) states that fishing is permitted on some stocks below conservation limits, but only if the stock is achieving its management objective or exploitation will not prevent ongoing stock recovery, and there are good social or economic reasons to allow fishing to continue. The socio-economic factors considered include whether the proposed measure will have an unreasonable effect on someone’s livelihood or property value; effects on different groups; the effect on the viability of the fishery; and the *heritage value* of the fisheries.

Haaf netting has equivalent cultural significance to the guga hunt by the men of Ness - which is of course given legal protection by the Scottish Government - although the killing of seabirds is generally prohibited. The government has no legitimate power to remove these rights and in doing so could breach the European Convention on Human Rights. It is requested that the Annan Common Good netting activities are considered exceptional and the Solway be treated as a ‘special case.’

Whilst I am sympathetic to the idea of conservation, these proposals, when weighed against the cultural and economic impact they would have on the local community, they are disproportionate, illegitimate and open to challenge.