

Fighting the Fish Farmers

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[Salmon & Trout Conservation \(Scotland\)](#)

In October 2012 the people of Sleat – the southern peninsula of the Isle of Skye – discovered they had just two weeks to respond to a public consultation on a planning application to site a fish farm in their adjacent Loch Slapin. Notification had been sent to the non-existent Community Council on the far side of the loch, but not to Sleat, who at the time had no idea what the implications of a fish farm might be or what they should do about them.

At that point I was contacted by a Sleat local essentially saying: “You’re a biologist. Please advise us.” I too had no idea, other than a naïvely vague notion that if they were farming fish, they’d be less likely to be hoovering them out of the sea, so it was probably a good idea. A few of us met and began learning about salmon farming and sharing the knowledge we gained.

The facts soon changed our minds. Facts became the foundation of our case: our method.

With days to go, Sleat Community Council organised the first of several briefing sessions, attended by about forty people. At the end of the meeting a vote was taken and Community Council requested to submit a consultation response to the Highland Council’s planners expressing the majority decision that a fish farm in Loch Slapin was not wanted. Individuals were encouraged to write in as well. Eventually, public opinion was decisive: 74:1 against.

But something was going on which we didn’t understand: the applicant did not have tenure of the seabed lease on the site, while a rival company did. If only for that reason it seemed *a priori* that the application was doomed to failure. The day before the decision deadline the application was withdrawn.

Immediately, the rival company launched their application to occupy the same site. We had had two weeks to prepare for the first assault, but this time there would be a whole year until the next consultation, an opportunity to get climbing the learning curve, which we did. By the time comments were required we knew a great deal more about salmon aquaculture, the planning process, the documents an applicant had to submit, the poor quality of same and how uncritical the statutory consultees’ responses were.

We began discovering irregularities in the applicant’s documentation, ranging from inattention to procedure, *via* silly errors to blatant falsehoods. A particularly satisfying early revelation followed carefully re-measuring the applicant’s distances from their fish farm site to various ‘noise receptors’, which were all correct to within reasonable tolerances except two of them, those nearest where fish farm noise would be most apparent to passers-by. One was out by a hundred percent and the other ‘inaccurate’ by almost three times. That really had us checking figures and we consistently found similar cheating, which while being overlooked by statutory consultees, could be exposed by assiduous Joe Public.

The second application was refused because its siting contravened several Local Plan policies, but the applicant had already applied to infest two more sites in adjacent Loch Eishort. Celebration was short-lived and we set to examining the documentation of two new fish farm proposals which we would have to deal with separately but at the same time!

Again we had time to attend to the work, but a new problem became apparent. Many of the people who had so willingly joined in with previous public consultations assumed that having successfully opposed two fish farms, their job was done. It was going to be very difficult to persuade them to prepare and write two more letters of objection.

To salvage community engagement a ‘gimmick’ was required. I wrote a book – *HOLES Scotland’s Salmon Sewage Scandal* – that would provide the facts people needed to inform their letter writing. *HOLES* makes the point that it’s the nets that are the problem, consisting as they do entirely of holes tied together with string through which all fish farm waste dissipates to the detriment of the marine environment.

Here’s a shocker (back-of-an-envelope estimate): fish farms in Scotland release untreated effluent equivalent to approximately four and a half times Scotland’s human raw sewage.

“One reason net-cage industrial farming is profitable is due to externalised costs. At present the salmon farming industry pays nothing for waste disposal. Fish faeces and uneaten feed pellets go directly into the ocean. Our environment and wild marine species pay the price that secures the industry’s profits.” – Living Oceans (YouTube)

Fortuitously, a Sleat resident who attended meetings of our *ad hoc* organising group had some funds and paid for publication of 200 copies which we delivered for free, door-to-door around the area, with an insert encouraging people to contribute to the two consultations. They did, magnificently, and with authority accrued from knowing the facts and understanding the argument.

Meanwhile, we were able to divide our new expertise so that one would keep an eye on the Highland Council’s planning website and interact with the Community Council, another would concentrate on sea mammals, another on impacts of sea lice on wild salmon, another on landscape and social impacts, another on press and internet announcements and another on pollution *versus* marine biology, all on the look-out for deficiencies and irregularities in the applicant’s documents.

We refined our argument down to three main headings (others apply): 1. Pollution (organic, N & P, excess chemotherapeutants); 2. Detrimental impacts on wild salmonids (sea lice and genetic introgression) and 3. Incompetent Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs).

I applied myself to EIAs, in particular the seabed surveys. Video footage was available from the applicant (for an exorbitant price) and although it was tedious to watch all the way through, as had to be done, it was entertaining to watch the submarine camera spin on its cable, lurch, bounce and undulate, speed and slow, peer up and away from the seabed, and repeatedly crash disturbing clouds of sediment that completely obscured the view. Incompetent.

We plotted latitude and longitude from the screen onto maps and discovered that the trajectories of the routes shown in the applicant’s report had been falsified by drawing straight lines between the start and finish points. In truth the camera had wiggled its way completely off course, at one point describing inelegant spirals while travelling precisely nowhere. It was very satisfying to expose this nonsense and back it up with a full appraisal of the report that – if properly analysed (not done by the statutory consultee) – revealed an inexcusably low-quality caricature of scientific methodology and write-up skills not much better than an idle teenager’s emergency homework!

Seabed survey reports routinely consisted of poor write-up structure, misspelled, inaccurate or incorrect scientific names, lamentably inadequate and irrelevant data quantified using infantile methodologies, with no discussion or suggestions for mitigation of environmental impacts – the very point of the exercise. We even found material transferred from previously submitted reports – e.g. the name of the wrong loch – because each was a copy/paste self-plagiarism of their dreadful predecessors. (I think another exclamation mark is excusable!)

Claims that proposed fish farms were not in the vicinity of seal haul-out sites were routinely ‘inaccurate’ to say the least. One was out by a risible 120 miles.

It seemed that nobody involved in the planning process was aware of these unforgivable deficiencies (of which these are but a few examples).

Importantly, the statutory consultees didn't notice, so failed to tell the planning officers whose job it is to instruct the councillors who, in planning committees, make the important decisions whether to accept or refuse applications. We had identified a cascade of misinformation in which – deliberately or by accident? – applicants flout proper planning procedure which consistently passes unnoticed and unpunished.

During the evolution of the Sleat anti-fish farm project (not anti-aquaculture) a few passionate contributors had gathered to share knowledge and discuss tactics. Eventually the main five decided we should have a name so that we might take on the appearance of an established organisation. Since we had concluded that closed-containment tank systems would be the answer to all of the problems associated with net-cage salmon farming we chose Scottish Salmon Think-Tank or SST-T ('think: tanks'). Also, if Norwegian big businesses can call themselves *Scottish* Salmon Company or *Scottish* Sea Farms, why should a little Skye group not have a pompous, national-sounding label too?

On devising our new website's domain name we were delighted to discover that we could have the highly appropriate suffix *dot-net* and became:

www.scottishsalmonthinktank.net

In November 2015, after the good people of Sleat had laboured for three years of annoyingly unnecessary hard work imposed by aggressive, faceless industrialists, the two Loch Eishort applications were withdrawn, the applicant having been informed that refusal was imminent. Opinion letters sent in for Eishort 2 were 131:1 against and for Eishort 1, 104:0 against. That should have sent a very powerful message from the people to the planners. Community effort might have contributed to the planning process, but we can't be certain because we aren't allowed to know.

I deliberately put Eishort 2 ahead of Eishort 1 in the previous paragraph because that's the way they passed through the system – who knows why? That simple switch caused us no end of muddle and the potential for error that might even have been the applicant's deliberate confuse-the-opposition tactic. We know from an infamous leaked e-mail that at least one large aquaculture company is not beyond a bit of chicanery when obstructed by mere people:

“But [village name] is a guaranteed vipers nest, with the huge delays that will create, and the demands on Council (and TSSC) time, could be better spent on other sites that may be less oppositional ...” and “Lets spend the energy ... filling the Councils time ...”

One response to inconvenient, obstructive local people is to move their attentions to 'less oppositional sites', a trick that can work. The same company that was refused three sites in south Skye plus three more planned for Broadford Bay had no trouble getting the site entitled Loch Snizort East (north Skye). The public hardly knew it was happening (or supported it, or didn't care) and opposition amounted to just four objections, not enough for the council to take them into account, which I understand requires five. Opposition from the statutory consultees – and regrettably this criticism must include local wild salmon protection interests – was characteristically weak, so the application sailed through without a hitch. They have now applied to occupy an adjacent site, but this time objection letters reached nineteen (zero in support).

With the fish farm threat to the south Skye lochs at least temporarily removed, now the SST-T can concentrate on conservation. Long before we knew that the planning applications would fail we had optimistically begun enquiring about various forms of conservation status for Loch

Eishort. We have the interest of local land owners who are particularly concerned to protect and improve their rivers and we have been promised assistance from a project officer of Fauna and Flora International with whom we will begin work in March 2016. Scottish Environment Link – an amalgamation of all Scottish conservation organisations – has taken our case seriously and we have lobbied and informed MSPs and their researchers with a presentation at Holyrood. Of course, we also have a mutually beneficial relationship with Salmon & Trout Conservation (Scotland), an excellent partnership.

At last we are getting to know the right people and we attend conferences and workshops such as, recently, *Flourishing Communities and Productive Seas*, a multi-disciplinary synthesis of concern for the natural and human environments in relation to marine productivity, putting nature and people first while not overlooking our need to exploit resources appropriately. (n.b. I try to avoid that adjustable word ‘sustainably’.) This initiative of the Scottish Universities’ Insight Institute is effectively acting out the memorable observation by the founding father of the modern environmental movement and creator of Earth Day, one of most influential public awareness campaigns ever undertaken on behalf of global stewardship:

“The economy is a wholly owned subsidiary of the environment, not the other way around.” – Gaylord Nelson (2002). *Beyond Earth Day: Fulfilling the Promise*.

The foreword of the same book contains a comment that could have been custom-made for industrial salmon aquaculture as we know it in Scotland:

“You show me pollution and I will show you people who are not paying their own way, people who are stealing from the public, people who are getting the public to pay their costs of production. All environmental pollution is a subsidy.” – Robert F. Kennedy Jr.