



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Mairi Gougeon MSP,
Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and
Islands

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Cabinet Secretary,

I have heard from several constituents, businesses and associations who have raised their concerns about a number of seals who are entering the River Dee, causing the number of salmon returning to the river to decline at an alarming rate.

Seals have been regularly invading the river, both eating and scaring the fish, along with pushing them off their reeds (nests) during spawning season in the winter, which is having a devastating impact on their reproduction.

One constituent raised the below:

“There are a number of beats which traditionally yielded almost 200 salmon from February – May, today they are now very lucky if they get a handful (whilst the seal is present). Almost every morning ghillies and river bailiffs are trying to chase the seal downstream, often we are seeing the seal with fish in its mouth, the beats that the seal is traveling through or up to aren’t catching any fish, however – the beats above where it’s traveling to are, it’s no coincidence the damage the seals are having on our river. Guests have had enough and we are losing their custom rapidly.”

As a result of the seals invading the River Dee, The Aberdeen and District Angling Association have reported a significant loss in salmon numbers:

“Recent catch statistics can easily reflect the presence of these seals when comparing our catch returns over the last few years when seals have become more prevalent in the lower river. For example, on the Association’s Garthdee beat the five-year average annual catch for this beat up to 2012 was 82 salmon and Grilse, the five-year annual catch up to 2017 is only 33 salmon and grilse. Sadly, the four-year average annual catch return for the same beat up to 2021 is only 2 salmon.”

Fishing along the River Dee plays a vital role in our rural economy and supports hundreds of jobs and numerous local businesses in the area. Local businesses are already reporting a loss of custom due to the shocking decline in numbers.

“All our hands are tied but unless government start helping us by trying to keep seals in the sea not in the river, we are going to be left with no spring salmon, meaning no anglers and the economic knock on effect to Estates, hotels, ghillies and fishery board, bottom line jobs. The effects are already being felt... Last week we had 8 men sharing 4 rods staying in Banchory,

not a sign or touch of a fish, only the seal swimming up and down, unlikely they will be back, not only hotels but the area can't afford for this situation to be left as it is presently, we desperately need government help."

The River Dee is also recognised as a Special Area of Conservation for its efforts to protect Atlantic salmon, freshwater pearl mussels and otters. Several conservation initiatives are already in place, such as adopting a code of catch and release of all salmon back to the river to continue their journey to spawn, and maintaining the riverbank. The seals are devastating these efforts, and current strategies to deter the seal are not working, as outlined below:

"Current methods of displacing the seal from one part of the river to another to prevent it taking fish by "scaring methods" currently employed by Salmon Fishery Boards does not work. The latest Government publication "Wild Salmon Strategy" identifies many strategies to conserve salmon stocks in our river systems and even this publication highlights the seal problem and that a wider review of its current licensing system for predator control should be undertaken."

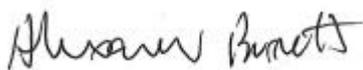
If numbers of salmon continue to substantially reduce then this will have knock-on effects on the other species. Action needs to be taken to protect the salmon from predation. As such, below is a final point that has been raised to me by a constituent:

"If we are to protect both the sport of salmon fishing and the secure economic future of Deeside, then we must in the first instance protect the salmon, even if it calls for a remedy that some may find unacceptable. We are after all, shooting deer by the thousand to protect native woodlands, culling Grey Squirrels in urban areas to protect our native Red Squirrels and a Government funded project to eradicate stoats and weasels in the Orkney Islands. All proven and effect methods of control. When salmon enter the river of their birth it is their final journey for the survival of the species, to reach the headwaters and lay its eggs. We must afford it all the protection we can give it, otherwise it will become a journey to extinction."

I would be grateful if you could outline your understanding of the consequences of the situation and the salmon crisis in the River Dee, and what can be done to keep seals out of the River Dee?

I would also be obliged if you would be available to meet with those interested in the management and rejuvenation of salmon in the River Dee?

All the best,



Alexander Burnett
MSP for Aberdeenshire West