

# International OUTLAWS

Ignoring scientific advice, Ireland's Salmon Commission has just recommended a total allowable catch of nearly 170,000 salmon for this year — and there is even talk of an extension to the netting season in some areas. Salmon & Trout Association director PAUL KNIGHT reports

**I**N RECENT WEEKS, focus has returned to the drift-net fishery for salmon off the coast of the Irish Republic. This fishery regularly takes more than 200,000 fish a year, when fish robbed from nets by seals, and illegal catches which are never officially recorded, are taken into account. The real crime, though, is that a significant proportion of those salmon are destined for natal rivers in non-Irish countries. England, Wales, south-west Scotland, Spain, France and Germany all lose fish to this disastrous mixed-stock fishery. It is called "mixed stock" because the huge nets indiscriminately catch fish regardless of where they originate, and therefore make the

combined commercial and rod fisheries of almost 170,000 salmon for 2005, as opposed to the scientific advice of just 125,000 fish. Members of the excellent Irish "Stop Salmon Drift Nets Now" action group tell me that this is undoubtedly due to the intense pressure put on the Commission by the netsmen, who demanded at least a 140,000 fish quota for their industry. Add a slightly reduced rod catch from the ten-year average — about 27,000 salmon — and you have your TAC. Scientific advice wanted a 100,000 fish commercial quota, so you can clearly see where the discrepancy lies. The new Minister of the Marine, Pat The Cope Gallagher, has still to make his decision, but don't

**"A significant proportion of salmon are destined for non-Irish rivers"**

management of distinct river populations impossible. This has led to the fishery being outlawed internationally by everyone with half an interest in salmon conservation; apart, that is, from the Irish Government and the powerful commercial netting interests within the Republic.

As I write this in early March, the National Salmon Commission (Ireland) has just recommended a Total Allowable Catch (TAC) for the

hold your breath, as his constituency is in the heart of netting country, and politics, rather than science, conservation or economics will guide his hand over this issue.

Despite successive Irish Ministers of the Marine declaring a commitment to address the drift-net fiasco, commercial pressure has always been the major influence stopping the Government from making the tough decisions necessary. Even in the light of the



**Playing a salmon on the Screebe Fishery, Co Galway. A rod-caught salmon is worth more than 20 times that of a net-caught fish to the Irish economy.**



Indecon Report, which valued a rod-caught salmon to the Irish economy at something over 20 times that of a netted fish, they have consistently failed to act. Indeed, if Gallagher accepts the Salmon Commission's recommendation for the 2005 TAC, he will have spectacularly ignored scientific evidence and advice, not only from his own scientists but also from the International Council for the Exploration of the Seas (ICES) and the North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organisation (NASCO).

The one hope we have of bringing

resolutions. We see no similar commitment from the Irish Republic's Government to abide by its NASCO responsibilities.

The recent Indecon Report proved the major contribution made to the Irish economy by recreational salmon rod fisheries, often in remote communities where other income is hard to achieve. We believe this gives the Irish Government particular responsibility to manage their salmon fisheries with the socio-economic benefits provided by angling in mind, quite apart from the conservation arguments connected

## "Just tell me the logic behind that sort of recommendation!"

significant international pressure to bear on the Irish is if the European Union becomes involved. With this in mind, I wrote recently to the head of the EU delegation at NASCO, complaining (yet again!) about the drift-net situation with the following arguments:

\* The Irish Republic, as a member of the EU delegation, is signed up to resolutions agreed within the NASCO Forum. NASCO has called for the cessation of all mixed-stock salmon fisheries within waters regulated by participating parties.

\* The Irish Republic is also signed up under NASCO to the Precautionary Principle, which is particularly relevant to the Irish drift-net fishery over its potential impact on NATURA 2000 sites, designated under the Habitats Directive and including Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) rivers within Ireland, the UK and other European states. The Precautionary Principle therefore applies to the Irish Government's responsibilities both to NASCO and the EU.

\* UK anglers contributed significantly to the £3.3m funding of the recent buy-out of the majority of the North-east of England drift-net fishery. These funds were given to improve the conservation and recreational status of North-east English and Scottish east-coast salmon stocks, and also supported Government commitments to phase out mixed-stock fisheries within the UK, thereby producing a partnership between Government and private interests to abide by NASCO

to European legislation and affecting neighbouring states. A rod-caught fish may be returned alive to the water, with continuing recreational and economic benefits to the community, while a net-caught fish must be killed to provide any benefit at all to the economy. In Ireland, though, while anglers face increased regulation this year, albeit along sensible and generally acceptable lines, there is even talk of experimenting with extensions to the netting season in Bangor and Waterford. Just tell me the logic behind that sort of recommendation!

S&TA, along with many other NGOs and individual rivers' organisations, has therefore urged the EU to put pressure on the Irish Government to act swiftly to end this damaging fishery. This, we feel, should include them facilitating a partnership with private fishery interests to bring about a voluntary cessation of drift-net fishing, with compensation paid to licensees, as happened in England.

My final thought is with the local organisations that carry out so much excellent in-river improvement work to salmon spawning and juvenile habitat, only to see their efforts jeopardised by woeful management at national level. There is no fiercer kick in the teeth for those actually getting their feet wet in the interests of salmon conservation than to see politicians with no more eye for the future than the next ballot box.

[www.salmon-trout.org](http://www.salmon-trout.org)