

Fishing

End of netting gives returning salmon free run to home rivers

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Salmon anglers have been given one of the biggest Christmas presents they have had in half a century. After years of protest, Ireland has bowed to pressure and ended industrial salmon netting off its coasts from January 1.

The decision marks a successful culmination of a ten-year campaign waged by organisations representing 30,000 salmon anglers in the republic, the entire British salmon angling community and game fishermen in several countries on mainland Europe. A compensation package is being developed for the 850 commercial netmen who will lose their licences.

The move shuts down, theoretically at a stroke, a fishery off Ireland's west coast that at one time was taking up to half a million salmon a year heading not only for Ireland's own rivers, but rivers in Britain, France, Spain and elsewhere. It will relieve the stresses on salmon that have brought populations on some rivers to the point of extinction.

Properly managed and funded, it holds out the prospect of a return to healthy stocks and to the kind of salmon fishing on Britain's doorstep that once attracted game anglers from the United States and beyond.

The benefits will be seen immediately. According to Ireland's Ministry of the Marine, about 68,000 fish that would have been legally netted in 2007 — plus, no doubt, many thousands not recorded — will be free to make their way to Ireland's own rivers and spawn. Many thousands more will be free to continue their journeys elsewhere.

Before industrial netting began, 68,000 salmon would have been almost a gesture. Today, they represent a huge boost to

once-teeming rivers now counting their salmon runs in the hundreds and even tens.

Salmon — and hence salmon angling — have been in trouble since scientists began to unravel the fish's secrets 50 years ago.

In the 1950s and 1960s, it was discovered that not only European salmon but salmon from the United States and Canada congregated in the seas around Greenland and the Faeroe Isles. Huge commercial fisheries sprang up there almost overnight. In no time, thousands of miles of cheap, invisible shrouds were being laid across the narrow sea highways that salmon were found to use on their way from, and back to, the rivers of their birth. One of these highways ran down Ireland's west coast.

The result was inevitable. Catches everywhere soared, faltered — and collapsed. By the early 1980s, it was estimated that half the Atlantic's salmon stock had been wiped out. Thereafter the decline steepened and

'Populations on some rivers have been close to extinction'

the impact spread. One result was that anglers' salmon catches crashed — and with that, the angling tourism on which many remote communities, not least in Ireland and Scotland, relied. Ghillies lost their jobs, tackle and boat-hire businesses went to the wall and many small hotels and bed-and-breakfast houses closed.

The fightback began in 1989 when Orri Vigfusson, an Icelandic businessman, came up with the idea of simply paying licensed netmen not to put to sea. Anglers and conservationists throughout North America and Europe have since poured millions of pounds into his North Atlantic Salmon Fund and one by one nets have been "bought out" off Greenland, the Faeroe Isles, most of mainland Europe and, belatedly, off the North East of England. Three years ago Ireland alone was unabashed, by now benefiting from

fish freed as a result of buy-outs elsewhere.

Since then the Irish Republic has been threatened with prosecution by the European Community for breaking conservation law and the Stop Drift Nets Now organisation in Ireland has given fishery owners and anglers a single voice to counter the netmen's own powerful lobby.

Now, the Ireland Government has relented but what is crucial is that the gains so hard-won are not squandered. Whereas the nets were indiscriminate, not only taking fish heading for well-stocked rivers but, sometimes, the last remnants of stock from dying rivers, the republic's waterways now need to be managed on a one-by-one basis — the only certain way to ensure that different stocks get the individual management they need.

Next, the ban needs to be policed effectively — no easy matter given the west of Ireland's wild and sparsely-populated coastline. Likewise, the sale of rod-caught salmon should be ruled out: if it is not and malcontents replace their nets with angling gear, the toll of fish will simply be transferred from the seas to freshwater. Bona fide anglers themselves will need to continue their restraint.

The closure of the last large-scale drift net fishery left in the North Atlantic does not end the salmon's problems. Large numbers of young fish are inexplicably getting lost at sea, perhaps affected by changing ocean temperatures. Habitat neglect and intensive farming mean that the upland streams can support many fewer fish than in the past. On some rivers, escaped fish from salmon farms outnumber wild fish and the genetic integrity of the wild stock — and maybe its migratory instincts — is being diluted.

There is more. But still, the long-awaited decision has been taken. Salmon anglers in Britain and Ireland will be on a qualified high. And quite right, too.

● Brian Clarke's angling column appears on the first Monday of each month.