

Calls for Re-Opening of the Drift Net Fisheries for Our Island Communities

"We on the islands learned from our fathers and passed our learning on, grateful for what we had and glad of the opportunity to share and continue it. We now ask for consideration. We ask for our way of life to be acknowledged, respected and treated accordingly" - Jerry Early, Arranmore Island.

There is a certain amount of irony in the fact that the recent call for the re-opening of the drift net fisheries for Island Communities is coming from the political party that imposed the ban in the first place and effectively destroyed a way of life that has existed for centuries around our coastline. Some may call it hypocrisy but I will temper that analogy until we see if anything comes out of the latest attempts to get our traditional fishermen back out fishing.

The question has been put out there for the need for the Minister for Communications, Energy & Natural Resource to review the ban on Drift Net Fishing for wild Atlantic Salmon and if he will consider providing a limited licensing regime for Islands and Coastal communities in view of the recovery of the wild salmon stocks.

Fianna Fáil Seanad spokesperson on Agriculture, Senator Brian Ó Domhnaill, has told the Seanad that an urgent review of the ban placed on drift net fishing for wild Atlantic salmon is now required. He said the review is needed in light of the increased volume of salmon coming into the majority of all rivers.

He commented: "In light of the challenging economic environment and the difficulties being experienced by coastal and island communities, I firmly believe that the ban on commercial drift netting should be eased."

Senator Ó Domhnaill and Senator Denis O'Donovan pressed the Minister of State for National Resources, Fergus O'Dowd TD, about opening a limited licensing regime for island and coastal communities in view of the recovery of the wild salmon stocks.

Commenting during the recent Committee debate on the subject, Senator Denis O'Donovan from Cork stated: "I will refresh the memory of the House. In 2006, a Fisheries Bill was introduced and in the same year, the then Minister, Noel Dempsey, one of our own Ministers in that Government, decided to revoke the licence for salmon net fishing around the coastline. This caused great consternation and, arising therefrom, an absolute ban on drift nets for salmon fishing was introduced which affected people around west Cork, Kerry, the island communities and, as my colleague will attest, in Donegal. It had a socio-economic impact on those areas. In Cork there were some 110 active drift net licences, all of which were revoked by ministerial

order, as the Minister was entitled to do; it was not done by legislation. As a result of efforts by me and others within our party those affected got a compensation package. At that stage Fine Gael Deputies from the peripheral areas of Ireland, whether in counties Donegal, Mayo, Clare, Kerry, west Cork or Waterford, gave a clear commitment that if they were returned to power they would reverse that particular decision. I locked horns with the Minister of the day, Noel Dempsey, with whom I had difficulties, and he declared that after five or six years he would review the situation.

"I accept and do not dispute the importance of salmon fishing to inland fisheries in the rivers and lakes of the west of Ireland. The issue is also present, however, for people in Bere Island, Whiddy Island, Cape Clear and other islands, for whom there should be a limited reopening of salmon fisheries, subject to certain obvious restrictions. I am not talking about the blanket situation that had obtained. However, evidence so far shows that the removal of drift net licences has dramatically increased the volume of fish coming into all the rivers. In Bantry Bay we have the Ouvane and Comhola rivers, among others. A lot of poaching is going on. In my view, the people I mentioned are the first who should be given, on a test series, a limited licensing system. This would help people in remote rural areas of Ireland, the peninsular areas and islands off west Cork and might only be on a two year basis. If the Minister retains the right to reintroduce a licensing system he also has the right, at any stage, to abandon that system. After six years of the ban it is worth looking at this situation again and we should do so. For many years, salmon fishing off the west Cork coastline was very successful and created onshore jobs. It is worth revisiting."

Senator Brian Ó Domhnaill from Donegal recalls that "both Fine Gael

and Labour promised to carry out such a review prior to the last election so I was deeply disappointed with the response from Minister O'Dowd, who has responsibility for this issue, when he dismissed our call outright.

"I never agreed with the outright closure of mixed stock commercial salmon fisheries in 2007. However, in light of the increase in runs of salmon in almost all rivers following the closure, I believe it justifiable to seek a review of the ban," said Ó Domhnaill.

"I feel it is totally unreasonable not to give consideration to reviewing this issue, particularly in light of the fact that the two biggest challenges facing the fortification of wild salmon stocks is pollution in our rivers, which was highlighted in a new EPA report, and the excessive destruction of wild salmon by schools of seals.

"I will continue to press the Government on this issue until a relaxing of the ban is introduced. I believe that a controlled re-introduction of commercial salmon fishing could be introduced on a 3 or 5 year pilot basis in a way which would not diminish stock levels."

Senator Ó Domhnaill also expressed his satisfaction that the Donegal Islands Fishermen Committee had an opportunity to make a formal presentation to the Oireachtas Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine recently (we publish some of their presentation below).

"The group had the opportunity to discuss the Common Fisheries Policy review and the issues impacting island fishermen, including the salmon ban. The group recently launched a 3-Year Survival Plan which aims to save and maintain the communities on the Islands of Arranmore, Inishboffin, and Tory Island," concluded Senator Ó Domhnaill.

Speaking on the matter, the Independent TD for Donegal South West Thomas Pringle pointed out: "Legislation in 2006 effectively outlawed the tradition of fishing for wild salmon in Ireland. To compound matters, area VI A was then closed in November 2008 which directly affects Donegal fishermen. This has had devastating consequences whereby the only stock islanders can fish is

lobster and brown crab which means that these species are now being fished to extinction in our areas.

"The Donegal Island Fishermen, who spoke this week to the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine of which I am a member, called for the fair treatment of small island communities, respect for fishermen as custodians of our fisheries and the sea. They also asked for the responsibility and right to practice traditional livelihoods that are ecologically sustainable, socially just and culturally diverse and pass down our traditions, knowledge and skills to future generations. This comes on foot of the Donegal Islands Survival Plan, a three-year survival plan for Donegal islands to tackle the mass unemployment, emigration and loss of heritage that these islands are now facing.

"If an agreement could be made to relax the ban on salmon fishing it would then be possible for Arranmore to be linked with other European and International small islands, sharing experiences, strategies and visions for resilient communities and ecosystems. From there it could be ensured that the marine ecosystem is in balance and that activity is within the ecosystems regenerative capacity.

"The case of the fishing ban in Castlemaine, Co. Kerry, and the subsequent reopening of the harbour for commercial fishing is living proof of this. Arranmore, which is of a similar size to Castlemaine, would be very likely to reap similar benefits if such changes were to be implemented there, having a considerable positive impact on the local industry and community alike.

"I have been a strong advocate of the Donegal Islands Fishermen and have, over the last number of months, been making numerous representations to Minister Coveney and Minister O'Dowd over the seriousness of the situation and the potential for growth.

"As it stands, Arranmore has lost €800,000 from its annual economy, and there have been many business closures and mass emigration from the island. We cannot allow this to continue," added Pringle.

"I would ask that the salmon fishing ban be relaxed for a period of 5 years during which the fishermen could work with the authorities to collate all information on stocks, conservation and records," stated Pringle.

The Joint Committee

on Agriculture, Food and the Marine heard from Jerry Early, John O'Brien and the Parish Priest of Arranmore Fr. John Joe Duffy from the Donegal Island. The Donegal Islands Fishermen's Committee addressed the theme 'survival of the islands and impact of fishing restrictions'. They presented their three year plan, which calls for "the fair treatment of small island communities, respect for fishermen as providers of sustainable seafood and as custodians of our fisheries and the sea".

We publish the full text of the three opening statements from Mr. Early, Mr. O'Brien and Fr. Duffy. We fully recommend that you visit the Oireachtas Committee Debate website if you wish to read the full text of the responses from all present at the very interesting debate.

"My name is Jerry Early. I am from Arranmore Island, County Donegal. I represent the Donegal islands' fishermen. I represent the communities that depend on the fishermen from these islands. I used to be a fisherman. This submission is made on behalf of the fishermen of the Donegal islands but the issues contained within it are common to island fishermen throughout Ireland.

"We call for the fair treatment of small island communities and respect for fishermen as custodians of our fisheries and the sea. We ask for the responsibility and right to practice traditional livelihoods that are ecologically sustainable, socially just and culturally diverse, and pass down our traditions, knowledge and skills to future generations.

"In 2006, we were forced to organise to try to overcome our loss of livelihood. In our six year existence we have not wavered from our commitment in spite of political pressure, financial inducements and rejection. What has kept us on the road is the belief that we are right, the consequences to the islands of this ban remaining, and the overwhelming support and encouragement of our communities. We have had great support from the Gaia Foundation, the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers, the European Small Islands Federation, the European Commissioner, Maria Damanaki, and many more non-governmental organisations.

"There are laws to protect our birds and seals, but traditional fishermen and small island communities are afforded little protection,

with fishermen who are already an endangered species now threatened with extinction. Our islands have characteristics that are intrinsically valuable and play an important role in the mixture that forms Europe's diverse coastal economy. Islands should be maintained not as museum pieces, but as a vibrant and critical element of modern Europe.

"If islands can gain consideration and return to the traditional way of life, we can look forward ten years to a situation where Arranmore would be linked in solidarity with other European and international small islands, sharing experiences, strategies and visions for resilient communities and ecosystems. We could look forward to a marine ecosystem that is healthy and abundant, with people happily coexisting with the sea and shore, ensuring that the marine ecosystem is in balance and their activities are within the ecosystems regenerative capacity. The fishermen would remain the custodians of the sea, passing on knowledge and skills to the next generation.

"We can foresee the return of the emigrant, the need for more schools, the possibility of small businesses growing from the resurgence of the islands' economy, tourism on the upturn as our communities strengthen, a return to the days of sea sports and regattas, and a strong and successful lifeboat crew saving lives and bringing pride and prestige back to the people. We would have a say in the policy making affecting the islands as our Government recognises the special status of island communities and the work they do as guardians of traditions, the ecosystem and the seafaring arts and skills. The islands would return to self-sufficiency, practising traditional, small-scale fishing and supported by a diversity of livelihoods.

"Island inhabitants have always accepted a role within society which sets them apart from their mainland countrymen. They do so because of tradition, duty and responsibility, and a love of a way of life. The island man has been given a task to keep this way of life alive. We are different, a breed apart. We are part of a whole yet, at times, undeniably alone and separate. Ireland has entrusted its islanders to keep the lights burning, keep the traditions and be at the forefront of the culture, the language, the skills the crafts. That we are recog-

nised as a special class of people is amply demonstrated by the fact that Donegal islanders vote in all national elections two days before the rest of the country.

"We on the islands learned from our fathers and passed our learning on, grateful for what we had and glad of the opportunity to share and continue it. We now ask for consideration. We ask for our way of life to be acknowledged, respected and treated accordingly. Island fishermen will happily undertake the responsibilities involved in preserving the traditions held in high esteem throughout Europe and beyond. All we ask is the opportunity. We ask that our proposal be considered and that our lives be returned to us so that we can continue in our lifestyle and our livelihood.

"Legislation in 2006 effectively outlawed and banned the tradition of fishing for wild salmon in Ireland. To compound matters, area 6A was then closed in November 2008, which directly affects Donegal fishermen. Effectively, it means that the only stock islanders can fish is lobster and brown crab. Those species are being fished to extinction in our areas. Scientific organisations now publicly admit that they may have exaggerated the effects that drift net fishermen have had on wild salmon stocks.

"We were offered a compensation package to stop fishing. We refused it. One of the conditions was that we would never again apply for a license to fish salmon. On our islands, with our traditions, where our fathers and grandfathers relied upon fishing to physically feed their children, the inclusion of that condition alone meant we could never accept the proposal. In 2006, we asked for special consideration, but none was given.

"In 2006 we warned of the effects this legislation would have on the islands of Donegal and elsewhere. Unfortunately, we have since been proved correct, with the population decreasing as fishermen and their families leave the islands. On Arranmore, we have gone from 760 inhabitants to fewer than 500 in the space of a few years. The economy has suffered as businesses closed. On Arranmore alone, one hotel, one bar and three shops have ceased to trade. The fisherman's co-operative in Burtonport, once a vibrant part of the community, has closed, shedding between 60 and 100 jobs. The Arranmore lifeboat service has to date lost 25% of its highly-trained crew members. School enrolment numbers are falling to such a degree that one of the two Arranmore primary schools is now faced with closure.

"Meanwhile, prices for allowed species such as lob-

ster and crab have fallen dramatically as supply outstrips demand, making earning a living harder still. Arranmore Island has lost €800,000 from its annual economy, as set out in the excellent submission by Crick Carleton of Nautilus on behalf of Comhar na nOileán Teo. These figures do not include the €150,000 income from the white fish sector. The social structure of Arranmore is suffering as experienced seamen are not available to assist in the running of regattas and sailing races that are a huge part of summer life on the island. This will inevitably affect tourism. Perhaps most worrying of all, traditional skills are not being passed to the next generation. Last year, Fr. Duffy buried 11 people on Arranmore Island and baptised only one. The expectation is that no children will be born on Arranmore this year. We have lost large numbers of young men and women to emigration as they sought and failed to sustain a livelihood in an environment that could not support them. In the absence of corrective action, the future for the Donegal islands is clear.

"Our solution is set out in the report we commissioned by Alynne Delaney, an expert in inland fisheries management. Specifically, we ask that the salmon-fishing ban be relaxed for a period of five years during which fishermen will work with the authorities to collate all information on stocks conservation and records. We will liaise with the Bord Iascaigh Mhara observers and scientific bodies. We undertake to provide the boats, equipment, personnel and training, and the blood sweat and tears that are part of every fisherman's life. We propose that we be allowed to fish in an area to be decided on a days-at-seas basis but not further than 12 miles from shore and, critically, far enough from land not to disturb the salmon bound for under pressure rivers. Generations of local knowledge enable island fishermen to pinpoint salmon runs to specific rivers with great accuracy.

"What we have proposed will cost the State nothing. Arranmore Island is among the most deprived areas in the country, as illustrated by the Central Statistics Office map we have distributed to members. The island is classed by the CSO as extremely disadvantaged, being ranked one out of 483 on its relative deprivation score, with one being the most disadvantaged. If nothing is done, our community will die out. That is not meant to be an emotive attack on members' consciences; I am simply stating the facts as set out by all recent studies and statistics. A Government spokesperson told us recently that, in his

opinion, the relaxation of the salmon-fishing ban at this time would be irresponsible. How much more irresponsible will it be to sit idly by as the lifeblood drains out of our islands? The Government should not be prepared to preside over the death of the vibrant, colourful communities that bring so much to the Irish way of life.

"I thank members for their attention on this matter. We recognise the extreme pressures on their time and greatly appreciate the interest in our plight that is shown by the invitation to attend this meeting. The communities of the Donegal islands have sent us here to plead their case. We are requesting, on their behalf, that the committee commission a report into the effects of the salmon-fishing ban and the closure of area 6A on the Donegal islands, and the severe restrictions this legislation has placed on our way of life. We are depending on our political representatives to carry our message forward to those within Government who have the power to overturn this ban. We hope they will not see us abandoned. If we allow our islands to depopulate and fail, we will all carry the stigma of that failure. We will be remembered as the generation which gave up on a way of life, all for the sake of 20 small boats."

Fr. John Joe Duffy: "I am the first generation of my family not to be involved in fishing, an involvement we can trace back some 300 years. My people came from the small island of Inisfree, close to Arranmore, which is no longer populated. My colleagues and I realise that we are living in very difficult times. We islanders are battling not only the recent economic decline but a decline that began some years previous to it. We do not deny there was investment in the islands, with a great deal of money going into infrastructure and other projects. Now, however, there is an almost tangible sense of despair among our island communities. Parents feel they are simply preparing their children for emigration.

"The population statistics for Arranmore make for grim reading. While a survey conducted by a predecessor of mine in 1988 showed 768 people living on the island, the figure today is 487. That decline is due in large part to the severe restrictions that have been placed on fishing, including the ban on salmon fishing and the restrictions imposed within 40 miles of the shore in area 6A. These difficulties are exacerbated by the ongoing problems in regard to the herring fishery, where a track record is being sought for particular years. This will deny entry into herring fishing for many of our

island boats. The overarching problem is that nothing has replaced the salmon ban. There is virtually no employment on the islands, save for those women who keep Gaeltacht students.

"We have, at our own expense, maintained a campaign which seeks to raise awareness of our plight. We received great assistance from Alynne Delaney in the report she drew up, as referred to by Mr. Early. The bottom line, however, is that we do not have the financial resources to engage the scientific expertise to prove that the small catch of salmon we would take would have a negligible impact on overall sources. Conversely, it would have an enormous impact on our islands by helping to make life viable and halt emigration. One of the major consequences of the increase in emigration was the loss this year of two primary teachers. The effect is also clearly seen in the lifeboat service. We are very proud to boast that Arranmore Island has one of the most highly decorated lifeboat stations in the British Isles, with a proud record of lifesaving going back more than 100 years. As recently as last Thursday night, our lifeboat took a French fisherman who was ill with cardiac difficulties off his boat. The sad reality, however, is that we had only a crew of five to go out on the lifeboat on that occasion. That is a permissible number, but the ideal complement for safety purposes is seven. Our lifeboat crew is being depleted, in a few cases from retirement but mostly through emigration. We are reduced to a crew of 15, with several of them considering emigrating later in the year. It is a crisis situation. We should be allowed to fish salmon on a very strict basis, as well as fish that are mainly non-quota species, closer to our shores. While we are allowed to fish in area 6A, our boats are too small to go 40 miles out. We would not have the diesel fuel capacity to do so. If we had a favourable herring quota for our boats, we could smoke our own fish and have an Arranmore brand which would also create 12 to 14 seasonal jobs on land.

"In addition to the ban on salmon, the ban in area 6A for small boats within 40 miles has put huge pressure on lobster and crab fishing. Lobster and crab prices are at an all time low. We have a crisis for our island population and way of life.

"How can the joint committee, which has the expertise, help us? If members of the committee think that island life is worth preserving, restrictions need to be lifted along with a careful easing of the ban on salmon fishing. Otherwise island life will disappear as many young families continue to emigrate."

Mr. John O'Brien: "There is not a lot more left for me to say following what Mr. Early and Fr. Duffy have covered. I served on the last salmon commission where the standing scientific committee was given a job to do concerning the best way to conserve salmon stocks. I was the fishermen's representative. We told them all along that the major problem with the salmon stock was river pollution and the predation of seals at sea. The scientists recommended the best way to manage salmon stocks was to end mixed stock fisheries at sea and move it to a fishery where the surplus could be taken on the estuaries ashore. I felt very unhappy with that and so did the fishermen from all the other islands off the Donegal coast. We had no access to the surplus since it was only allowed to be taken in the rivers.

"We were offered a compensation package, as Mr. Early said, but part of the conditions attached were that one could never again apply for a commercial licence. We decided not to take the money and keep some channels open to try to get our rights. We started this campaign five or six years ago. I have been to Europe on a few occasions where I met various people, including Mr. Michael Earle who was an adviser on fisheries to the Green group in the European Parliament for 20 years. I told him I was representing the Donegal island fishermen and explained to him that the salmon fishery had been closed down off the Irish coast. I said we had been led to believe by the politicians that it was done under some EU habitats directive. He explained that the EU does not work in that way and that it does not take away people's livelihoods like that. He said the EU would have told the Irish Government to take some steps to conserve stocks, perhaps by keeping rivers clean or reducing efforts at sea. He said, however, that the EU would never have instructed the Government to close down people's livelihoods. I came back and had a meeting with the gentlemen representing the islands. I told them the situation was not as simple as we were being led to believe, and that this policy did not come from Europe. I said I was told in Europe that my problems lay with the politicians in Dublin.

"Scientists have a job to do in advising how to conserve fish stocks, but politicians have always had a job to do in conserving the communities we represent. Fr. Duffy and Mr. Early referred

to declining school enrolments and school closures. When can one know when an island is below the conservation limit? Last year, we buried 12 people while only one child was born. On my island the school closed a number of years ago and so my children attend school on the mainland. Is that island below the conservation limit therefore? There is a serious obligation on politicians in Ireland to look after our coastal communities. We want salmon in the rivers and want visiting anglers to come to this country.

"All we want is our fair share. We managed all the fishery on a seasonal basis. Our salmon fishery was the most managed one in the world, including net length, depth and mesh size. It also included the hours one put to sea and the time one returned in the evening. It was a four-day week, seven weeks per year. What more can one do for conservation?

"There is salmon running out in the wild Atlantic 365 days a year, so surely we should be entitled to our fair share of that. I queried some scientists about how stocks were now in the rivers. They said a lot of the rivers are starting to open up again. A lot of rivers had been closed down due to a lack of information or misinformation. Anglers on big rivers like the Moy reported their catches, which meant they kept big rivers open. However, anglers fishing smaller rivers either did not report their catches or deliberately misreported them to paint a bad picture, that there were no fish going upriver. It backfired on them and even some of the scientists would admit to that today, but it is too late for us.

"It is not too late for the politicians in charge of the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources or the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine to reverse that decision. They should give us an opportunity to work with the Department, An Bord Iascaigh Mhara and the standing scientific committee, if they want to come aboard our boats. As Mr. Early and Fr. Duffy said, let us do a three-year or five-year trial to see how the stocks are, as well as the genetics of the fish and what stocks we are interfering with.

"There are enough fish so we should be entitled to a share. Let us share them out evenly among the coastal communities, the rivers, anglers and everybody else. That is all we are asking. I hope that a favourable outcome will emerge."

Keep up to date with the Marine Times Newspaper @

