

Anglers' €0.75bn just tip of iceberg

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This week's government report that angling and angling tourism are worth over €0.75bn — and 10,000 rural jobs — to the economy every year is very welcome.

At a moment when every opportunity to generate revenue and create employment matters, it is doubly welcome because it puts a value on a resource threatened on so many fronts that it suggests we are negligent, indifferent custodians of a world-class resource.

Anyone familiar with Irish angling and threats it faces at sea and in our lakes or rivers would probably respond to the €0.75bn figure by wondering what the sector might be worth if it was managed, protected and respected properly.

Sea anglers have seen stocks decimated by seemingly unaccountable commercial interests. Some inshore charter skippers have had to apologise to clients because once abundant fish stocks have disappeared. Boat anglers tell of gannets trying to take mackerel from their lines because they are starving as the fish they depend on have disappeared. Ornithologists tell of sea bird colonies collapsing because nesting birds cannot find the fish needed to feed their young.

Commercial interests want Government to allow netting for bass, a very slow growing species that has recovered because commercial bass fishing has been illegal for more than two decades. If this ban is rescinded then bass stocks will disappear in a very short time, indeed they may anyway because of illegal netting. Bass fishing is one of the strong growth areas in angling tourism.

The Minister for Agriculture, Simon Coveney, is expected to approve proposals for Europe's biggest salmon farm off the Aran islands soon even though the deeply divisive project seems to depend on a controversial report commissioned by the project's promoters, Bord Iascaigh Mhara. This almost unique report discounts the well-established and internationally recognised link between salmon farms and sea lice and the destruction of salmon and sea trout stocks.

Commercial salmon fishermen in Greenland will resume netting for salmon next month because they no longer see any point in protecting stocks that are commercially exploited in Ireland, Scotland or Norway. A project on the scale proposed for the Galway coast would certainly add to that momentum and jeopardise salmon conservation right around the Atlantic.

That such a project, and the reopening of the commercial bass fishery, are very real prospects in Ireland is a shameful indicator of our attitude to these precious resources. The prospect points to a deeply rooted cultural weakness central to our poor attitude to environmental protection.

There is, on top of all of this, the fact that overstretched fishery protection services do not represent an effective deterrent to commercial or individual poaching operations. And, if that was not enough, our attitude to water quality and protection is far less demanding than it should be.

The reality is that this week's figure of €0.75bn is more an indication of the potential in the sector, rather than the realisation of that potential. And the really frustrating thing is that to realise the great opportunity all we have to do is properly respect and manage the resources nature has given us. This was acknowledged by Minister of State Fergus O'Dowd when he launched the report and in any event is something we have a responsibility to do for future generations. It seems a no-brainer.

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