

MOY MISTAKE

Reto Coutalides argues that Irish salmon tagging laws are unsustainable



A **S** I MENTIONED IN A FORMER letter to the editor (October 2024), despite the historically low numbers of returning salmon to Irish rivers, it is still possible to kill ten multi-sea-winter (MSW) springers per season in accordance with the existing regulations. In rivers with a substantial run of MSW fish, like the River Moy, this happens regularly, year after year. In my opinion, the existing regulation does not protect these fish as it should. I am convinced that the tagging scheme is unsustainable, especially regarding the protection of springers on the River Moy.

This is the reason why I and others objected to Inland Fisheries Ireland (IFI)'s Wild Salmon and Sea Trout Tagging Scheme Regulations. IFI's existing calculation of the available fish to harvest mixes the numbers of grilse (ISW) and springers (MSW). This is not an efficient method to protect both stocks. With a logbook return of only approximately 50%, alongside ongoing poaching and fish not being tagged by anglers, I believe the exploitation rate is highly underestimated. I also doubt the assumption that the proportion of springers (8.6% of the total annual run) is still as high as 20 years ago. Spring stocks are collapsing all over the distribution area.

Taking all the official available data into account, the number of springers that will be allowed to be killed on the River Moy in 2025 is 487 fish. This is close to what could be theoretically harvested (551 fish) – the conservation limit (CL) that guarantees enough fish will be left for spawning. Not to mention the fact that the exploitation rate of springers is always higher than that of grilse, which would logically make it higher than the given 28%.

IFI's official annual reports, published on its website, do not contain the calculations and methodology being used to calculate the CL, the percentage of MSW fish,

the surpluses and the exploitation rates. Taking into account the underestimated exploitation rates of MSW fish due to unreturned log books, untagged fish and poaching, the protection of the MSW fish on the Moy is far from being guaranteed.

Therefore, I propose a system where the springers (MSW) would be better protected. For example, the IFI could adopt a system as in Denmark and France, where there are separate quotas for grilse and springers (for example, one green tag per season for one springer). The size and amount of springers allowed to be kept would have to be defined. Once the quotas are reached, fishing would still be possible on a catch-and-release basis.

Fishermen would also only obtain the specified amount of tags allowed per year, which is not possible with the existing non-digital licence management. Therefore, I propose a digitised licence management, like in Norway, Denmark and France. Failure to record the catch at the end of the day (including if no fish are caught) would automatically lead to a ban on buying the annual state licence the following year. With this system, the data on caught-and-released fish would be timely and more valid.

And last, but not least, IFI staffing must be reinforced. That is a question of political will. I have seen too many things over the last 30 years on the riverbank. The existing tagging scheme and licence management is attracting fishmongers from across Ireland and abroad. In my opinion, this is the wrong way to protect an endangered species. There are many factors that have negative impacts on salmon stocks, some difficult to change in the short term. This is an issue that we should focus on now. ■

Reto Coutalides works for the North Atlantic Salmon Fund (NASF) and supported the buyouts of Irish driftnets with NASF founder Orri Vigfússon. He has fished the River Moy for more than 30 years.