**IFM Otter Meeting – Notes from Tim Small (British Trout Association)**

Good Morning, My name is Tim Small and I have been farming trout in the Cotswolds since 1974 at Lechlade on the River Leach, a small tributary of the Thames at the eastern end of the Cotswold waterpark. I want to give you all a different perspective on the ramifications of otter predation today.

Predation of fish on stillwaters and wild river fisheries has been well documented but there is another predator food supply which seems to have been largely overlooked and this is commercial fish farms, mainly trout farms producing fish for the table and restocking markets.

These are intensive operations where many tons of fish, involving huge numbers of fish, are farmed in a relatively small area, being kept in concrete tanks or earth ponds. They are easy pickings for many types of predators. The sites are often impossible to fence and net in due to their location, size and workability and are also covered by planning laws and Health and Safety issues.

It is not only the direct loss of fish that impact on the owner but many other associated implications, including welfare and environmental issues.

I have always been involved in the political side of aquaculture and am currently the Chairman of the restocking section of the British Trout Association, the trout farming trade body that accounts for 80% of UK trout production. I also hold the portfolio for welfare and the environment at BTA, am a member of the fish welfare group and am a stakeholder on the EA’s Abstraction Reform Groups, Government Food Security Committees and the NFU’s Water for Food Committee.

I have recently attended meetings of PAG to bring their attention to the wider issues surrounding fish predation issues in general.

Whereas territory comes in to play with many predator attacks, this falls away when there is such a huge, readily available food source. After a release of 18 pairs of otters in the late 90’s on the River Leach, near where it joins the Thames, the otters, rather than taking up individual territories throughout the upper Thames region, and Cotswold Water Park, made a Bee line straight for the Trout Farm where over 20 otters were regularly spotted, in broad daylight, taking fish from an intensive farm that covered an area not much bigger than a Tennis Court. Photo of Map Screenshot.

There is some disagreement on this exact figure but for 6 months it was not unusual to see these 20 otters running up and down my concrete farm raceway walls from my kitchen window. In the next 6 months, and 146,000 missing fish later, the numbers had come down to a slightly more manageable level. There was a gradual dispersal of the otters, various road kills and an expensive night watchman. I also learnt of the otters EU protective status after I was arrested (and quickly released) for placing bird scarers around the farm and shooting a shotgun over their heads(Disturbance rules). (My local MP, a virtually unknown David Cameron, took up my case at the time).

I have now lived with otters for 20 years and recently the problem appears to be getting worse. They are getting more numerous, are certainly not territorial where there is an abundant food supply, and are far less wary than they have been in the past. We have had instances of staff (and our farm dogs) being “threatened” by otters at night.

I am not talking about losing the odd fish. In fact, there is a part of me that got incredibly excited in the 90’s at the prospect of seeing wild otters successfully returning to our river after so many years. I would certainly not have begrudged them the odd fish. We were already suffering from mink predation and I had heard that otters were very good at scaring off these viscous pests. The reality is very different.

It is not the direct loss of fish but the stress created by a predator attack on a heavily stocked farm that does the real damage. The otter might only need to take and kill one fish but in the process will cause panic amongst all the other fish in a pond/tank leading to immediate death through heart attacks and longer term mortalities through stress induced and disease related issues.

Feeding, probably the main cost for any trout farmer, is compromised through bad Feed Conversion Ratios or a reluctance to feed at all, which again leads to welfare issues. This mass panic is exacerbated when otters bring their young on to the farms to teach them to fish. They have the time of their lives, not only catching easy food but having enormous fun in the process.

When there are so many fish on offer it really doesn’t matter if the otter doesn’t complete a kill the first time and many fish escape with chunks torn out of their bodies, leading to future infection and are totally unacceptable for the table or restocking market. Brown trout, far more valuable and slower to grow than rainbow trout, are far more vulnerable to a non lethal attack.

We get visited almost every night by several separate otters. The worst times are when kits are being weaned and taught to fish.. Photo of dead fish 0397 then 0400. As I am in the restocking market my fish tend to be big and cannot be stocked or sold with great chunks missing from their bodies. These wounds rapidly fungus up which then spreads to other fish.

Farmed trout are particularly vulnerable to predation in the early morning hours during the summer months when water temperatures are high and oxygen levels are low. The recipe for a perfect storm. It is not only the fish that suffer. There are environmental aspects too. We farm to very strict discharge consent criteria and these attacks show up quite clearly in our outlet water for the next few hours in terms of increased BOD, suspended solids, oxygen etc and has got us in to trouble with pollution control at EA, In the past.

You might ask why we cannot fence in our farms. There are many practical reasons why we cannot. We ( I am talking about our entire industry) already do what we can to keep out avian predators with overhead netting. The logistics of having otter proof fences around a farm, or units on a farm, is very difficult. Photo of farm DJI 0024. They are work environments with equipment and staff needing to be able to move around and work SAFELY and easily.

There are also large volumes of water entering and leaving the farm and individual holding units that are almost impossible to screen off effectively and without jeopardising the thing we farm with, WATER!

We already have issues with Health and Safety Officers who want walkways and guard rails along all our tanks and consider netting to be a workplace risk and hazard to machinery. There have been planning issues as well.

The big picture goes wider still and far beyond the practical and financial issues experienced by the farmer and the effects on the local environment.

The UK has a very good record on fish health and extremely strict rules about the movement of fish, import controls etc and a very rigorous health testing regime. As an island we are lucky to be clear of any notifiable diseases which are prevalent throughout the rest of Europe (and worldwide). One of the possible advantages of Brexit is that these rules can be tightened up even more as we will not be restricted by Treaty of Rome rules on movement of goods throughout the EU.

I know that Government is very concerned about food security, even more so now that we appear to have a changing climate and are likely to be compromised by trade movement tariffs and EU politics.

They are also very concerned about the UK’s biosecurity status and would love to see a self sufficient, self supporting UK Trout industry. At the moment trout ova are imported in to the UK from many places around the World. Despite rigorous health testing we are always at risk that a notifiable disease will slip through the net and come in to the UK and wipe out the industry. There are very strict compulsory slaughter orders with NO compensation. A recent CEFAS exercise showed that a notifiable disease outbreak in Hampshire would probably affect the whole UK within a matter of days. The end of an industry and the end of a very valuable source of food.

Believe me, farmed fish will become a very important part of our diet in the coming years. The risks of trout farmers producing a large UK broodstock is already fraught with risk. To invest in such a project and then have it destroyed by predation makes it a very risky venture.

The ramifications for the rural economy too are numerous. Trout farms employ many people, both directly and indirectly, in rural areas. Restocking trout keep a flourishing fly fishing industry going , bringing extra money in to the local economy in terms of meals and accommodation etc.

Many rivers are now no longer being stocked because the trout are so likely to be predated before an angler even has a chance of catching them and many anglers are now reluctant to pay what can be a substantial amount for a river season ticket when they are under the illusion that all the fish will have been eaten before they get there. I read an EA report recently that said that the wild brown trout had not disappeared…They were just hiding! This is not helpful.

I come back to Food Security. Government is determined that the UK becomes as self sufficient as possible in terms of the food it produces. There is little incentive to breed trout when the risk through predation, with virtually no controls at our disposal, is so great. 99% of farmers are keen naturalists and thrilled to be working with and alongside nature but once predators get to such out of control proportions, and there is no practical defence and, in many cases, the predators are actually being actively encouraged, it is very easy to throw in the towel.

We are already working in a difficult, changing environment where climate change, the ever decreasing availability of veterinary medicines, the red tape involved in licencing suitable vaccines, Water abstraction Reform, The Water Framework Directive and many other issues are already having serious impacts on the aquaculture sector.

Predation is a huge problem, increasing the whole time. There are very few controls available for these highly protected species.

Highly protected because they are considered so rare.

That does not seem to be the case anymore, especially when their numbers are being enhanced by human intervention, whether it be deliberate introductions or the availability of an abundant free food supply. This changing scenario should be considered and acted on accordingly, especially where non lethal controls could be adopted with the help of the various governing bodies.

However, I am concerned that any legally trapped otters from fenced fisheries will be released in the immediate vicinity. I am concerned about the release of “re wilded” otters and where they go.

There is a wildlife park not a million miles away from us that have breeding otters with young each year. Where are those young going at the end of each season??? There are always new young there the following year.

Just one more thing before I finish. There is a lot of concern about the impact of salmon farming right now. I take an interest as a fish farmer and a fisherman and naturalist. Having seen seals 20 miles from the sea on the River Tay last autumn, along with the gooseanders and guillemots, which I also saw on the River Exe, I wonder if the decline in salmon is actually because the smolts never even get to sea in the first place because of the huge rise in all sorts of protected predators?

Tim Small. 2018.