

Book Reviews

The Atlantic Salmon – a Vanishing Species? by Anthony Netboy. Faber and Faber, 70s.

Mr Netboy has travelled widely, read many documents and talked to experts in many countries, so that this book is based on a great deal of information gathered from a variety of sources. He has treated the history of the Atlantic salmon resources country by country, starting with Spain and working northwards through France to the Baltic and Norway, then west to the British Isles (covered in four chapters) and further west to USA, thence northwards via Canada to Greenland, ending with Iceland. For each country, there is an account of the salmon rivers and the methods used for catching salmon, and an historical survey with statistical information.

It is sad but interesting to read how the story of exploitation of salmon stocks has followed the same pattern in different countries with the stages happening at different dates depending on the impact of the industrial revolution. Salmon migrating up rivers were first used by local people as an excellent food resource. With the development of faster transport, the fish were caught to be sold at markets in centres with large populations and this often led to over-exploitation of the runs of salmon. The industrial revolution involved the use of water power and consequently rivers were dammed preventing downstream movement of smolts as well as upstream migration of adults, thus completely interrupting the life cycle. Industrial wastes were discharged into watercourses and killed many species of fish, and salmon, with their high oxygen requirements, were especially susceptible to organic pollution. Thus over-exploitation and physical and chemical interference with rivers led to decimation of stocks and to the complete disappearance of salmon from many erstwhile productive rivers. And now the species is threatened because fishermen have learnt where some can be caught during their feeding phase in the sea – a type of exploitation which had just started when this book was written.

Mr Netboy's book should be compulsory reading for all who are interested in the conservation of valuable natural resources. As he points out, conserving salmon stocks involves rational exploitation in each river to ensure a continuing production of fish and it also involves protection of rivers along their whole lengths to allow the fish to survive and to move freely in both directions. New salmon runs can be created by opening up new spawning grounds and introducing ova into rivers without natural runs. In Sweden, wherever rivers are blocked by hydroelectric barrages, the fisheries have been conserved by rearing smolts in hatcheries and releasing them into the estuaries when they are nearly ready to move into the Baltic Sea. We know enough about its habits and physiology to protect the fish during its freshwater life. In fact, some of the necessary measures were recognised many centuries ago. Dublin Corporation may hold the proud position of being the first authority to pass an anti-pollution law – in 1466!

The latest threat is to salmon on the high seas and scientists are now arguing about the need to protect fish (at a stage when their flesh is scarcely worth eating) by forbidding drift netting. It will indeed be a scandal if political pressures lead to the disappearance of the surviving stocks of this excellent food and sport fish. Mr Netboy's figures show how rapidly stocks of salmon can dwindle and disappear and he is to be congratulated on making so much information available in a readable form.

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