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# OF FISH AND FOE

Many protesters fail to see the bigger picture, writes Simon Cooper



**I** ALWAYS FANCIED A CAREER AS A FILM critic and finally I have my chance. Sadly, it ends up more in sorrow than cinematic celebration.

Don't get me wrong. Director Andy Heathcote and producer Heike Bachelier's *Of Fish and Foe*, a fly-on-the-wall documentary about some of the last remaining salmon netmen in Scotland, is a good film. But it's downright depressing. It follows a year in the life of the Pullars, the "most hated family in Scotland" as one of the sons says of themselves, who have three estuary licences on the north-east coast. In 2018, we see them battle not only the vicissitudes of a harsh and dangerous occupation but also an animal activist group called Sea Shepherd, fishery boards that monitor the netting operations, and Salmon & Trout Conservation (Scotland). Believe me, nobody comes out of this well except perhaps the police, who are forced to referee farcical standoffs, which they do in good heart.

It is hard to feel much sympathy for the Pullar family. After all, aren't they destroying the Atlantic salmon population? They seem disorganised. They get in all sorts of verbal exchanges with the conservationists, eventually resulting in a court prosecution. They get fined £7,000 for breaching 18th-century netting regulations. They seem to get too much satisfaction in the use of their seal-culling licence, though to be fair one of them is the most amazing shot.

But were others any better? The Sea Shepherd group (a motley crew overly motivated by class animus) believed in direct action; the aim was to disrupt legal netting by legal(ish) means to the point that the Pullars gave up. In this they were to succeed, but not exactly as they planned. However, their focus on protecting seals that are not endangered (the population has tripled to 120,000 in 50 years) seemed in total contrast to their disregard for the Atlantic salmon, who clearly are.

The fishery board officials came across as either stooges or unfair actors. In an unholy alliance the

Salmon & Trout Association went to law with the help of the Sea Shepherd and Hunt Saboteurs to invoke EU legislation that eventually closed the Pullars down, who had, in true European madness, previously received a £100,000 EU grant for the netting enterprise.

At this point you feel a certain sorrow for the Pullars. Yes, they were harvesting wild salmon, but they had been doing it for countless generations; this would be a craft and a way of life that was about to die forever. As well it should, some might say, but compared to the many evils perpetrated on *Salar* in the name of international commerce theirs was minor, largely haphazard and had, for many centuries, happily existed alongside rod-and-line fishing. As the caption on the screen reminded viewers, the annual number of salmon killed by rod anglers exceeded that of the netmen in their final year of operation.

You may wonder why I'm discussing a Scottish salmon netting story in a chalkstream column but that is because the theme *Of Fish and Foe*, namely activism versus genuine conservation, could so easily be applied to our southern chalkstreams. Today we find ourselves fighting on new fronts: beavers, canoeists, and the right to roam in rivers. But these are all distractions from the real fight. The fight to preserve our chalkstreams, and the species who inhabit these precious rivers, from destruction. It is the fight that the single-issue activists choose to sidestep. They do so at their peril, for the very thing they wish to harness for their particular needs, may well be destroyed in the process.

*Of Fish and Foe* was recently released in the UK and is available on Amazon Prime TV. ■

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