

After a twenty year gap, the resumption of traditional fixed engine salmon netting on the souther shore of the Moray Firth from Gardenstown harbour is highly encouraging – not least because it comes at a time when numbers of fishermen on Scotland's east coast is at an all-time low

Report and photos by **David Linkie**

The purchase by the family run Usan Salmon Fisheries Ltd of the rights to operate bag stations from Rosehearty west to More Head has been welcomed by residents of Gardenstown, home to one of the largest ownership concentrations of fishing vessels, including midwater and prawn twin rig trawlers in Scotland.

Although the days of herring drifters landing nightly catches at Gardenstown are distant memories, the tidal harbour nestled under towering cliffs continues to be used by a sizeable fleet of seasonal static gear boats fishing for lobsters and mackerel in the summer.

The arrival earlier this year of the traditional salmon coble Usan Lass has helped increase activity around the harbour. Young netsmen John and Kevin Pullar with crewman Magnus Johnston have been welcomed, for which they express their appreciation. Fishing fixed engine stations requires netsmen to continually maintain gear: regularly washing growth off leaders and nets along with repairing nets damaged by seals and bad weather.

Having access to spare gear ashore is essential. For this purpose, Usan Salmon Fisheries has bought a former garage and compound overlooking the foreshore at

Bag net fishing returns to Gardenstown



Gamrie, which will be developed next winter to provide living accommodation during the five-month season to replace the temporary caravan.

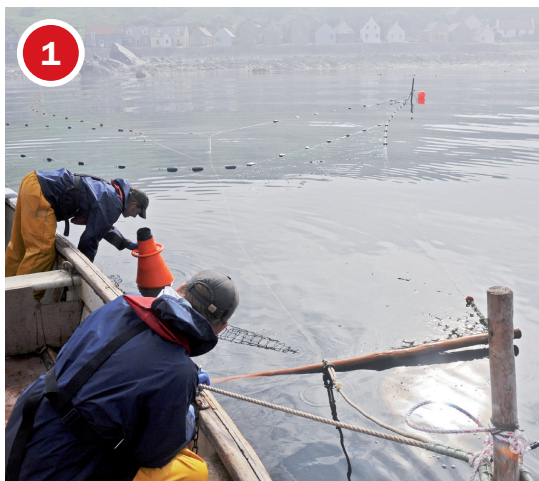
Although the operators are consolidating their knowledge of local conditions, a process expected to take a couple of seasons, early returns indicate that the fishery is capable of yielding viable catches that

stand comparison with their other locations in Scotland. Unfortunately, since starting the 2012 netting season on the east coast of Scotland has coincided with unusually prolonged run of winds, which have restricted crews from checking and changing the nets, and creating difficulties when setting and retrieving leaders. These unfavourable conditions have been compounded further by much rain which in turn has led to coloured flood water entering the sea. As a result of this, salmon, grilse and sea trout swim further offshore before entering their natal river.

While owning the rights to set fixed engine bag nets along 9.25 miles of shoreline either side of Gardenstown,

for their first season Usan Salmon Fisheries took the decision to operate in proximity to Gardenstown harbour, and build up knowledge in this area, with the help of local knowledge.

As the first flood of a spring tide surged up the entrance channel to start uprighting the ebbed out fleet of inshore boats, John Pullar headed towards the



1: John Pullar sees no sign of life in the first net set close in to the unique foreshore hamlet of Crovie



2: Approaching the second bag net of the morning near Troup Head

Magnus Johnston holds the best fish of the morning



1: A 5kg salmon comes to the surface of the fish court



2: The distinctive Scottish Wild Salmon tag



3: Inshore static gear boats wait for the incoming tide in Gardenstown harbour

first bag net, less than a mile to the east set close beside the hamlet of Crovie. The leader and shore side anchors of this station are secured to rocks in front of the unique terrace shoreline of traditional fishermen's of homes.

Using a viewing funnel to check for signs of life in the fish court, avoiding the need to release the 4m wooden staff and haul the bottom of the bag to the surface, resulted in John Pullar declaring a blank and putting the motor into gear to go to the Peter net 200m away.

Designed for catching salmon and sea trout in close to shore, traditional fixed engine bag nets are in effect a floating fish trap, consisting of one or more fish courts and associated incales and wings, together with a leader net designed to lead the salmon into the trap; the whole of which is fixed or moored to the shore or seabed.

The design concept of bag nets has remained virtually unchanged since similar types of fish traps were first used 200 years ago.

A bag net is an elongated diamond, in which a short leader set at 90 degrees to the

longer axis is used to encourage salmon/sea trout to swim into the fish court/trap.

After being turned by the leader into the body of the bag net, fish swim into the tide and pass through the wider outer opening before entering the fish court through a stainless steel framed inner gap into the fish court itself. Constructed from 90mm mesh, the bag nets are 40-50 meshes deep. Preferably 6in mesh netting is used for the 40fm leaders, increasing to 14in when jelly-fish are prevalent.

Five single fluke anchors weighing 200kg-300kg each secure bag nets not attached to the shore (outriggers). Inshore bags are held in place with three anchors in addition to ropes secured to ring bolts cemented into rocks ashore.

On a still morning with heat from a strengthening sun beginning to burn off the fog, the second net showed welcome signs of activity. After two retaining pins were lowered through a handful of meshes fore and aft into the gunwale before a pocket of netting containing a grilse and small sea trout was brought

over the side. Opening the release lacing enabled the fish to fall onto the deck, allowing Magnus to dispatch, bleed (with a nick in the gill) and label the salmon with a distinctive Scottish Wild salmon tag.

On lifting the net clear of the holding pins, the net slipped clear back into the water as the crew raised the vertical staff before pushing it back down into the water for most of its length before tying it off once again on the top spreader.

Set at the seaward extremity of Troup Head, the net didn't need to be hauled, with the lack of activity overnight being contributed to by the quiet conditions and crystal clear water. With the remaining three nets set under More Head, west of Gardenstown,

Usan Lass headed crossed Gamrie Bay towards another net. Strong swirls and glimpses of silver as John brought Usan up to the fish court raised expectations of a better return. While a gleaming freshly run 5kg salmon was welcome, unfortunately it was unaccompanied.

Just 400m to the west, the Middle net yielded a second grilse. While lying alongside the bag with the engine off, an occasional high pitched sound was audible - this was an acoustic seal scarer, which Usan Salmon Fisheries were trialling on behalf of the Sea Mammal Research Unit to implement better management of seals.

On arriving at the March net, a waterproof box

containing two heavy duty 12v batteries was floating close to a large buoy on the seaward side of the fish court. A transducer emitting a high frequency randomly timed ping was suspended a fathom below the surface from the buoy, linked to the floating battery box by armoured cable.

Since reopening the Gardenstown bag net fishery, netsmen have been plagued by marauding seals, which after 20 years of having sole rights to migratory fish in the bay, have been causing widespread damage to gear and trapped fish on a daily basis.

In keeping records on the numbers of live and damaged fish taken from each net, early indications are that the seal scarer is proving effective and is available in addition to the netsmen being licenced by Marine Scotland to shoot seals close to their nets, although the system price tag of £5,000 is considerable.

To reduce seal damage, Usan Salmon Fisheries have modified their nets to make them more resistant to seals. Bag floors and sides are constructed from 4mm braided 90mm mesh netting to prevent seals from tearing the net before attacking fish. Doublers are used to square off the corners of the court so salmon cannot get trapped in the previously narrow tapering pocket of netting accessible from outside the bag.

To prevent seals from swimming through the small inner door into the court before feeding on fish captive inside, rigid stainless steel frames are used to create 6 x 6.5 inch x 14in panels. By replacing the plastic door bars, the narrow openings, which are wide enough to allow the biggest class of salmon to swim freely in, are proving adequate to all attempts by seals to tear the opening apart.

Having made considerable investment in developing their business and creating further long-term employment, Usan Salmon Fisheries continue to liaise closely with Marine Scotland to ensure long-term management and sustainability.

Earlier in 2012, the Usan Station operated a catch and release scheme in conjunction with Marine Scotland in which a pre-agreed weekly total of fish were released back into the sea after electronic tracking devices were inserted in them. This work will continue until 2014 and it is hoped that the results of these tagging experiments will yield a valuable insight into the behaviour of these highly prized fish.