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Anadromous and Catadromous  
Fish Committee

Sven Sømme's approach to the high seas fishery  
for Atlantic Salmon

by

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The late Sven Sømme of Norway was a charming man whose life was devoted to the salmon. In 1950 he was elected Chairman of the Salmon and Trout Committee in succession to Knut Dahl, the well known Norwegian scientist, whose assistant Sømme had been for some time.

At the annual meeting of the Council in Copenhagen in 1950 Sømme read a communication on the subject of salmon fishing in international waters outside the Baltic. Unfortunately his communication was not recorded but I well remember the discussions which took place on that occasion in the Salmon and Trout Committee. Sømme mentioned he thought that there was a feeding ground in international waters off the north coast of Norway and argued "that in order to prevent the complete destruction of stocks of Atlantic Salmon these fish should be protected against commercial fishing in international waters outside the Baltic"<sup>1</sup>. The Committee felt, however, that whilst there might be some evidence in favour of the proposal, further information was required before the matter could be usefully considered. As a compromise the Committee, according to its report, requested " the Council to appoint a Sub-Committee to consider and report upon the desirability of protecting commercial fishing for the Atlantic Salmon

in international waters outside the Baltic"<sup>1</sup>.

The word "protecting" in the resolution was perhaps unfortunate but it arose through a mishap. Sømme had been invited to lecture to anglers, I think, in Odense, and having duly prepared the report of the Salmon and Trout Committee he departed for Odense. However, his manuscript was lost so I, with some others, had to write a report. Whether or not my bad handwriting was responsible the word protecting was substituted by prohibiting and none of us at that stage noticed the mistake. So the imperfect report was sent to the Consultative Committee for examination. Whether this mistake made any difference I do not know. In any case everyone knew what was intended.

As is well known the procedure at the Council is that all recommendations for committees are submitted to the Consultative Committee, made up of chairman of all subject, area or species committees, and that body advises the Council, as to what should be done in a particular case. In this case the Consultative Committee accepted the recommendation of the Salmon and Trout Committee and proposed to the Council that a Sub-Committee, consisting of E. M. Poulsen of the Danish Biological Station, R. S. Wimpenny of the Lowestoft Fisheries Research Station, subsequently Chairman of the Consultative Committee from 1952 to 1957 and Sømme, should be established to consider the question<sup>2</sup>. This course of action was approved by the Council at its final meeting on 10 October 1950<sup>3</sup>.

Between the 1950 and 1951 meetings of the Council a questionnaire was sent out to salmon experts of the different European countries inviting comments on various aspects of the problem. It is not proposed to discuss these replies but merely to state that Sømme gave members of the Salmon and Trout Committee at the Amsterdam meeting of the Council in October 1951 a short report<sup>4</sup> on the work done by the Sub-Committee and suggested that special attention should be paid by the Salmon and Trout Committee to the collection of:-

1. More effective statistics relating to salmon catches;
2. Evidence of feeding grounds for salmon in the open sea and
3. Data relating to the mortality of salmon in the open sea.

The Council's Sub-Committee concluded its deliberations on 6 October 1951 and its report is<sup>5</sup> worth quoting in full as follows:

Report of the Sub-Committee on the Salmon Fishery International waters.

We have carefully examined the answers to a questionnaire sent out to the salmon experts of various European countries, and as a result of a consideration of the answers and of the literature on the subject, we find it possible to come to a short agreed conclusion on this matter. In addition Mr Sømme has expressed and defined his own especial attitude to the subject in the Addendum.

Although we had at first in mind the summarising of contemporary salmon legislation by Mr Sømme and the preparation of a note on the causes of mortality in salmon by Dr Poulsen, we found later that the answers to our questionnaire were such to make these contributions superfluous at the present stage.

The heads of our conclusions are as follows:

1. The only known occurrence of salmon in fair numbers in international waters outside the Baltic is that reported by M. R. Vibert for the mackerel grounds S.W. of the British Isles.

Otherwise there is no evidence of feeding grounds in international waters, nor is there any substantial fishery in such waters far off-shore in the N.W. Atlantic area.

2. With the possible exception of the area S.W. of the British Isles there is probably no danger to salmon stocks as a result of the fishery of international waters.
3. If the presence of substantial numbers of salmon should be found in the Atlantic area we are not of the opinion that they must at once be the object of restrictive legislation. This is because these grounds may well receive contributions from salmon of virgin and underfished river areas as well as those from well-fished districts, and also because, in the Baltic, where the greater part of the catch is taken from feeding grounds in international waters far from the shore, the species is not thought to be over-exploited.
4. We are not satisfied that the decline in the catch of salmon that has taken place in recent years has been entirely due to fishing.
5. Notwithstanding the conclusions in paragraphs 1 and 2, it cannot be denied that a dangerous situation may arise in special places and the situation should be kept under constant review. In order to do this it will be necessary for more effective statistics to be collected. In making the present report we have been much hindered by the defective nature of the catch statistics from some countries and we strongly

recommend that the matters referred to in this paragraph be brought to the attention of the Salmon and Trout and Statistical Committees.

6. The answers to the questionnaire show that little or no knowledge exists as to questions 2 (mortality in the open sea) and 3 (feeding areas in international waters outside the Baltic). As knowledge of this kind would be important for a consideration of the relative danger to the salmon stock of fisheries in international waters, in coastal waters and in freshwater we recommend that the Salmon and Trout Committee should consider possible means and methods for the acquirement of such knowledge.

(sgd.) R. S. Wimpenny, E.M. Poulsen,  
Sven Sømme.

Amsterdam, October 6th, 1951.

Although Sømme actually signed the report of the Sub-Committee he made a special statement<sup>5</sup> which is again worth quoting in full as follows:-

Special Statement

by

Sven Sømme

Every country possessing a stock of salmon has restrictive laws for the purpose of conserving the salmon runs. If these laws did not exist the salmon runs would have been depleted in almost every civilised country by over-fishing inside territorial waters.

In fact all salmon countries take active steps to conserve their fish in order to maintain and if possible increase the up-river runs. They construct fish ladders, operate hatcheries, control pollution, and attempt to restrict and punish the unlawful capture of salmon. They all aim at securing the optimum catch of salmon by allowing sufficient fish to reach the spawning grounds.

The salmon after feeding in the open sea return to their native country and stream to spawn. The size of the salmon runs and the maintenance of the stock depends entirely upon the success of the laws and cultural work in each country and of the nature of each particular country's streams and rivers.

The statistics relating to the capture of Atlantic salmon are very incomplete in most countries. Few are able to present accurate figures as to the amount of salmon caught in various years. It is still more difficult to obtain figures to prove over-fishing or under-fishing or that the optimum catch has been secured.

We know that the salmon has disappeared from the Rhine, some French rivers, some rivers on the coast of Maine and other areas and that extensive work has been undertaken in order to re-establish the runs.

Moreover Dr. W F Thompson has been able to show that fishing has depleted or distorted runs of the Pacific salmon in the U.S.A. and Alaska. But the Sub-Committee appointed by the Consultative Committee to review the plight of the Atlantic salmon in the open sea has failed to produce evidence of overfishing or of danger to the stock of salmon in Europe outside the Baltic and to examine whether it is considered desirable to protect the salmon owing to exploitation in the open sea. The material presented from Norway may be considered as a proof that over-fishing is taking place in that country and restrictions applied to some of the rivers have led to a considerable increase in the catches therefrom. Finally M. R. Vibert has informed the Committee that 130 salmon were caught in the open sea by French mackerel drifters in 1948. Otherwise it has been impossible for the Sub-Committee to present scientific evidence either for or against the existence of any over-fishing of Atlantic salmon or any danger to the stock from fishing in international waters.

I have signed the Report of the Sub-Committee stating these facts, as I can see that a strictly scientific body such as the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea can take no steps to secure restrictions that are not securely based on scientific evidence.

However, I do not in any way feel confident that there is no danger to the stock of salmon from over-fishing in the open sea or outside national waters, and it is my sincere belief that no country possessing and taking care of a stock of salmon of her own would care to see it exploited in international waters beyond the control of restrictions. If such exploitation should be started there are no means of stopping it, as it is evident to all that it is a very difficult matter to obtain international agreement on such restrictions.

The Sub-Committee has asked that the attention of the Salmon and Trout Committee should be drawn to this matter so that the situation may be watched closely in future and an attempt be made to gather material to show us where we are. Nevertheless I am concerned over the situation as a whole, and I feel we would have advanced a very important step if we had been able to agree that the development of salmon fishing in international waters is undesirable. The opinion is based on the probability that, despite the lack of proof, the stocks are already being fully exploited or over-exploited and on the assumption that each country is able to tax its own stock of salmon so as to obtain the optimum catch, and that the maintenance of a stock of salmon in any country is due to the amount of success derived from salmon laws and conservation measures.

Amsterdam, October 6th 1951

Some's statement in 1951 has a familiar ring about it and would not have been out of place in any of the recent discussions of the problem of the high seas fishery for salmon at the North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission (NEAFC) or

the International Commission for the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries (ICNAF) of the problem of the high seas fishery for salmon.

My sole purpose in writing this note is to draw attention to Somme's foresight in bringing this matter to the notice of the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea at a time when the high seas fishery for salmon in the North Atlantic was not a problem, nor in the minds of many experienced people ever likely to be.

REFERENCES

1. Rapports et Proces-Verbaux des Réunions. 129. 44
2. Ibid. 129 26-7
3. Ibid. 129 12
4. Ibid. 130 29
5. Ibid. 130 APP.B 21-22