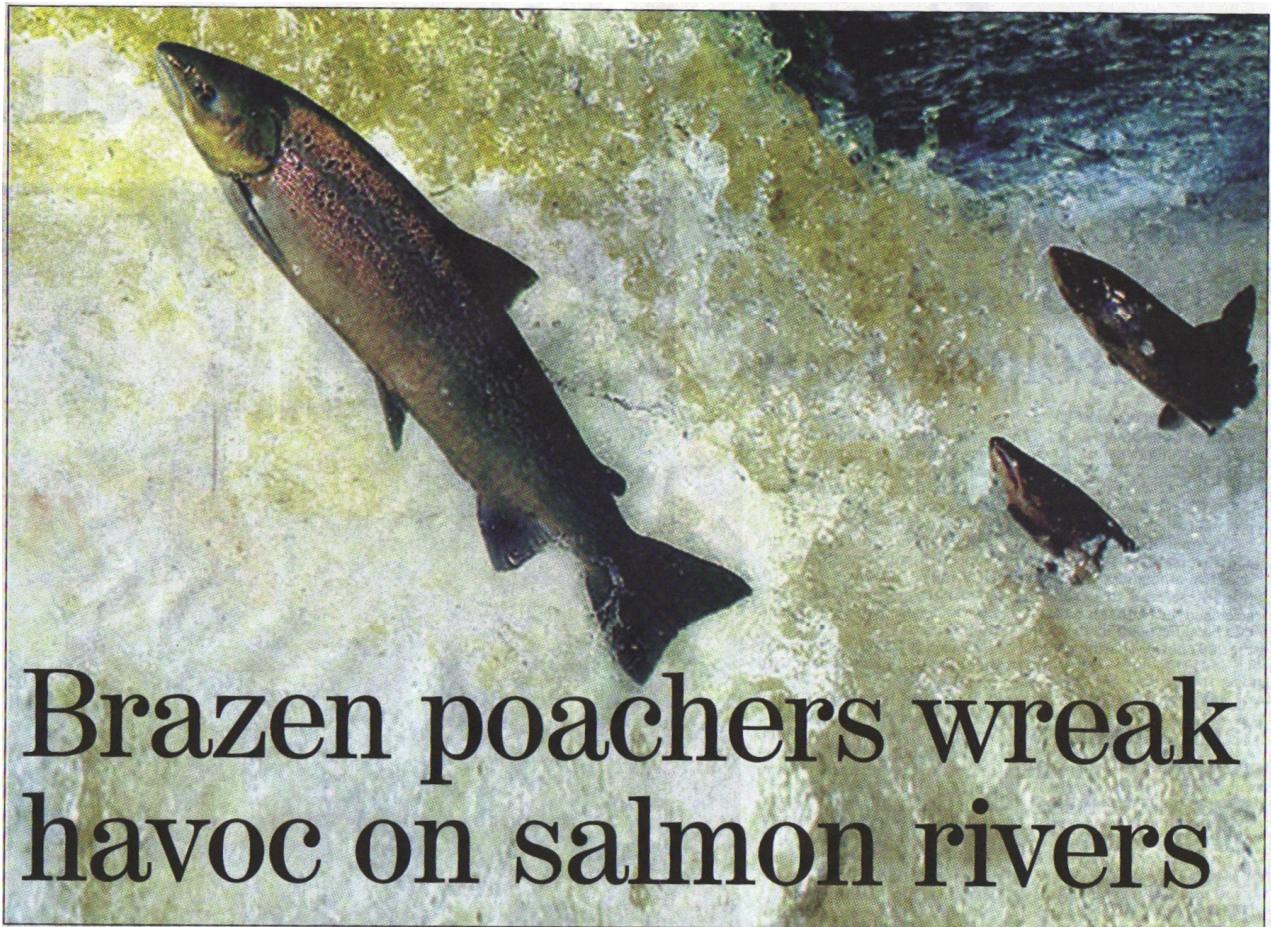


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By **Linda Stewart, Environment Correspondent**

Almost all the salmon have been stripped from the Queen of the Glens, thanks to poaching.

That's the warning from anglers who say action against poachers netting the Glenariff River in broad daylight is overdue. Meanwhile, salmon running the nearby Dun River have plummeted from around 500 fish 20 years ago to 40 last year. Poachers in Donegal threatened to poison the drinking water supply of more than 50,000 after telling bailiffs to "back off". Gardai stepped up patrols on the Pollan Dam in the Inishowen Peninsula after anglers and bailiffs patrolling the River Crana were threatened.

This week, police said poaching at the Glenariff River, which thunders down through the Glens of Antrim, is such a problem that stocks could be reduced. Officers have been called to investigate poaching at the Glenariff near Waterfoot in recent weeks. A PSNI spokesman said: "This is becoming a big problem in this area, and will affect river stocks. Local bailiffs and police are appealing for public assistance."

However, local anglers say the police warning seriously understates the scale of the problem, saying salmon stocks have undergone massive declines in the rivers Dun, Dall and Glenariff. Glens of Antrim Angling Club chairman Frank McDonagh said salmon stocks can no longer recover without outside help. The club has pumped huge amounts of money into the rivers to

look after them and rebuild the stock but their efforts have been stymied by poachers who use nets to fish the endangered species out of the pools. "Twenty years ago you would have expected about 500 salmon on the River Dun. A fish counter has been put in the river by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) over the last four years — first it registered 95 fish, then the next year it was 74, then it was 68 and last year only 40 fish ran the River Dun," he said. "There has always been a poaching problem on the Glenariff River and we're seeing detrimental effects on the whole system. We're trying to do something about it — we have banned people catching and killing fish. They all have to be returned to the river."

Each year the club releases 100,000 young salmon into the Dun, but there are reports of at least 20 known poaching incidents a year. It doesn't help that there are both legal and illegal nets placed in the sea near the mouths of the rivers emerging from the glens, as well as a local tradition of illegal angling.

Tom O'Neill of O'Neill's Country Sports in Cushendun said: "This has been going on for years. The poaching is starting to drop off now because there are virtually no fish left," he said.

A spokesperson for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure said: "DCAL are keen to receive actionable intelligence regarding suspected illegal fishing, and encourage people to contact the local DCAL fisheries office or, in emergency, the hotline 0800 80 70 60.

Illegal netting carried out in broad daylight

Gone is the image of the poacher as a shadowy figure who slips through the trees under cover of darkness. Instead poachers will march up the banks of the Glens rivers in broad daylight, safe in the knowledge that there simply isn't the manpower to keep the area properly patrolled. The newer breed of poacher travels by car from much further afield before laying his nets so that there is little chance of passing salmon or trout escaping.

Tom O'Neill of O'Neill's Country Sports in Cushendun said: "You get people coming up in cars, four or five of them, and they net different stretches of the river — quite boldly during the daytime. It is totally illegal. "The local club policy is to catch and release any salmon but they can't police this all by themselves." It's easy for poachers to get away with plying their trade in the Glenariff River because there are so many secluded riverbank spots well away from the road. It doesn't take long to throw in a net and leave the bank again. Illegal nets are also placed in the sea near the mouths of the rivers to intercept migrating fish.

Frank McDonough, who chairs the Glens of Antrim Angling Club, said: "We get more organised poachers, especially from Belfast, who pitch nets into the pools and they also throw boulders into the pool to scare the fish and make them swim into the nets. "We're finding it hard to stop it. Glenariff is the worst of the rivers for poaching. There is a lovely path which goes up most of it and people don't tend to get seen from local houses."

He added: "I'm not sure whether anyone has ever been prosecuted — if so it was a few years ago. People have to know that this is going on."

Read more: <http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/environment/poachers-wreak-havoc-on-salmon-rivers-14933869.html#ixzz0yaVl1OBP>