

University accused of misinformation with salmon statement

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Photo: JaneM

The University of St Andrews had to fend off claims that it misled the nation last week, when it released questionable figures about the number of wild salmon being killed by sea lice.

The disagreement was a result of a University press release, which claimed that results pointed to 39% of wild salmon being killed by the parasites.

A backlash by the Scottish Salmon Producers' Organisation (SSPO) ensued. It claimed that the aforementioned figure was inaccurate, and that real numbers of salmon being killed by sea lice were approximately 1-2%.

The University claimed to “stand by its research and press release”, despite calls by the SSPO, who represent salmon farmers in Scotland, for Principal Louise Richardson to issue an apology with immediate effect. The SSPO's chairman,

Professor Phil Thomas, told *The Herald*: “The effects of sea lice on the ocean mortality of wild salmon are very small, representing about 1% to 2%, rather than the 39% that was claimed in the media statement. This is consistent in both the previous scientific studies and their data.”

“To make these wholly incorrect and unjustifiable claims damages both the scientific reputation of the

individuals concerned and the institution. I am entirely at a loss to understand how a reputable university like St Andrews can have become embroiled in a process of public misinformation of this type,” he added.

Amid the strong sentiment conveyed by the SSPO, a spokesperson for the University re-stipulated its support for the findings of the paper, and said: “The central, unequivocal finding of this research paper, as presented in our press release, is that parasites such as sea lice are responsible for an average of 39% of all salmon deaths at sea. We reject Professor Thomas’s substantial and unwarranted comments on the University of St Andrews.”

The press release did point to the number of free-ranging salmon killed as a result of sea lice, to be “unexpectedly large”. However, it went on to detail how these could be attributed to cross-infection of wild fish by captive salmon: “...these results do emphasise the need for the industry to not only maintain the health of their own stocks, but also to minimise the risk of cross-infection of wild fish.”

A Scottish Government spokesperson told *The Courier* that the University’s findings on the impact of the parasites on wild salmon were welcomed, and that the study would be given “careful consideration.”