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Opening Extract from...

Salmon Fishing in the Yemen

Written by Paul Torday

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I

The origins of the Yemen Salmon Project

Fitzharris & Price
Land Agents & Consultants
St James's Street
London

Dr Alfred Jones
National Centre for Fisheries Excellence
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Smith Square
London

15 May

Dear Dr Jones

We have been referred to you by Peter Sullivan at the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (Directorate for Middle East and North Africa). We act on behalf of a client with access to very substantial funds, who has indicated his wish to sponsor a project to introduce salmon, and the sport of salmon fishing, into the Yemen.

We recognise the challenging nature of such a project, but we have been assured that the expertise exists within your organisation to research and project manage such work, which of course would bring international recognition and very ample compensation for any fisheries scientists who

became involved. Without going into any further details at this time, we would like to seek a meeting with you to identify how such a project could be initiated and resourced, so that we may report back to our client and seek further instructions.

We wish to emphasise that this is regarded by our client, who is a very eminent Yemeni citizen, as a flagship project for his country. He has asked us to make clear that there will be no unreasonable financial constraints. The Foreign & Commonwealth Office supports this project as a symbol of Anglo-Yemeni cooperation.

Yours sincerely

(Ms) Harriet Chetwode-Talbot

National Centre for Fisheries Excellence
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Smith Square
London

Ms Harriet Chetwode-Talbot
Fitzharris & Price
Land Agents & Consultants
St James's Street
London

Dear Ms Chetwode-Talbot

Dr Jones has asked me to thank you for your letter dated 15 May and reply as follows.

Migratory salmonids require cool, well-oxygenated water in which to spawn. In addition, in the early stages of the salmon life cycle, a good supply of fly life indigenous to

northern European rivers is necessary for the juvenile salmon parr to survive. Once the salmon parr evolves into its smolt form, it then heads downriver and enters saltwater. The salmon then makes its way to feeding grounds off Iceland, the Faroes or Greenland. Optimum sea temperatures for the salmon and its natural food sources are between 5 and 10 degrees Celsius.

We conclude that conditions in the Yemen and its geographical location relatively remote from the North Atlantic make the project your client has proposed unfeasible, on a number of fundamental grounds. We therefore regret we will be unable to help you any further in this matter.

Yours sincerely

Ms Sally Thomas (Assistant to Dr Jones)

Office of the Director, National Centre for Fisheries Excellence

From: David Sugden

To: Dr Alfred Jones

Subject: Fitzharris & Price/Salmon/Yemen

Date: 3 June

Alfred

I have just received a call from Herbert Berkshire, who is private secretary to the parliamentary under secretary of state at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

The FCO view is very clear that this project is to be given our fullest consideration. Notwithstanding the very real practical difficulties in the proposal from Fitzharris & Price, of which as your director I am fully aware, the FCO feel

that we should seek to give what support we can to this project.

Given the recent reductions in grant-in-aid funding for NCFE, we should not be too hasty to decline work which apparently connects us to excellent private sector funding sources.

Yours
David

Memo

From: Alfred Jones

To: Director, NCFE

Subject Salmon/Yemen

Date: 3 June

David

I appreciate the points you have raised in your memo of today's date. Having given the matter my fullest consideration, I remain unable to see how we could help Fitzharris & Price and their client. The prospect of introducing salmon to the wadis of the Hadramawt seems to me, quite frankly, risible.

I am quite prepared to back this up with the relevant science, should anyone at the FCO require further information on our grounds for not proceeding.

Alfred

Office of the Director, National Centre for Fisheries Excellence

From: David Sugden

To: Dr Alfred Jones

Subject: Salmon/Yemen

Date: 4 June

Dr Jones

Please accept this memo as my formal instruction to proceed to the next stage of the Yemen salmon project with Fitzharris & Price. I would like you to meet Ms Harriet Chetwode-Talbot and receive a full briefing, following which you are to develop and cost an outline scope of work for this project for me to review and forward to the FCO.

I take full responsibility for this decision

David Sugden

From: Fred.jones@ncfe.gov.uk

Date: 4 June

To: David.Sugden@ncfe.gov.uk

Subject: Yemen Salmon Project

David

Can we talk about this? I'll pop round to your office after the departmental meeting.

Alfred

From: Fred.jones@ncfe.gov.uk

Date: 4 June

To: Mary.jones@interfinance.org

Subject: Job

Darling

I am being put under unreasonable pressure by David Sugden to put my name to some totally insane project dreamed up by the FCO to do with salmon being introduced into the Yemen. There have been memos flying around on this for days and I suppose I thought it was so bizarre I didn't even mention it to you last time we spoke. I popped into David S's office just now and said, 'Look, David, be reasonable. This project is not only totally absurd and scientifically nonsensical, but if we allow our name to be involved no one in the fisheries world will ever take us seriously again.'

Sugden was totally stone-faced. He said (pompously), 'This one is coming from higher up. It isn't just some minister at the FCO with a bee in his bonnet. It goes all the way to the top. You've had my instruction. Please get on with it.'

I have not been spoken to like that since I left school. I am seriously considering handing in my resignation.

Love

Fred

PS When are you back from your management training course?

From: Mary.jones@interfinance.org

Date: 4 June

To: Fred.jones@ncfe.gov.uk

Subject: Financial realities

Fred

My annual salary is £75,000 gross and yours is £45,561. Our combined net of tax monthly income is £7333 out of which our mortgage takes £3111, rates, food and other household expenses a further £1200, and that's before we think about car costs, holidays, and your fishing extravagances.

Resign your job? Don't be a prat.

Mary

PS I am home on Thursday but I have to leave on Sunday for New York for a conference on Sarbanes-Oxley.

Memo

From: Andrew MacFadzean, principal private secretary to the secretary of state for foreign and commonwealth affairs

To: Herbert Berkshire, private secretary to the parliamentary under secretary of state, FCO

Subject: Salmon/Yemen Project

Herbert

Our masters tell us this project should be pushed on a bit. The sponsor is not a UK citizen, but the project can be presented as a template for Anglo-Yemeni cooperation, which of course has wider implications for perceptions of UK involvement in the Middle East.

I think you could quietly drop a word in the ear of David Sugden, whom I believe is the director of the fisheries people

at DEFRA, that a successful outcome to this project might attract the attention of the committee putting forward recommendations for the next New Year honours list. Equally it is only fair to point out that an unsuccessful outcome might make it difficult to defend NCFE against further cuts in grant funding in the next round of negotiations with the Treasury for the new financial year. This might help get the right messages across. We have, of course, talked at a senior level to the appropriate people in DEFRA.

Keep this off the record.

Lunch at the club at 1 p.m. tomorrow?

Yrs

Andy

Memo

From: Director of communications, prime minister's office

To: Dr Mike Ferguson, director veterinary, food & aquatic sciences, Chief Scientists' Group

Subject: Yemen salmon project

Mike

This is the sort of initiative that the prime minister really, really likes. We want some broad-brush comments on feasibility from you. We do not require anyone to say absolutely that it would work, only that there is no reason for not trying.

Peter

Memo

From: Dr Michael Ferguson, director veterinary food & aquatic sciences, Chief Scientists' Group

To: Peter Maxwell, director of communications, prime minister's office

Subject: Yemen salmon project

Dear Mr Maxwell

Monthly average rainfall in the western mountains of the Yemen is around 400 millimetres in each of the summer months, and mean temperatures at elevations above 2000 metres fall to a range of between 7 and 27 degrees Celsius. This is not uncharacteristic of British summer weather and therefore we conclude that for short periods of the year conditions exist, particularly in the western provinces of the Yemen, which are not necessarily inimical to migratory salmonids.

We therefore speculate that a model based on the artificial release and introduction of salmonids into the wadi systems for *short periods of the year*, linked to a programme of trapping the salmon and returning them to cooler, saline water during other periods of the year, would not be an inappropriate starting point for a modelling exercise to be carried out by the departments with the relevant expertise. I believe NCFE is the most appropriate organisation for this.

I hope this brief note is sufficient for your purposes at this stage?

Yrs

Michael Ferguson

PS Have we met?

Memo

From: Director of communications, prime minister's office

To: Dr Mike Ferguson, director veterinary, food & aquatic sciences, Chief Scientists' Group

Subject: Yemen salmon project

Mike

That's great. No, we haven't met, but I look forward to it some day soon.

Peter

Memo

From: Peter

To: Prime minister

Subject: Yemen salmon project

PM

You will really like this. It presses a lot of different buttons:

- positive and innovative environmental messages
- sporting (cultural?) links to a Middle Eastern country not as yet closely aligned with UK interests
- secular Western technology bringing improvements to an Islamic state
- a big, positive news story that will take front-page space away from less constructive news items coming out of Iraq, Iran and Saudi

A great photo opportunity: you standing in a wadi with a rod in one hand and a salmon in the other – what an image that would be!

Peter