

# Green Scene: Wild vs. Farmed Salmon

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[Title in Tri-City News: Salmon don't love dry weather - or farm fish]

This sunny autumn has been delightful for the human inhabitants of the lower mainland. But local streams are suffering without their normal top-ups of rainfall. Climatologists tell us global warming will bring an extended period of summer drought to coastal BC. Surely, this is what we are now experiencing. By late summer, salmon gather in Burrard Inlet and the mouth of the Fraser River to wait for the fresh water inflows that tell them their natal streams hold sufficient water for spawning. So far, this signal has not come. The longer they must wait, the less fit they will be for their final act.

As if global warming were not trouble enough, our wild salmon face another growing threat, namely, farmed salmon. Twenty years ago, salmon farming was touted by some as a salvation for wild salmon because farmed production, it was thought, could relieve fishing pressure on wild populations. Now we know better – or, at least, we should. Wherever salmon have been farmed around the world – off the coasts of Scotland, Norway, Chile or BC, it has created problems that remain unresolved and continues to place wild populations at risk.

Atlantic salmon, the only salmon species capable of adapting well to a caged existence, are held in large pens along the coast where they are fed fish pellets for months on end. These facilities are like offshore hog barns; feces and uneaten pellets accumulate on the ocean floor, smother marine life and promote harmful algae blooms. Salmon are carnivores so it makes as little economic sense to farm them as it would to raise cattle for lion feed and then sell only lion meat for human consumption. People should eat the herring and sardines that are, instead, turned into fish pellets.

Occasionally, caged salmon escape. Initially, fishery officers said it was impossible for these alien salmon to survive and breed here. Like so many of the statements made about Atlantic salmon, this is wrong. Atlantic salmon have now been found in over 80 BC streams, including the Coquitlam River and breed in at least 3 of them - to date.

By far the worse problem is the transmission of sea lice from Atlantic salmon caged along migration corridors to young salmon that are killed by the attachment of only a few lice. Prior to salmon farming, juvenile salmon were never exposed to dangerous levels of sea lice. Some pink salmon runs in the Broughton Archipelago near Knight Inlet were almost eliminated by these lice infestations. The evidence was first gathered by Alexandra Morton who studies orcas there. Fisheries officers discounted her data and denied this was happening. Recent scientific studies proved Morton was right.

In an attempt to control lice infestations, salmon farmers are allowed to add an unregistered chemical to salmon feed. This chemical, available only on an “emergency basis”, is toxic to birds and aquatic organisms, disrupts the life cycles of lobsters and shrimps and requires several months to degrade in the marine environment.

Apart from the problems farmed salmon cause for wild salmon, they are not especially good to eat. Farmed salmon carry higher levels of pollutants such as PCBs and dioxins than do wild salmon. The flesh of farmed salmon would be a pasty grey without artificial colouring. In “A Stain Upon the Sea - West Coast Salmon Farming” (available in local libraries), Morton describes how surprised she was to see marauding racoons refuse to eat the fresh Atlantic salmon she left unattended on her boat. If hungry racoons have enough sense to decline farmed salmon, then, perhaps, we should too.

*Last spring, the provincial government established a Special Committee on Sustainable Aquaculture to examine the economic and environmental impacts of the aquaculture industry in BC ([www.leg.bc.ca/cmt](http://www.leg.bc.ca/cmt)). This Committee is soliciting public input until October 31. They can be reached at the Office of the Clerk of the Committees, Room 224, Parliament Buildings, Victoria, BC, V8V 1X4 or [aquaculture@leg.ca](mailto:aquaculture@leg.ca).*