

Green Scene: Standing up for Wild Salmon

by Elaine Golds

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A couple of weekends ago, one of my heroes came to town. Alexandra (Alex) Morton, a biologist who for more than two decades has been ringing alarm bells about impacts of the farmed salmon industry on wild salmon, spoke to a crowd of people when the film, *Salmon Confidential*, was shown in Port Moody. *Salmon Confidential* provides an update on Alex's most recent efforts to identify a number of viruses which appear to be having impacts on wild salmon.

I should say at the outset that I am also an opponent of salmon farms along our coast. These farms raise huge quantities of Atlantic salmon which are often sold as "fresh salmon" in some grocery stores. These farms appear to be little more than salmon feedlots which contaminate the sea floor wherever they are located with feces and pharmaceuticals used in attempts to keep various diseases under control. These fish must be fed a chemical dye to turn their gray flesh a healthy-looking pink. Because salmon are carnivorous fish, they require up to 8 kilograms of fish meal (derived from wild fish caught elsewhere) to create 1 kilogram of edible salmon. To my mind, nothing about farming salmon makes any environmental sense.

(L-R) Port Moody Councillor Rick Glumac with Alexandra Morton, filmmaker Tywla Roscovich and former parliamentary page, Brigette DePape (Stop Harper) at the Port Moody showing of *Salmon Confidential*.
Twyla Roscovich photo.



Wherever the salmon farming industry has established itself around the world, deleterious impacts on wild fish have followed. Surely, if there is any place in the world where we should

be cautious about introducing fish farms, it should be our Pacific coast with its several species of wild salmon which are truly keystone species in our west coast ecology. Studies estimate that at least 137 other species depend on abundant runs of wild salmon to survive. These include resident orcas, seals, sea lions, coastal wolves, bears, eagles and of course, people. Research has shown that even our coastal forests are fertilized by the decaying bodies of wild salmon.

When Alex came to BC in 1984, she had no idea of the direction her life would take. She and her late husband had come to study orcas. They set up a monitoring station in Echo Bay in the Broughton Archipelago between

the mainland and Vancouver Island. Shortly after, the government announced plans to introduce fish farms to the area. Right from the beginning, things got off to a bad start. Although local fisherman identified which areas were especially important to them for fishing, it was these exact locations that were allowed by government to be used as sites for fish farms. In 1989, when a large run of chum salmon returned to the nearby Viner River, most of these chum mysteriously died before they spawned. As Alex writes in her chapter of “*A Stain upon the Sea*”, it was only years later that she learned salmon farms in the area had big problems that same year with a bacterial kidney disease and tests undertaken at that time showed that 100% of chum salmon infected with the bacteria died. Oddly, DFO (the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans) failed to investigate; what killed the chum remains a mystery.

By 1993, another bacterial disease, furunculosis, was affecting salmon farms in the area. Salmon farms in Scotland and Norway were already suffering significant mortalities from this disease. Despite this, DFO allowed eggs to be imported from Scotland to BC. Once the disease was identified here, DFO allowed the salmon farmers to use erythromycin to treat it, an antibiotic normally banned for use on fish eaten by people. The next spring, the Kingcome Inlet chinook underwent a serious decline in their population which resulted in the closing of three fishing lodges. Despite many letters from Alex, DFO refused to undertake any testing which could have shown a linkage between the strain of furunculosis on nearby fish farm and the sick chinook.

It was becoming obvious to Alex that DFO was failing to take the necessary precautions to protect wild BC salmon. Her experience of the past two decades has shown over and over again that decisions taken at the upper levels of DFO are compromised by a management which strongly supports fish farms, pays a callous disregard for wild salmon and has muzzled their own scientists, including Dr. Kristi Miller. Meanwhile, the number of diseases which appear to have been introduced to this coast through salmon farms is continually increasing.

For more than two decades, Alex Morton has been an exemplary citizen scientist collecting data about diseased fish that surely should be the responsibility of DFO. She has been thwarted in her efforts by the secrecy of the fish farmers who refuse to make the public the diseases their salmon are introducing into coastal waters and by threats and roadblocks thrown up by DFO. *Salmon Confidential* is available online at www.salmonconfidential.ca. All those who care about our coast should view it.