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Salmon Confidential—How a Canadian Government Cover-Up Threatens Your Health, and the Entire Ecosystem

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By Dr. Mercola

Many environmental experts have warned about the unsustainability of fish farms for a decade now, and we have documented those objections in many previous articles. Unfortunately nothing has yet been done to improve the system.

As usual, government agencies and environmental organizations around the world turned a blind eye to what was predicted to become an absolute disaster, and now the ramifications can be seen across the globe, including in British Columbia, Canada.

Salmon Confidential is a fascinating documentary that draws back the curtain to reveal how the Canadian government is covering up the cause behind British Columbia's rapidly dwindling wild salmon population. A summary of the film reads:¹

"When biologist Alexandra Morton discovers BC's wild salmon are testing positive for dangerous European salmon viruses associated with salmon farming worldwide, a chain of events is set off by government to suppress the findings.

Tracking viruses, Morton moves from courtrooms, into British Columbia's most remote rivers, Vancouver grocery stores and sushi restaurants.

The film documents Morton's journey as she attempts to overcome government and industry roadblocks thrown in her path and works to bring critical information to the public in time to save BC's wild salmon."

If you think watching a documentary about wild fish sounds boring, this film may well change your mind. It provides sobering insight into the inner workings of government agencies, and includes rare footage of the bureaucrats tasked with food and environmental safety.

It reveals how the very agency tasked with protecting wild salmon is *actually* working to protect the commercial aquaculture industry, to devastating effect.

Once you understand just how important wild salmon are to the entire ecosystem, you realize that what's going on here goes far beyond just protecting a fish species. Without these salmon, the entire ecosystem will eventually fail, and in case you've temporarily forgotten, you are part of this system, whether you're a Canadian or not...

'Keystone' Species Missing in Action by the Millions

As explained in the film, a "keystone" species is a species of animal that is essential to the functioning of the ecosystem. It's a species that other animals cannot survive without. In British Columbia (BC), pacific salmon are a keystone species. They fill hundreds of streams and rivers, feeding hundreds of species, including humans. Alas, since the early 1990's, salmon numbers have rapidly dwindled, coinciding with the introduction of aqua farms raising farmed salmon.

Story at-a-glance

Salmon Confidential draws back the curtain to reveal how the Canadian government is covering up the cause behind British Columbia's rapidly dwindling wild salmon populations: fish farms

In British Columbia, pacific salmon are an essential species for the ecosystem. They fill hundreds of streams and rivers, feeding hundreds of species, including humans. Since the early 1990's, salmon numbers have rapidly dwindled, coinciding with the introduction of farmed salmon pens

Fish farms breed pathogens that can spread like wildfire and contaminate any wild fish swimming past. Wild salmon that died before spawning have tested positive for a number of salmon viruses, including the highly lethal "salmon influenza"

Farmed fish, purchased in stores around British Columbia have tested positive for at least three lethal fish viruses, including the dreaded ISA virus (aka salmon flu), salmon alpha viruses, and Piscine reovirus, which causes the salmon to have a heart attack, preventing them from swimming upriver

I recommend buying locally-grown foods, and wild fish only. Fish farms are a breeding ground for disease and toxic waste, and produce fish of inferior quality. Due to the dramatically increased disease risk—a natural side effect of crowding—these animals are further contaminated with drugs, and in the case of salmon, synthetic astaxanthin, which is made from petrochemicals that are not approved for human consumption

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Each year, millions of wild salmon go missing, and many are found to have died before spawning. They can be found littering the shores of rivers and streams in BC in large numbers.

Biologist Alex Morton has followed and studied the unusual decline in salmon stocks for nearly 30 years. She noticed that as commercial fish farms moved into the area, they had a detrimental impact on wild fish. The most obvious was a dramatic rise in parasitic sea lice in juvenile salmon, which naturally do not carry the lice. But that was just the beginning.

Fish farms breed pathogens that can spread like wildfire and contaminate any wild fish swimming past. Norway has recognized this problem, and does not permit fish farms to be located in rivers or streams populated by valuable native species. In British Columbia, no such restrictions exist.

On the contrary, not only has the Department of Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) never taken the spread of disease into account when approving salmon farms in sensitive areas such as the Fraser River, the agency is actually covering up the fact that fish farms are the cause of dwindling salmon stocks.

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Wild Salmon Declines Traced Back to Salmon Farms

The film discusses the fate of Dr. Kristy Miller, head of molecular genetics at DFO, who, using DNA profiling, discovered that the fish that die before spawning have a number of DNA switched on that healthy fish do not. In a nutshell, the wild salmon are dying from leukemia, retroviruses, brain tumors, and immune system decay...

Salmon leukemia virus raged through fish farms in the area in the early 1990's when the farms were first introduced. A retrovirus, salmon leukemia virus attacks the salmon's immune system, so it dies of something else, much like the process of AIDS. At the time, it was discovered that virtually all the BC Chinook salmon farms were infected. They also discovered that the virus killed 100 percent of the wild sockeye salmon exposed to it. Yet *nothing* was done...

Instead, as soon as Dr. Miller traced the problem to fish farms, she became ostracized, and effectively put under gag order. When her findings were published in the distinguished journal *Science* in 2011, the DFO did not allow her to speak to the press, despite the fact that her findings were hailed as some of the most significant salmon research of the decade.

Two years earlier, in 2009, the Fraser River experienced the worst salmon run in recorded history. Some 10 million fish went missing, leaving traditional people living along the river without catch. In response to the public outcry, the Canadian government created the Commission of Inquiry Into the Decline of Salmon in the Fraser River, also known as the Cohen Commission. The inquiry cost \$26 million dollars and spanned across 150 days of hearings. Theories presented for the mysterious disappearance of the salmon included overfishing, sharks, water temperature, pollution, even predatory giant squid!

It wasn't until the very end that attention was finally turned to the most logical source: salmon farms.

Dr. Ian Fleming testified about Norway's discovery that fish farms are a source of pathogenic disease that can decimate native fish, and therefore does not permit salmon farms in certain areas frequented by wild salmon. British Columbia, in contrast, has approved at least 10 farms in one of the narrowest channels that wild sockeye salmon migrate through, and disease risk was not considered when approving any of them.

Lethal Salmon Virus Found in Every Region with Installed Salmon Farms

Dr. Rick Rutledge, professor and fisheries statistician at Simon Fraser University worried about river inlet sockeye, which were also dwindling in numbers just like Fraser River sockeye. He discovered that the river inlet sockeye were infected with Infectious Salmon Anemia Virus (ISA), also known as salmon influenza. This highly lethal and much-feared virus has proliferated in every region across the globe where Atlantic salmon farms have been installed.

First detected in Norway in 1984, infection spread to other countries via egg imports. In Chile, ISA wiped out 70 percent of the country's salmon industry, at a cost of \$2 billion. But Chile has no native salmon to decimate. British Columbia *does*... And contrary to Chile, the wild salmon of BC are absolutely critical to the ecosystem and residents of the area. The locals don't just make money off these fish; it's a main staple of their diet.

According to Morton, at least 11 species of fish in the Fraser River have been found to be infected with European-strain ISA, yet the Canadian food inspection agency has aggressively refuted the findings, and even attacked the credibility of two of the most preeminent experts on ISA testing, who testified that positive results were found to the Cohen Commission.

In fact, everyone who has spoken up about these salmon viruses, which can be traced back to salmon farms, has been shut down in some way or another. And by muzzling scientists like Dr. Miller, the Canadian government has effectively put the entire BC ecosystem at grave risk, just to protect commercial fish farming and international trade. In so doing, they're also

allowing potentially contaminated farm-raised salmon to be sold, exported, and consumed.

You May Be Buying Salmon Infected with Dangerous Fish Viruses

Morton tested farmed salmon purchased in various stores and sushi restaurants around British Columbia, and samples tested positive for at least three different salmon viruses, including:

1. Infectious Salmon Anemia Virus (ISA)
2. Salmon alphaviruses
3. Piscine reovirus, which gives salmon a heart attack and prevents them from swimming upriver

The problem with this, aside from the unknown effects on human health from eating salmon with lethal fish viruses, is that viruses are preserved by cold, and fish are always kept frozen for freshness. Then, when you wash the fish, the viruses get flushed down the drain and depending on your sewer system, could be introduced into local watersheds. The environmental impact of this viral contamination is hitherto unknown, but it's unlikely to be completely harmless.

"This is why it must become public," Morton says. She insists that consumers, stores and trading partners must become aware of this problem, and be the ones to insist on proper testing and remedial action. It's not just about protecting certain species of fish, it's about the health of the ecosystem as a whole; it's about human health and food safety as well.

How can you tell whether a salmon is wild or farm raised? As explained by Morton, the flesh of wild sockeye salmon is bright red, courtesy of its natural astaxanthin content. It's also very lean, so the fat marks, those white stripes you see in the meat, are very thin. If the fish is pale pink with wide fat marks, the salmon is farmed.

Farmed Fish Pose a Number of Health Hazards to Your Health

Farm raised fish of all species can spell disaster for your health in a number of ways. It's important to understand that ALL farm-raised fish – not just salmon -- are fed a concoction of vitamins, antibiotics, and depending on the fish, synthetic pigments, to make up for the lack of natural flesh coloration due to the altered diet. Without it, the flesh of caged salmon, for example, would be an unappetizing, pale gray. The fish are also fed pesticides, along with compounds such as toxic copper sulfate, which is frequently used to keep nets free of algae.

Not only do you ingest these drugs and chemicals when you eat the fish, but these toxins also build up in sea-floor sediments. In this way, industrial fish farming raises many of the same environmental concerns about chemicals and pollutants that are associated with feedlot cattle and factory chicken farms. In addition, fish waste and uneaten feed further litter the sea floor beneath these farms, generating bacteria that consume oxygen vital to shellfish and other bottom-dwelling sea creatures.

Studies have also consistently found levels of PCBs, dioxins, toxaphene and dieldrin, as well as mercury, to be higher in farm-raised fish than wild fish. This fact alone would be cause to reconsider consuming farmed fish!

Wild caught fish have already reached such toxic levels, it's risky to recommend eating them with a clear conscience. For example, according to a [US Geological Survey study](#), mercury contamination was detected in EVERY fish sampled in nearly 300 streams across the United States. More than a quarter of these fish contained mercury at levels exceeding the EPA criterion for the protection of human health. So, when you consider the fact that factory farmed fish typically are even MORE toxic than wild-caught fish and also contain an assortment of antibiotics and pesticides, avoiding them becomes a no-brainer – at least if you're concerned about your health.

To learn more about the differences between farmed salmon and wild salmon, specifically, please see my interview with [Randy Hartnell](#), founder-president of Vital Choice Wild Seafood and Organics. I'm a huge fan of their wild sockeye salmon, and beside a fish dinner at a restaurant here or there, Vital Choice salmon is about the only type of fish I eat.



[Download Interview Transcript](#)

Buying Local Increases Food Safety and Food Security

Morton recommends buying local foods and wild fish. I couldn't agree more. As mentioned in the film, disease in farm animals is one of the biggest sources of epidemics in humans. Therefore, the health of food animals cannot be treated as some sort of idealistic notion relegated to tree-huggers and animal-welfare crusaders.

Fish farms are the aquatic version of a confined animal feeding operation (CAFO), and just like their land-based cattle- and chicken farms, aquatic CAFO's are a breeding ground for disease and toxic waste, and produce food animals of inferior quality. Due to the dramatically increased disease risk—a natural side effect of crowding—these animals are further contaminated with drugs, and in the case of salmon, synthetic astaxanthin, which is made from petrochemicals that are not approved for human consumption.

Wild salmon are dying from diseases cultivated and spread by salmon farms. Where is the sense in this? And instead of selling wholesome, nutritionally-superior wild salmon, Canada is selling inferior and potentially diseased salmon raised in fish farms. Who benefits, and who loses?

The industry will tell you the world needs inexpensive food, and inevitably, they insist that such foods can only be created using the latest technology and artificial means. The latest example of this craziness is the creation of what amounts to a vegetarian fish diet designed for carnivorous fish.² Instead of fishmeal, the protein in this feed comes from bacteria, yeast or algae instead. This way, fish farms will not need to use valuable wild fish to feed farmed fish, and this, they claim, will help alleviate world hunger... Never mind the fact that by altering a fish's diet in such a drastic way, you're undoubtedly altering its nutritional content as well.

So at what cost should we clamor for cheap foods? At the expense of our environment and, potentially, the very lives of our descendants? We cannot be so blindly arrogant as to think that we can survive as a species if we allow the ecosystem to fall apart.

The ramifications of our large-scale, mass-producing, chemical-dependent food system are incredibly vast, which is why I urge you to become more curious about your food. Where, and how was it raised, grown, or manufactured? These things do matter; for your health, and the health and future of our planet.

Like Morton, I am also very concerned about our vanishing freedoms and increasing "corpocracy," where citizens are ruled by multi-national corporations with just one goal in mind: Maximizing Profit. A glaring example of this loss of freedom was Bill 37—the inappropriately named "Animal Health Act" which, had Canada made it into law, would have made it a crime to report farm animal disease to the public. Under this bill, informants would face a \$75,000 fine and two years in prison simply for naming the location of a disease outbreak. Fortunately, the Act was dropped, but could potentially be revived sometime in the future...