



Should You Stop Eating Salmon?

Yes, says a top UBC scientist. 'Smart shopping' isn't saving wild stocks.

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One of the big movers this holiday season was a President's Choice frozen appetizer: salmon wellingtons, little puff pastries stuffed with [Marine Stewardship Council](#) certified wild pacific salmon.

Great to know harried holiday hosts could feel good about what they were serving, right?

Sorry to ruin the party. Although certification programs and awareness campaigns have succeeded in stigmatizing farmed salmon, some say this market-based approach to fisheries management is not only ineffective, but also misguided.

The bottom line, say researchers, is that all salmon species are in decline, with some stocks sinking to unrecoverable levels. The iconic wild animal of the Pacific Northwest is facing total extinction.

Which raises a very hard question here in British Columbia -- a question that strikes deep into our economy, our cultural pride, our very identity in this part of the world.

Is it time to stop eating salmon?

Consume or conserve

Daniel Pauly, a fisheries biologist at the University of British Columbia, says he was at first intrigued by, and supportive of, market-based programs that attempt to educate the public about sustainable seafood.

Now he says those efforts are wrong headed.

"This is really, 'How can I stuff my face and have a good conscience?'" he says.

"We're told we have to buy right, we have to consume right. But to make consumption our major means of expression... consumption is the problem."

"A total boycott is something I can understand."

Yet many salmon research and conservation groups are reticent to tell people to stop eating salmon, and say that a total ban is not warranted because of the few stocks that are still healthy and relatively abundant.

The [Wild Salmon Centre](#) is a non-profit dedicated to protecting Pacific salmon and salmon habitat.

Spokesperson Rachel Uris acknowledges there is a "real crisis" of fisheries in North America, but says there are stocks that are doing well and are effectively managed.

"We would certainly never call for a moratorium on eating salmon," says Uris.

'Something to consider'

Shauna MacKinnon of the [Living Oceans Society](#) says a moratorium on salmon fishing would be "something to consider."

She says closing the commercial fishery and investing in better management and more habitat rehabilitation could help wild salmon.

Right now, she says, commercial fisheries and the revenue they provide are the incentive for governments to invest in salmon.

"I think that's definitely a very strong argument for why it makes sense to keep supporting wild salmon fisheries," says MacKinnon.

However, the very thing that keeps commercial salmon fisheries viable -- hatcheries -- are one of the factors contributing to the decline in wild stocks, says Bill Wareham, director of the [David Suzuki Foundation's marine conservation program](#).

The fishing and processing industry makes no differentiation between salmon born in a hatchery and those born in the wild, says Wareham. But hatcheries can "super load" the populations of a particular salmon species.

When fish from weak stocks are inevitably netted alongside those from these hatchery-enhanced stocks, they can disappear completely. This is the impact of a mixed-stock fishery.

Angling for certification

The Alaskan sockeye fishery, the only MSC-certified salmon fishery in the world, addresses this by placing fisheries closer to streams where salmons

spawn.

Wareham says he doesn't believe the certification of the Alaska fishery was warranted.

"The hatchery issue is a complicated one because it does put more fish out there and creates an opportunity... but from a true ecosystem perspective, it's not a good long term solution," says Wareham.

The David Suzuki Foundation also submitted a critique of the Pacific sockeye salmon fisheries to the Marine Stewardship Council. Currently, British Columbia's chum, pink and sockeye salmon commercial fisheries are being assessed for MSC certification.

"We don't believe scoring included all the information available," says Wareham.

"In our assessment methodology, the criteria is whether or not there is a good management system to respond to the needs of the [salmon] populations," said Wareham.

"We don't feel that's happening with wild populations."

Too much variation

One of the reasons it's difficult to paint a complete picture of the state of salmon altogether is because of the variety.

There are five species of salmon on the Pacific coast, which are subdivided into stocks (based on where they were born) and runs (based on what time of year they return to their birthplace to spawn.)

In British Columbia, generally northern salmon stocks, like those from the Skeena river shed, are faring better than ones in the south, from the Fraser river shed.

"There are really, really bad news stories, and then there are good news stories about some stocks that are quite healthy," says Wareham.

"But when you take the whole picture altogether, salmon populations are significantly reduced."

Wareham says he believes a total moratorium on salmon fishing, at least in the Fraser River, would be worth trying.

"But it's not always going to work," he says, citing the Atlantic cod fishery as one example of how even a total moratorium on fishing -- issued more than 15 years ago -- still hasn't helped the species recover.

"If we hope to have a more robust salmon population overall compared to what we have now... we're going to have to try some of these longer-term closures," said Wareham.

"The alternative is a long slow continued decline in the availability of wild salmon."

Caution, yellow-listed

Under the Vancouver Aquarium's SeaChoice program, a guide to sustainable seafood, all species of [B.C. salmon are yellow-listed](#). In other words, it's not the best choice, and consumers should eat with caution, says Colin Campbell, a science advisor for the Sierra Club of B.C.

Because salmon populations change seasonally and annually, it's hard to be sure of the identity of the salmon you're buying, he says.

"We can't say it's an absolute no to eat salmon, we do want to warn people that we don't have some of this necessary knowledge" says Campbell.

"We're worried fisheries practices at the management level fails the weak stocks and the rare stocks of salmon... and it's these rare ones where the future of salmon lies in terms of the environment and climate change."

Poor management

The future of salmon lies, not only in the rare stocks, but also in the northern stocks. Salmon are susceptible to rising water temperatures, and in northern waters that are colder, they just might be able to hang on the longest.

Des Nobels, a former commercial salmon fisherman who now works with the [T. Buck Suzuki Environmental Foundation](#), says there are still healthy stocks in the Skeena River.

That's one of the reasons why he says he's hard-pressed to say people should not be eating any B.C. wild salmon.

As long as there are healthy stocks, however, he thinks the people who live in the region should harvest them. For him, this is a key aspect of sustainable fisheries management.

"When you have people that are locally involved in harvesting, they have the most at stake in terms of any loss or damage to that resource. There they tend to be good stewards of that resource. From that, you create a conservation mindset," says Nobels.

It is this conservation mindset that non-profit and non-government groups should be promoting, says Pauly, and they should do it by holding governments accountable.

"The measure of success should not be how people feel and how they consume. It is how the fish are on the ground. And I believe that, really, at the end of the day, it is what becomes a rule by government agency or law that is ultimately effective," he says.

In order to bring about far deeper restrictions on how many wild salmon can

be caught and consumed, Pauly has his own recommended approach to achieve sustainability.

"I encourage a boycott. That represents something that is worthwhile."

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Colleen Kimmett reports on sustainability issues for The Tyee and others.

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