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Economic report looks at BC sablefish farming; Claims its 'unlikely to boost economy' in province

The next potential fish to be farmed in B.C. - sablefish - is unlikely to deliver economic benefits to the province, according to a report (partly funded by the Canadian Sablefish Association) released yesterday (May 4th) by University of British Columbia Director of Fisheries Economics Research Unit U. Rashid Sumaila and University of Victoria Asst. Prof. John Volpe.

Professor Volpe is one of the authors of the March 30th study in the scientific journal Proceedings of the Royal Society B which claims that the transfer of parasitic sea lice from salmon farms to wild salmon populations is much larger and more extensive than previously believed. The article was much criticised by some scientists and the BC salmon farming industry.

Read also Wild Vs. Farmed : New study claims to "reveal" salmon farms' infectious impact on wild salmon in British Columbia (30.03.2005) & General News : Greenpeace co-founder condemns sensationalistic 'science' of Suzuki Foundation & anti-aquaculturists (06.04.2005).

Titled Ecological and Economic Impact Assessment of Sablefish Aquaculture in British Columbia, the report analyzes aquaculture and sablefish market information to identify potential consequences of introducing industrial-scale sablefish farming in B.C. Among its findings, the report says sablefish farming is unlikely to boost B.C.'s economy. Further, it finds that if managed properly, a sablefish farming ban could benefit the province.

"As B.C. farmed salmon falls victim to global competition, sablefish is poised to become the heir apparent to the aquaculture industry in B.C." says Sumaila, a researcher at UBC's Fisheries Centre who has been looking at the issue over the past year. "This is built on the premise of exploiting unrealized economic opportunities. Our study casts some significant doubts as to the magnitude of the potential economic opportunities."

Wild sablefish have been harvested off the west coast of B.C. for more than 40 years. Also known as black cod or butterfish, sablefish is a sleek, black-skinned fish that grows to a size of 120 cm, a weight of 57 kg and can live 114 years. A highly prized table fish, it is the source of lucrative commercial fisheries from Washington State to B.C. and Alaska, and is currently being developed to be farmed in B.C.'s aquaculture industry.

Thirty-seven sablefish sites have been approved around Vancouver Island, while a hatchery is scaling up production on Salt Spring Island to provide juvenile sablefish for the proposed B.C. industry.

"The message from this study is that we need to tread gently and think more creatively than we have in the past," says study co-author Volpe, of UVic's School of Environmental Studies. "This report leaves little doubt that over time the value of sablefish would be gutted, as has been the fate of salmon, and underscores that support for industrial-scale sablefish aquaculture would signal that our policy makers have learned little from the salmon aquaculture experience."

Partly funded by the Canadian Sablefish Association, the economic analysis concludes that the chances of B.C. achieving big gains from sablefish farming is very low. In particular, it finds:

Because of the potential for negative interactions between wild and farm stocks, coastal communities and B.C.'s marine environment will be exposed to some risk

A decrease in the price of sablefish will ultimately follow an increase in sablefish supply to the market from aquaculture. This decrease will be at the expense of both sablefish farmers and fishers in Canada but beneficial to sablefish fish consumers. Since virtually all sablefish is consumed outside Canada, benefits are exported while costs are entirely absorbed within Canada

At low aquaculture production levels, small economic gains under certain conditions are possible. These gains disappear as production increases to anticipated levels

A ban on sablefish farming in B.C. might be beneficial to the province, if wild sablefish could be marketed in a way to command a price premium of 20-25 per cent

From the experience of salmon farming in B.C., sablefish farming is unlikely to add to B.C. and Canada's GDP, export earnings and employment in the B.C. sablefish sector

"Fish farm promoters claim that the economic benefits of fish farming outweigh any environmental risks, but this study proves that those claims are little more than bilge-water," said Eric Wickham, spokesperson for the Canadian Sablefish Association.

"When sea lice from fish farms infest and kill millions of wild salmon smolts, it is easy to see the negative impact of fish farming in an ecological sense. Economic research into fish farming is no less dramatic because it predicts the disastrous economic impacts that poor government policy choices has on families who depend on healthy fish stocks for their livelihood," said Wickham.

"We hope that our senior governments read this report carefully," concluded Wickham.

Read also

- Science : Salmon & sea lice study lambasted by critique, 'Science sufficiently compromised' to cast doubts (08.04.2005)
- General News : 'Journalists' knowledge & perception of salmon farming would gain were they to visit a fish farm' (06.04.2005)
- HOT News : Many words involved in the ontogeny of negative farmed salmon press stories: Past 36h Media Coverage (31.03.2005)

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