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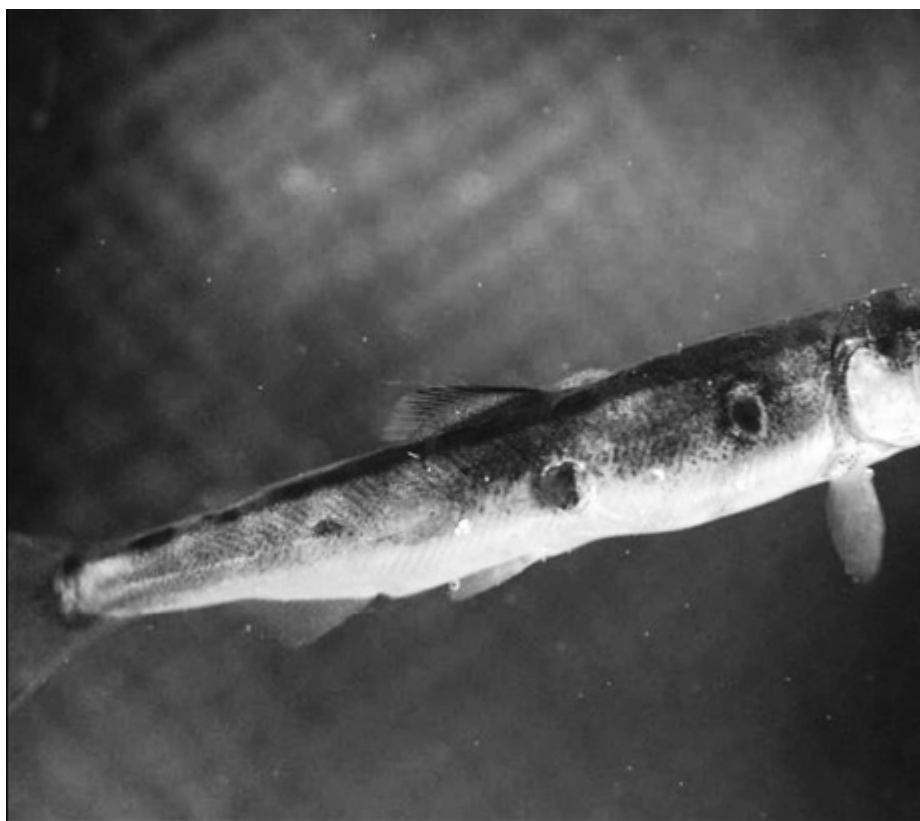
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Parasitic sea lice killing BC's wild salmon

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Salmon farmers using the ocean as a sewer,says scientist



WILD OR FARMED? Sea lice parasites infecting wild salmon. PHOTO COURTESY OF ALEXANDRA MORTON

by Amanda Stutt
News Writer

A team of scientists have discovered that parasitic sea lice escaping from farms along BC's coast are infecting and killing the wild salmon that sw

farms placed on the salmon's natural migration routes.

The study, titled "Epizootics of Wild Fish Induced by Farmed Fish," was a collaborative effort by Martin Krkosek, Martin A. Lewis, Alexandra Mc Fraser and John P. Volpe. The study was published this week in the online journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, and will likely add more fuel for an already heated debate.

"Salmon farming has a number of liabilities...specifically in the Pacific, it has a very bad effect on the wild fish," said Daniel Pauly, director of the University of British Columbia Centre for Sustainable Aquaculture. "In the Atlantic...this has contributed to the annihilation of Atlantic salmon...because the farms release lots of animals which are half wild and half domestic which compete with the wild ones."

Pauly explained that contact with farmed salmon can have a detrimental effect on the fitness of wild salmon—the ability of a fish to survive in the wild and reproduce.

Pauly described the issue of pollution in the form of parasite release, and how sea lice parasites attach to the skin of fish, and grow so enormous that the infection corresponds to a human having "plates" all over one's body.

Pauly said the farming industry's response to previous allegations, has been "untenable," maintaining the position that they had nothing to do with the production of parasites. "It's not a subjective position," said Pauly. "The evidence shows."

"These farms emit...a cloud of parasites... a stench that no other animal can withstand...[and] all the fish are infected."

Pauly confirmed that all farmed salmon are infected with sea lice parasites, but that adult salmon may withstand the parasitic infection [But] when a baby [wild] salmon...encounters a farm and a parasite, it will die."

Farmed fish are harvested and marketed by removing the parasites from their skin, explained Pauly. "It's not an issue for aquaculture. They handle the chemicals. They are not really supposed to use some of the chemicals that are used in wild fish."

For Pauly, the question is not what the industry should do, but what the government should do. "Government favours big fisheries...they can be your buddy. They will support a reelection campaign."

Alexandra Morton, co-author of the study, said a major problem is that wild fish are in the wrong place. They're on the path of the migrating wild fish. "I think that the salmon producers saw these as good places to put farms."

Producers know that anywhere there are wild fish, the farmed fish will benefit from the oxygenation, proper temperatures and currents, she said.

Morton explained that wild fish naturally carry sea lice in salt water but

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migrate into fresh water the lice die because they can't survive in fresh water. "This is one of nature's natural cleanup modes," said Morton.

Ironically, when wild salmon come into contact with the farms, they infect the wild fish and then the lice survive and thrive by breeding on the farmed fish. They do this because farmed salmon live in stagnant environments and don't migrate into fresh water.

"Anytime you cage animals in too high a density...you have a parasite problem because the animals aren't moving, they're so crowded together, and often they're genetically very similar. These are all natural laws being broken," Morton said. "Adding wild salmon constantly moves the lice."

"There are literally billions of these baby lice now hatching and flowing into pens because pens do nothing to stop lice moving... lice just pass through," added Morton.

Morton explained that most of the producers of farmed salmon on the BC coast come from Norway and that Norwegian farm producers have already had this problem. "They solved the problem by controlling the number of sea lice, and finally they moved the farms away to areas where they wanted to have wild salmon."

"There is no reason for this mess," she said. "It's a technological problem. We need to be a better barrier, just a better fence that the lice can't get through."

Although many salmon producers are interested in trying closed containment, Morton said they are being given "a fair shot" on the production level, Morton said.

"They say it's too expensive to go to closed containment," she said.

"Right now it's so easy to let all your waste be flushed out to sea, basically into the ocean as a sewer to take all of this mess away."

Tony Farrell, chair of Sustainable Aquaculture at UBC, declined comment for this study, stating that he had not yet read the article, and that "the media reported the results of the study before it was released by the scientific journal...the public interest preceded the availability of scientific facts."

Farrell pointed out the long history of fish farming in various cultures around the world. "Fish farming has been around for thousands of years...if it's not working why hasn't it collapsed?"

He explained that aquaculture is really the domestication of wild fish and that it should reduce the wild fish catch.

Farrell is concerned with the dietary requirements of farmed fish, and he is now focused on finding a way to "stop feeding fish to fish." He is researching "better feeding farmed fish...and understanding the use of plant-based diets as a critical component for sustainable aquaculture."

Farrell's other goal is to "make sure the welfare of farmed fish is looked after. We want to make sure farmed fish are not stressed they will grow better. The challenge for us is to find sustainable methods of rearing fish...equipping aquaculturalists with proper diets and ensuring fish welfare."

According to Morton this is "an important issue, because right now they are harvesting wild fish to feed farmed fish."

He also said that the aquaculture industry should be careful of "mixing up the food chain." Right now, a lot of what the fish are eating are chickens... poultry blood flour."

As a result of this diet, the natural color of farmed salmon's flesh is not what a wild salmon's would be, but grey. Wild salmon have pink flesh because they eat on shrimp, said Morton. "

The redder the flesh, the more expensive the dye, the farmer tries to pick the pink that he thinks the consumer wants and then goes with that," he said

"It's fooling the public into thinking this is really a salmon. It's not really."

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