



Alaskan Marketing Behind Salmon Farming Controversy?

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By Vivian Krause
Opinion

Having worked in the salmon farming industry during 2002 and 2003, I am well aware of the environmental impacts of salmon farming. And like most people, I feel that the recent escapes and recent deaths of sea lions in Clayoquot Sound are unacceptable.

I no longer work in salmon farming, and am writing as a concerned member of the public in order to provide information that you may want to consider.

Several months ago, in my volunteer work as a board member of the Adoptive Families Association of B.C. (AFABC), I unexpectedly found information that made me look back and re-think the salmon farming controversy from a perspective I missed when I was in the industry: the Alaskan marketing perspective.

Looking for possibilities for grant funding for the AFABC, I came across the \$190 million dollar "Wild Salmon Ecosystems" Initiative of the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, based in San Francisco, Calif. At first I thought, "Wow! If they've got \$190 million for wild salmon, imagine what they might be able to do for foster children waiting to get adopted!"

We seem to have better programs for our wild salmon than for the 1,200 B.C. children who are wait-listed for adoption. If I'm not mistaken, we spend more money in Canada on endangered species than on finding families for the 20,000 Canadian foster children who are wait-listed to become adopted by a family.

To my surprise, when I looked at the grants database of the Moore Foundation, I discovered that it has provided substantial funding to environmental organizations to shift market demand away from farmed salmon.

Gordon Moore is a co-founder of INTEL. Gordon and Betty Moore are among the wealthiest and generous philanthropists in the U.S. Moore is said to be an avid wild salmon fisherman.

As I read through the grants database of The Moore Foundation, I found SeaWeb, based in Washington D.C., was granted \$560,000 for "identification of antifarming audience and issues, integration of aquaculture science messages into antifarming campaign, standardization of antifarming messaging tool-kit, creation of an earned media campaign and co-ordination of media for antifarming ENGOS."

According to page 76 of their 2004 tax filing to the Internal Revenue Service, the \$560,000 grant to SeaWeb was to provide "a high quality tool-kit and coordination infrastructure for use by ENGOS (environmental organizations) in their campaigns to shift consumer and retailer demand away from farmed salmon."

The Moore Foundation's website says, "we do not expect to focus significant resources on salmon restoration in southern British Columbia or the lower 48 states of the U.S.," yet the foundation has granted at least \$20.2 million to organizations working in British Columbia, all of which are actively opposed to salmon farming as currently practiced.

The Moore Foundation is the major source of funding for sea lice research by environmental organizations in British Columbia. SeaWeb publicized sea lice research by the David Suzuki Foundation during the time that SeaWeb was funded to "shift consumer and retailer demand away from farmed salmon." Alexandra Morton and John Volpe are profiled at SeaWeb as photographers.

Is the sea lice research one of the "aquaculture science messages" that SeaWeb was integrating into its "antifarming campaign?" Research that is part of an "antifarming campaign" is hardly impartial. How do environmental organizations maintain impartiality in their sea lice research while participating in an "antifarming campaign?"

In early March 2007, much to my surprise, I noticed that the Moore Foundation had changed the stated titles and purposes of at least four grants, including the one to SeaWeb. The title of a \$453,000 grant to the Coastal Alliance for Aquaculture Reform was changed from "Farmed and Dangerous Markets Campaign" to "Aquaculture Education Campaign."

At about the same time, The Monterey Bay Aquarium modified its "Quick Fact" card on Farmed Salmon and the Salmon Shopper's Guide for the "Go Wild" campaign, seems to have been removed from the web. Weeks earlier, Creative Salmon had won a defamation case against Don Staniford.

It would seem to me that it wouldn't be easy to shift consumer and retail demand away from farmed salmon while reminding people that salmon farming avoids over fishing and by-catch and that farmed salmon is one of the few heart-healthy foods that most people should eat more of, not less.

It would not be easy to conduct an "antifarming campaign" while reminding people that salmon farming poses far less risk to wild salmon biodiversity and the ocean's carrying capacity than does the alternative form of salmon aquaculture: ocean-ranching.

In marketing terminology, shifting or reducing demand is known as "demarketing." It would seem to me that it would be a lot easier to demarket farmed salmon by portraying it as high in contaminants and by saying that sea lice from salmon farms kill as many as 95 per cent of juvenile wild salmon. In my opinion, however, neither assertion is supported by sound science.

Farmed salmon is not high in contaminants. Farm-raised salmon contain less than three per cent of what Health Canada considers to be the "tolerable level" for PCBs, unavoidable

contaminants found in trace amounts in all foods. Both tuna and sardines have been found to have higher PCB levels than farmed salmon. The average yearly per capita intake of PCBs has been estimated to be about 30 nanograms from farmed salmon, 199 from pork, 306 from milk, 716 from poultry, and 2,401 from beef. When it comes to mercury, wild Alaskan halibut contains about 25 times as much as farmed salmon and tuna contains about 33 times as much! So if farmed salmon isn't high in contaminants, why do environmental organizations say that it is?

Both Alaska and British Columbia are involved in salmon aquaculture to provide jobs and employment. B.C. farms about 22 million salmon while Alaska ranches 1.5 billion, 68 times as many. Ranched salmon are hatched in plastic trays, fed pellets and raised in net pens. Once released to ranch in the wild, ranched salmon consume more than 1 million metric tonnes of wild feed that is then not available for the truly wild salmon and other wild fish.

In 2006, about 42 million (38 per cent) of the 142 million Alaskan "wild" salmon were ranched salmon. Salmon ranching accounted for \$59 million (21 per cent) of the value of the Alaskan "wild" salmon harvest.

It is often said that Alaska banned salmon farming because of environmental concerns. Most of Alaskan waters are too cold for salmon farming anyway. In 1999, an Alaskan Senator told the Canada-United States Inter-Parliamentary Group that Alaska did not allow salmon farming as they would then not know what to do with the fishers.

At the World Salmon Summit in 2003, Jan Konigsberg, the former Alaskan director of the Salmonid Biodiversity program of Trout Unlimited, stated:

“If Alaska insists on pursuing salmon aquaculture and minimizing harm to wild salmon, it would ban salmon ranching and allow salmon farming, albeit under much stricter standards than now prevail throughout the Northwest. Instead, in the face of devastating competition from farmed salmon, the state and the industry have increased hatchery production. At the same time, the state and industry disparage salmon farming as part and parcel of a marketing strategy to differentiate “sustainable” wild salmon from “unsustainable” farmed salmon. This strategy, sad to say, rests on the deceit that all Alaskan salmon are wild and sustainably

managed.”

Facing stiff competition from farmed salmon and many other challenges, the value of Alaskan "wild" salmon collapsed from \$1.2 billion (1988) to \$168 million (2002). Since 2003, the value of Alaskan "wild" salmon has doubled.

Central to the brand marketing strategy for Alaskan "wild" salmon is differentiating it from farmed salmon. By depicting farmed salmon as unsafe and unsustainable, environmental organizations facilitate the product differentiation and brand marketing strategy for Alaskan "wild" salmon, as safe and sustainable.

The Alaska Seafood Marketing Institute (ASMI) has clearly acknowledged working with "conservation funders" and "lots of private foundation money." ASMI has acknowledged working with environmental organizations and using materials generated by them to sell Alaskan seafood.

At least three American foundations report having funded environmental organizations to conduct market research on consumer preferences for farmed vs. wild salmon.

Responding to a fisherman who asked, "Why ASMI doesn't bash farmed fish," the executive director of the Alaska Seafood Marketing Institute wrote back in 2002:

"...ASMI does a lot more behind the scenes than you are probably aware of. Direct attack ads by people with similar products generally do not work...They are seen as self-serving and lack credibility with the general public. In our case, it is far more credible to leave the attack to third parties, such as environmental groups and newspaper columnists, than it is for us to come out and do it ourselves."

Mr. Riutta went on to say:

"In addition, we are helping the people that sell our products or use them in restaurants understand the differences in wild and farmed fish, which includes showing them the material that is being generated by the environmentalists and the media. We also have been

working with a number of environmental groups and media for several years now pointing out the purity and sustainability of our salmon, which helps them make their points about the difference in wild verses farmed fish."

(For the entire memo, see item #26 posted at <http://www.ufa.fish.org/update/02/120602.htm>.)

In September, I wrote to ASMI to ask which "conservation funders" and environmental organizations it works or has worked with. ASMI replied but did not answer any of my questions about the involvement of environmental organizations in the marketing strategies of the Alaska Seafood Marketing Institute.

"Keeping the pressure on salmon farmers with truth squads will help to open more markets for wild salmon," wrote the executive director of the PCFFA in 2004. The PCFFA refers to the "Farmed and Dangerous" campaign of the Coastal Alliance for Aquaculture Reform as part of an "antifarmed salmon effort." The PCFFA is headquartered in San Francisco, in the same office building as the Moore Foundation.

The David Suzuki Foundation participated in the "Go Wild" campaign based in Minneapolis, Minn. The stated purpose of the campaign was "to break the farmed fish habit" so that wild fish will be more widely distributed.

I find it difficult to reconcile the participation of the David Suzuki Foundation and the Coastal Alliance for Aquaculture Reform in an "antifarming campaign" and an "antifarmed salmon effort," with their statements that they are campaigning to "reform" salmon farming.

Information from the Capital Research Center in Washington D.C. suggests that the David Suzuki Foundation has received at least \$US 8.1 million from American foundations. The David Suzuki Foundation acknowledges these foundations in its annual reports as having contributed merely "more than \$5,000" or "more than \$10,000."

It seems to me that policy makers and the public need to know to what extent sea lice research and the demarketing of farmed salmon is funded by the same American foundations

that fund promotion and market improvement for Alaskan wild and ranched salmon.

In May, I wrote to Dr. David Suzuki to ask questions and express my concerns about the apparent involvement of the David Suzuki Foundation in improving the market for Alaskan "wild" salmon. Neither Dr. Suzuki nor James Hoggan, the chairman of the board of the foundation, have answered my letter.

In the United States, the promotion of Alaskan "wild" salmon by The Sierra Club, The Audobon Society and other environmental organizations, is readily apparent because they explicitly promote Alaskan wild salmon. In Canada, it's not so obvious because environmental organizations promote wild salmon without specifying the Alaskan variety. However, more than 90 per cent of "wild" salmon is Alaskan. Promoting wild salmon is tantamount to promoting Alaskan wild and ranched salmon.

Environmental Defense has a "Farmed Salmon Purchasing" policy. It states, among other things, "Wild salmon from Alaska is also available and some prefer its flavor and texture over the milder farmed salmon." What does the flavor and texture of Alaskan "wild" salmon have to do with a farmed salmon purchasing policy? Environmental Defense has been granted at least \$12.7 million from the Packard Foundation including at least \$800,000 "to create markets for sustainable seafood."

Environmental Defense, The Natural Resources Defense Council and Ecotrust distribute recipe cards for Alaskan "wild" salmon. Ecotrust provides a recipe for "Dishwasher Poached Salmon a la Ruth." The recipe says to let the dishwasher go around twice on the pots and pans cycle to cook the salmon. How polar-bear friendly is that?

Ecotrust is described at its own web-site as "writ large a bi-national, bioregional shadow government and economic development agency." According to a paper posted at its own web-site, Ecotrust's central project is promoting wild salmon over farmed salmon. As of January 2007, Ecotrust was the second largest grant recipient of the \$190 million "Wild Salmon Ecosystems Initiative of the Moore Foundation and had been granted \$US 4.7 million dollars.

If Alaskan salmon -- wild or ranched -- is truly safer and more sustainable than farmed salmon, then surely it should be marketed as such! However, many studies suggest that salmon ranching (which accounts for 38 per cent of "wild" salmon) actually poses far greater risks to wild salmon biodiversity and the ocean's carrying capacity than does salmon farming. The Alaskan seafood industry reportedly dumps 1.5 million metric tonnes of untreated fish waste into the ocean every year. In contrast, fish waste from processing farmed salmon is used to make fish-based fertilizer. For aerial pesticide spraying, The Environmental Protection Agency has a 600 foot mandatory buffer zone in California, Oregon and Washington. Alaska has 35 feet. Since 2002, the amount of Alaskan salmon that is processed in China and then shipped back to the North American market, has increased more than six-fold. How safe and sustainable is that?

I do not see how promoting wild and ranched salmon over farmed salmon will protect wild salmon or human health. Since the market for Alaskan "wild" salmon has improved, 863 more boats are fishing for them, according to the Alaska Seafood Marketing Institute. I can see how demarketing farmed salmon serves Alaskan marketing interests.

When environmental organizations urge us to avoid farmed salmon, it seems to me that the public needs to ask: is this to protect wild salmon and the environment or is this to improve the market for Alaskan wild and ranched salmon, or perhaps a bit of both.

(During 2002 and 2003, Vivian Krause was corporate development manager (North America) for NUTRECO, then the world's largest salmon farming company. Prior to that she worked with UNICEF in Guatemala (1990-1996) and Indonesia (1996-2001). She has a B.Sc. and M.Sc. in nutrition from McGill University and l'Université de Montréal, respectively. She has lived in Kitimat and Kamloops and currently resides in North Vancouver with her family.)

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