

The Demarketing of Farmed Salmon by 35 Environmental Organizations in the United States and Canada

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Demarketing farmed salmon: Shifting consumer demand away

Health authorities recommend eating oily, ocean fish on a weekly basis, including farmed salmon. In stark contrast, environmental organizations¹ (ENGOs) say that because of high levels of PCBs, the "maximum number of safe meals" of farmed salmon is half a meal per month and for young children, zero meals.

Farmed salmon are not high in PCBs. Tuna and sardines have higher levels of PCBs than farmed salmon. Wild Alaskan halibut contains about 25 times as much mercury as farmed salmon, and tuna has about 33 times as much. Average yearly intake of PCBs is estimated at 30 micrograms from farmed salmon, 199 from pork, 306 from milk, 716 from poultry, and 2,401 from beef.

Despite the many recent improvements in salmon farming practices and its advantages over the commercial fishery (no risk of over-fishing, no by-catch), ENGOs continue to urge consumers to avoid farmed salmon. What gives?

In marketing terms, discouraging consumers from buying is "demarketing". According to Philip Kotler, "the aim is not to destroy demand, but only to reduce or shift it." When it comes to salmon, ENGOs have been funded to do just that.

The \$190 million "Wild Salmon Ecosystems Initiative" of the Moore Foundation granted SeaWeb \$560,000 for "coordination infrastructure for use by ENGOs in their campaigns to shift consumer and retailer demand away from farmed salmon."

By positioning farmed salmon as unsafe (contaminants, colorants, etc.) and unsustainable, environmental organizations facilitate product differentiation and the brand marketing strategy for Alaskan wild salmon, as safe and sustainable.

The Alaskan Context

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

In 2004, the Governor of Alaska and environmental organizations publicized the Hites study which incorrectly concluded that farmed salmon have dangerously high levels of PCBs. Sales of farmed salmon plummeted and demand shifted towards Alaskan wild salmon. Between 2003 and 2006, the value of Alaskan wild salmon nearly doubled.

Without the Hites study and its publicity promoting the fallacy that wild salmon is healthier than farmed salmon, the dramatic improvement in the demand for Alaskan wild salmon would not have occurred.

¹ Environmental Defense, SeaWeb, & Sustainable Seafood Canada (The David Suzuki Foundation, Living Oceans, the Canadian Parks & Wilderness Society, Ecology Action Center, the Sierra Club of Canada).

The Alaska Seafood Marketing Institute and Environmental Organizations

The Alaskan Seafood Marketing Institute (ASMI) has acknowledged working with environmental organizations, "because it is the best way to conduct our business." According to the United Fishermen of Alaska, the Alaskan Seafood Marketing Institute has worked with "conservation funders" with "lots of philanthropic capital."

At least 35 ENGOs appear to be involved in promoting Alaskan wild salmon or demarketing farmed salmon, or both. These ENGOs are funded by 17 American non-profit foundations that have more than \$US 31 billion in assets. ENGOs have been granted \$13.7 million for projects about farmed salmon, salmon farming and sea lice.

Closed Containment Technology

This would make salmon farming far more energy intensive, increasing carbon emissions like putting thousands of additional cars on the road! When environmental organizations propose environmentally flawed "solutions", something's fishy. Closed containment would not make salmon farming more sustainable but would increase production costs and make farmed salmon less price competitive.

Sea lice don't kill up to 95% of juvenile wild pink salmon as environmental groups say. Salmon farming has been practiced in the Broughton Archipelago for nearly 20 years. During that time, wild pink salmon steadily increased, reaching a 50-year high in 2000. That would have been unlikely if all along sea lice had been killing 95% of the juveniles.

Sea lice research by environmental organizations is funded by the same American foundations that fund the promotion of Alaskan wild salmon and the demarketing of farmed salmon on the basis of sea lice and other research. This raises questions about whether the research is conducted impartially. Science requires impartiality.

Alaska's Salmon Ranching

In 2006, 42 million (38%) of the 148 million Alaskan "wild" salmon harvested were hatched in a plastic tray. Alaska releases 1.5 billion hatchery salmon annually. In essence, the "pasture" of the Pacific Ocean is being used as a ranch.

Rather than so-called closed containment for salmon farms enclosed containment for **all** cultured, hatchery salmon might be preferable in order to keep hatchery salmon separate from the truly wild salmon. In other words, more farming and less ranching.

A Way Forward

Alaska believes its got the real thing. Unless environmental organizations demonstrate unprecedented impartiality, expecting them to approve of farmed salmon and salmon farming is like expecting the marketing department of Coke to promote Pepsi.

Instead of shifting consumer and retailer demand away from farmed salmon and towards wild salmon, the salmon industries (wild and farmed) could work together with health organizations to increase salmon consumption based on the promotion of one of salmon's greatest attributes: **omega-3 fatty acids**. That would be good for human health, good for business, and good for coastal communities - maybe even in Alaska!