

Developing Policy and Planning for Aquatic Resource Usage

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It is a pleasure to be with you today. I spent two and a half years as Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, where aquaculture was a major part of the job. In fact, looking back, I seemed to spend a disproportionate amount of my time on that aspect of the portfolio. Given the importance of the industry today, perhaps it was not so disproportionate after all.

On the West Coast, I understand that aquaculture is responsible for as much volume of product as is the capture fishery. Despite a lengthy moratorium on new operations, there are scores of aquaculture operations in BC waters. The East Coast development has similarly been rapid. That said, we are still small players on the international scene, with less than one percent of global farmed fish and seafood production. World wide, the figures for the importance of global aquaculture industry is about forty percent of the value of the global fish landings, and about 30 percent of the volume.

I mentioned that aquaculture took a lot of my time as minister, and the reason, most of you will not be surprised to hear, was the controversy that so often surrounded the industry. As a rough rule of thumb, politics is about controversies; what is working in an uncontroversial manner generally is not a political issue. That is why whole sections of the economy never get mentioned in Parliament. They just work well and get ignored. But I think it is fair to say, and again, I think that most of you would agree with me, that controversy over aquaculture has continued over the years.

I was reminded of this a few weeks ago, when preparing for this meeting, when I googled the US website of Trout Unlimited (www.tu.org). Now Trout Unlimited is a relatively mainstream environmental organization that devotes itself to promoting healthy populations of the various types of trout, and is largely made up of a generally harmless crowd of people who fish trout for sport. There is little of the irrational behavior that I associate with organizations such as the Fund for Animal Welfare, where ideology or sentiment are front and centre. The membership of Trout Unlimited is strong not only in California, but also in the mountain states, and it includes plenty of right-wing Republicans. In short, it does not have what I would call radical membership and is not a particularly radical group.

What did I find on the Trout Unlimited website? Trout Unlimited is involved in a new campaign (www.whywild.org) to encourage people not to eat farmed salmon, but to ask in

restaurants for wild fish instead. In addition, they want people to lobby congress to put restrictions on imported Canadian farmed salmon, and they further want people to lobby Safeway to stop carrying farmed salmon. Their concerns and reasoning were ones you know, negative impact of water systems, risk of introduction of species not native to the area, use of pharmaceuticals and hormones, and the possibility of disease transfer to local fish populations.

The risk of exotic species, in this case Atlantic salmon, and the possibility of disease transfer are the two main concerns. I will return to these in a few minutes.

Now I am not going today to offer opinions on the accuracy of their claims, that is not my purpose for coming to speak to you today. My opinions on such subjects are not relevant. Those are all areas of expert opinion, which I don't have, but of which there is plenty in this room.

But what I would like to comment on is that the concern is sincere, and adopting the position that it has, is resulting in contradictions with its other policy positions and in serious costs to the organization in terms of credibility and consistency.

These contradictions are well known, by the way, to Trout Unlimited. It is not just that they have members who are also involved in the aquaculture industry. The organization has had lengthy internal debate on the issue, and many of its members are far better informed on salmon farming and aquaculture issues than are members of the general public.

Now, let me outline a quick list of some of those contradictions. First, while Trout Unlimited understandably favours healthy wild fish populations, it is not opposed to hatcheries that produce fry and smolts in circumstances where natural systems are not functioning effectively and in situations where the natural system is not productive enough to handle heavy fishing pressure. The organization does not have an anti-hatchery position for fry, parr or smolts, but they are opposing the growth of young and adult fish in pens by your industry. You can understand that Trout Unlimited has to do a little tap dancing on this one.

Second, Trout Unlimited has championed catch-and-release, and one of the arguments is that the wild fish left to be caught again is far more valuable to the sports fishery than a fish killed and eaten. In fact, the campaign has indirectly supported the trout aquaculture industry by encouraging people to buy a farmed trout at the fish market rather than killing the wild fish that is caught. How many times have trout fishermen been told not to kill a wild trout, when the same weight of fish, equally good to eat and equally nutritious, is available in the supermarket? That message over the years has come from Trout Unlimited. Of course the substitute fish in the supermarket comes from the aquaculture industry, and trout farmers in this room have benefited from the TU campaign. In fact, in this respect they have been a champion of your industry. Strange that the organization should now be arguing so differently when it comes to farmed Atlantic salmon.

Third, urging people to eat wild fish rather than farmed fish may well put more capture-fishery pressure on wild fish stocks, the very stocks that the organization's campaign is trying to protect. You know the argument well, your industry has used it frequently. Of course in a perfect world such pressure would be headed off by regulation, but we don't live in a perfect

world. The more people who demand wild fish only, the more the demand will be, the higher the price will be, and the result is more pressure to increase wild fish kill, legally or illegally. This was a major reason for Atlantic salmon anglers, and the Atlantic Salmon Federation, taking the pro-aquaculture stand that they did when your industry in Canada was in its infancy.

Martin Silverstone, the editor of the Atlantic Salmon Journal, the house publication of the Atlantic Salmon Federation, makes that point in the latest issue. He writes on page 14 “Long before the Greenland Conservation Agreement, one of the worst threats to Atlantic salmon was the commercial fishery. That’s why it seemed like a good idea to help promote Atlantic salmon aquaculture. The plan was wildly successful, the market for wild salmon collapsed...” Another contradiction in the Trout Unlimited position.

Fourth, there are probably few more successful introduced species than trout, both rainbow and brown. And in the past, few people were more enthusiastic than trout fishermen as proponents of stocking these exotics in waters that did not have them naturally. I fish for brown trout on the Cowichan River on Vancouver Island. I confess, it is my favourite British Columbia fishing. They were introduced in the thirties and are still hanging on. The brown trout is an exotic species in the Cowichan just as it is in every river in the Americas where it is found.

I have fished for rainbow on the Crocodile River system in South Africa. Again, while the crocs are native, the rainbow are very much an introduced species. Trout fishing heaven for Trout Unlimited members are the rivers of Argentina, Chile and New Zealand. Again, exotic species that have been introduced into non-native areas. Trout Unlimited members are not innocents when it comes to the introduction of exotic species.

Now, I am not trying to put down US Trout Unlimited here. Let me repeat, Trout Unlimited knows of these contradictions, and they are certainly concerned about the problem their campaign is creating for itself within its membership. My point is that despite that concern, the organization has embarked on a campaign to encourage people to boycott farmed salmon, to put pressure on supermarkets to drop your product, and to put pressure on congress to reduce or even ban farmed salmon imports to the United States. The organization believes the environmental problems of your industry, your impact on wild fish, are so serious that they outweigh the consequent negative factors to them and the positions their membership has taken in the past that I have just mentioned.

I was surprised by the US Trout Unlimited “Why Wild Salmon?” campaign. They know that they will be alienating supporters who believe your position: that aquaculture under appropriate regulation has a place. They know that there likely will be “collateral damage”, if I can use that term, to the wild salmon populations by reason of increased harvesting pressure. They know that there is a contradiction with their accepted policy with respect to trout and salmon hatcheries for fry, parr and smolts. In other words, there have been serious costs to the organization for adopting this position. So I think we can agree that they have adopted that position by reason of conviction and genuine concern. It is not malice or spite. Nor is it a question of your message not reaching this group. It is not ignorance. They have heard your message and they have rejected it. It is well worth wondering why.

Now let me return to a decade ago when I was Minister responsible for Aquaculture in the federal government. The Liberal Party was in government then, and had been for the previous four years. A year before that the Party had adopted a resolution supporting the expansion of aquaculture at a policy convention, but if I remember correctly, the resolution had some ambiguous aspects with respect to environmental safety. In any event, as of my appointment as Fisheries Minister in 1997, I had the responsibility for the resolution, and I had the overriding responsibility to protect wild fish stocks. The latter was a fundamental responsibility that, in my opinion, would certainly override any resolution of a party convention if the Department were to advise me that the threat to wild stocks from aquaculture was significant.

So when I took over from Fred Mifflin as Fisheries Minister in late 1997 I wished to explore the issue just as fairly and as objectively as I and the DFO could.

I think the Department did a pretty good job. The officials were cautious, certainly, and that was a good thing. The precautionary principle when dealing with exotic species makes sense. We carried out a fair bit of research, and that too was a good thing. I appointed a gentleman well known to your industry, Mr. Yves Bastien as Aquaculture Commissioner, and despite the tough times for government funding in the mid-nineties, he received a reasonable budget. Incidentally it is a pleasure to see him here today. I won't ask for him to comment on the adequacy of the money he got.

The results you are well aware of. The official DFO position on the risks of salmon farming is on its website and available to all under the heading *Myths and Realities about Salmon Farming*, a website last updated on the 19th of July of this year (http://www.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/media/backgrou/2005/salmon_e.htm). Let me just summarize what it says.

First, DFO states without reservation that salmon is safe to eat and that PCBs are not an issue, being at generally similar levels in both wild and farmed fish, and well below other meats such as beef, pork and chicken. Further, and I quote here, DFO states that “farmed salmon has just as much nutritional value as its wild counterpart”.

On the issue of antibiotics and hormones, the website makes clear that much less is now used than previously, and further, its use in salmon farming is far less than the amount used in land based farm animal production.

On the issue of the impact of salmon farms on the environment, the website is again unambiguous. DFO believes that the industry meets rigorous and adequate federal and provincial standards, and further, that the issue of waste below the farms has been handled effectively by improving location decisions and by leaving certain sensitive areas fallow.

Time forbids dealing with each of the headlined “myths” that DFO “busts”. DFO deals with the issue of escaped Atlantic salmon and the possibility of them getting established in BC rivers. It totally discounts the possibility of interbreeding of Atlantic and Pacific salmon stocks. It deals with the issue of farmed salmon spreading disease to wild fish, and makes clear that DFO regards the risk as infinitesimal. And, while the document says more research is needed, it is reassuring on the issue of sea lice. It points out that sea lice are naturally

occurring, that Pacific salmon have lived with sea lice for centuries and have developed a natural tolerance for the parasite.

Finally the limitations and state of development of closed containment systems are patiently explained.

From the point of view of the industry, what I have read out is a very positive report. There is never a monolithic position among the members of such a large organization as DFO, and no doubt some of you can name people within the Department who are less than enthusiastic about your industry. But the Department as a whole has been highly supportive of aquaculture.

Why then, ten years after the appointment of the Commissioner after a ten year period of generally favourable treatment of the industry by the DFO, and the other regulating agencies, and ten years of your own efforts to dispel negative characterization, why is the industry still faced with the type of negative image that Trout Unlimited has embraced? Trout Unlimited is but an example. Others could have been used, such as the World Wildlife Fund, and even the Atlantic Salmon Federation is having some second thoughts. As you well know, there are plenty of other critics who adopt even more hostile attitudes.

There are a number of reports, by investigative bodies, that share this concern. The report of a former British Columbia judge, Stuart Leggatt, on aquaculture in British Columbia a decade ago was highly critical. While the David Suzuki Foundation was involved in getting Judge Leggatt to do the investigation, he is a highly respected person, and the report is his, not that of the Suzuki Foundation.

The Senate Committee in 2002 expressed important concerns. The House of Commons Committee on Fisheries and Oceans has expressed similar reservations. Most recently (this year) the BC Legislative Committee, charged with looking into the Pacific Fisheries Resource Conservation Council, which I established in 1998 to provide independent advice on West Coast fisheries issues outside of DFO, frequently has expressed concern, particularly on the sea lice issue, in many annual reports following the 2002 declines of pink salmon in Broughton Inlet. Its March 2004 report "Making Sense of the Debate about Hatchery Impacts; Interactions Between Enhanced and Wild Salmon on Canada's Pacific Coast" is still well worth a careful study.

In 2005 yet another group was set up, this time by the provincial government of BC, the Pacific Salmon Forum. It has received generous funding and the task of investigating the sustainability of British Columbia's wild and farmed salmon. A former federal fisheries minister, and a former chairman of the PFRCC, the Hon. John Fraser, who incidentally is a good friend of mine, has been given the chairmanship.

It hardly looks as though the issues surrounding salmon farming are settled in favour of the industry position.

Ten years of effort to develop a level of confidence in the industry by DFO and its ministers, by the Commissioner, and by the industry itself appears to have met with little success. Arguments in favour of the industry are not succeeding; doubts appear as strong as ever.

I think it is useful at this time to examine why this should be so.

First, on the credibility of the industry. Please don't feel offended if I point out that on science issues of this type, wherever there is self interest, there is rarely credibility in the public's mind. The forestry industry has had this problem, the mining industry has had it, and the land based agricultural community has also frequently found itself under suspicion. The traditional fishing industry is certainly not exempt. In science work and in analysis, self interest is not a good basis for credibility.

In this regard I recollect that over the past decade the aquaculture industry has also suffered from some overenthusiastic boosters. Nothing affects credibility more and creates suspicion among critics faster than exaggeration. The varying responses to the issue of colonization by escaped Atlantic salmon are a case in point. Escaped Atlantic salmon have probably been successful in spawning in a Vancouver Island river. In the long term it may or may not be significant, but credibility on all issues has taken a beating by reason of earlier claims by DFO and the industry that this could not happen.

Why have DFO and the Commissioner's arguments been so sceptically received? My own view in retrospect is that the two roles of promoting the industry and regulating it have not been adequately separated. Over the decade, DFO and the Commissioner became more and more identified with the industry and its position. Now some will immediately say this happened because analysis and the scientific results led to similar conclusions. While that may be true to a degree, the low credibility of the Department and its work on this issue in the mind of the public suggests that there is more to the concern than that. It may not be fair or accurate, but they are too often believed to be arguing to a foregone conclusion.

I should note that when Mr. Bastien was appointed, it was fully expected that he would have an advocacy role. The mistake I and my successors made was to believe that this advocacy role could be kept separate in the public's mind from the science and regulatory work of the Department. Rightly or wrongly, the distinction was blurred, and the result has been a far lower level of credibility than would otherwise be the case.

Let me return for a moment to the example of escaped Atlantic salmon. Professor John Volpe of the University of Victoria has characterized the evolution of the industry's and the Department's position as follows:

- First, escapes are very rare and can therefore be ignored or discounted.
- Second, escapes are inevitable but the fish won't survive in the wild.
- Third, some may survive, but they won't get into river systems;
- Fourth, Some may find their way to fresh water, but they won't spawn,
- Fifth, spawning may occur, but it will not be competitively viable,

- Sixth, multiple year classes of juvenile Atlantic salmon in some rivers are not a threat to native populations.

That the final position may be accurate does not say much for the credibility of the industry and the department. Past position changes have now made the Department's work suspect to the public and the non-governmental organizations.

Some argue that this is not important, and that the economic issues surrounding aquaculture, particularly regional development, are such that only the experts can understand them, and therefore only the experts and the government positions count. Not so.

Aquaculture, as you are well aware, requires heavy initial investment, and start up costs. Confidence in the investment climate, in the certainty of policy that can be obtained prior to that investment, is important. That certainty cannot be obtained if time after time the industry is subjected to criticisms from reputable sources. Further, when so many inquiries by elected representatives have expressed their concern over the impact of the industry, you can be sure that those politicians are unlikely to quickly change their position, even if they are not now in government.

So the question now becomes, is there something that can be done to improve the situation?

I think there is. My suggestions are rather simple, but carrying on with what appears to be an industry communications campaign as has been done over the past few years is not working.

First, a change in the emphasis of approach would be helpful. The problem is not the success of a communications campaign. We are not an area where it is often possible to have scientific, definitive, proof. Credibility requires admitting that Aquaculture does have impacts, and that there cannot be certainty in determining what they are. To allow the critics to be alone in stressing the uncertainty of the science gives them credibility not just on the issue where they are accurate, but across the board.

The sea lice issue is a case in point here. Any reading of the testimony before the various investigative bodies on the issue shows that there is a strong belief in the public that the industry has dismissed the experience of Europe on this issue as not relevant to British Columbia, even though there may be something the Europeans can teach us here. Further, the public has the impression that the science done by the industry and by DFO was self serving and designed to bolster a previously held position. This may not be the case, but such a public impression is not helpful to the industry.

While I do not expect an end to the debate in my lifetime, I believe the Pacific Salmon Forum (www.pacificsalmonforum.ca/) provides a critical opportunity to get away from the claim and counter-claim nature of the recent debate.

The Forum is spending a great deal of money, and has taken a great deal of time, on the issue of sustainable aquaculture, which is essentially the issue of salmon farming. John Fraser has the personal credibility earned over a lifetime as a responsible environmentalist and fisherman, to establish benchmarks in a manner that DFO can no longer do.

The media response to its statement discounting the recent recommendation of the Legislative Committee on on-land and closed containment was interesting. Media (and the public) accepted the Forum's views. It has the credibility this issue demands.

My view therefore, is that while the report of the Forum may not be the final word on the subject of your industry's future, it will certainly be the major policy document of the next decade or decade and a half.

The Pacific Salmon Forum can be viewed by your industry as a major challenge but, as the old saying goes, it can also be viewed a major opportunity. It is a challenge because time is short, and according to press reports and your critics, the level of cooperation it has received from industry to date has not always been what it might have been. Review your contacts with the Forum. Have you provided everything that the Forum has required of you in the way of data? Has your position been fully cooperative? The last thing that anyone needs is for Mr. Fraser and the Forum to report negatively in this regard.

I said it is also an opportunity. If your positions are sound and your science work accurate, I have no reason to doubt that you will have a fair report. You then can move ahead with some regulatory certainty as to the future.

It is also an opportunity to dispel some of the public's concerns about your credibility which I have been discussing today and of which you are fully familiar. Don't attempt a communications campaign to show that you were right, largely right, or partially right all along. Instead remember that in addition to the science issues, your problem is largely the suspicion of the public and its distrust of your statements. A positive approach to the Forum can go far to dispel this problem.

Put as simply as I can, I believe Mr Fraser and the Forum is the best opportunity for improving the image and reputation of your industry that you will have for a very long time.