

Keynote Address

Fisheries Fact and Fiction: Science and Spin Doctors

*The Honourable John A. Fraser*¹



PHOTO CREDIT: MIKE HENDRY

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I want to make it very clear that in this august company, I approach this subject with as much humility as I can muster and certainly with some diffidence because you are all, to one degree or another, experts in your scientific backgrounds and disciplines. My discipline was law; but one thing good lawyers remember from what they were taught is that they have to deal in facts, not 'information'.

In my lifetime, there have been thousands of so-called 'information offices' open around the world; some in the West, some in the Soviet Bloc. Much of the information that emanates is propaganda, much of it is the consequence of spin doctors putting on the best appearance they can, especially when the information comes from governments. They couch things in language which is so antiseptic and so wrapped in what we used to call 'comfortable words' that one could almost think that things were as spin doctors

"But what we are dealing with here, as people trained in science, are facts. Facts are reality, not supposition, not rhetoric, not theory and above all not 'comfortable words'".

¹ Ambassador for the Environment, Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Suite #2000 - 300 W. Georgia St., Vancouver, BC, Canada V6B 6E1

“While it would be folly not to take cognisance of what we have done well...it is surely also folly to pretend that things are different from what they are, to try to make them better than they are.”

“What I want to do is keep us reminded of the necessity to deal with facts, not rhetoric, not spin doctors’ notions but what has actually happened.”

wished us to think: that in every day and every way the world was getting better and better.

But what we are dealing with here, as people trained in science, are facts. Facts are reality, not supposition, not rhetoric, not theory and above all not ‘comfortable words’. There is, however, both in terms of the science and in terms of the task of the politician to inform and lead, a terrible ‘disconnect’, not just here in my country but around the world. I am assigned each year to take a principal part in Canada’s participation in the Commission for Sustainable Development (CSD). As you know, the Commission for Sustainable Development was established after the Rio Conference to monitor whether or not we were doing what we said we would do. One of the ways it was hoped that we could monitor this was that each country would on its own file a report each year, and that report would, for better or for worse, set out how each country was doing in its efforts to obtain sustainable development according to the commitments that we all made at Rio. Unhappily, too often those reports are put together by people whose instructions are to make it look as good as they can. While it would be folly not to take cognisance of what we have done well (because we had done some things very well over the years), it is surely also folly to pretend that things are different from what they are, to try to make them better than they are. Again, the ‘disconnect’ between the reality and what people are saying.

The Commission on Sustainable Development has been meeting each year, trying to bring together governments to deal with what we talked about at Rio and for decades before. But again, when we finished the five-year review at the United Nations, only months ago last spring, the result was not what we had hoped for and, even with all the things that we have accomplished, the considered opinion (and here the CSD and the UN were starting to move to reality) was that we have lost ground globally, not gained it.

What I want to do is keep us reminded of the necessity to deal with facts, not rhetoric, not spin doctors’ notions but what has actually happened. When it comes to biodiversity I think what we are seeing is that we are going to have to pay far more attention than we have. The old word ‘ecology’ which, for my generation was still a bit of a mystery, really leads inevitably to biodiversity because what it teaches us is that if the life system of this planet begins to disintegrate the consequence is not just one species going extinct or one stock of fish failing to return to its native river in British Columbia; it means the complete unravelling of that miraculous web that ties it all together.

It is true, as some people like to point out, that there has always been change. But what we are facing today is a rapidity of change and a diminishing of biodiversity in an alarming, indeed an extraordinarily unsettling way. It is all very well to say that ten to twenty thousand years ago in the Ottawa valley, the capital city of Canada was under a kilometre of ice and, after all,

the world survived and so did the human species. But what we are facing now is the prospect of rapid climate changes which, while admittedly partly due to natural phenomena, we can now measure the unprecedented increase of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere over the last 50, 100 and 150 years. This is an arithmetical fact that you cannot get around. CO₂ is doubling and will triple and will go beyond that if we do not do anything about it.

This man-made increase in greenhouse gas emission is, according to most of the best scientists in the world, affecting our climate. This has been denied by some journalists, some of them in Canada; it has been denied by some industrialists, some of them in Canada; it has been denied by a few scientists who put their own particular spin on the interpretation but back away from the fact that their views were considered by many more of their scientific colleagues and rejected.

What we had at Rio was a very late but significant recognition, at least by those who were there representing their governments, that we have a problem that is not a figment of somebody's imagination. It wasn't made up by Greenpeace to raise funds, it is not the consequence of some conspiracy of left wing subversives to destroy the market economy. And yet, for the last five years since Rio, we have heard a great deal of 'information' on climate change put out by people that support the status quo which has been an appalling abdication of any responsibility to reality. I have touched on climate change because part of what you will all be considering today, tomorrow and the next day you will not be able to speak about without consideration of climate change.

But climate change is not the only problem we have. When Europeans first came to this continent they saw what former US Secretary of the Interior Stuart Udall called, in his remarkable book *The Quiet Crisis*, the myth of superabundance, the myth that there was always something more to take in the next valley, in the next watershed, that there would always be more fields to plow. There was no consideration at all, at least in the early years, that there had to be some limits on exploitation and that we had to live in harmony with the great natural world we were exploiting.

We in North America have been extremely critical of ourselves, and for good reason, but some countries still insist on saying that they don't need to do anything because the developed countries started the industrial revolution, that we started the pollution and it is up to us to fix it. Again, that is spin doctor nonsense. I have listened to it, and so have others. For the most part it doesn't get challenged, but it needs to be because intellectually it is nonsense, and pragmatically it is folly. The fact of the matter is that if you just take greenhouse gases, the so-called developing world will produce, within fifteen to twenty years or maybe sooner, over half the greenhouse gas emissions on the globe.

"If the life system of this planet begins to disintegrate the consequence is not just one species going extinct or one stock of fish failing to return to its native river in British Columbia; it means the complete unraveling of that miraculous web that ties it all together"

“Some figures show that at least 70 per cent or more of the fisheries in the world are at their maximum exploitation or declining.”

“The Ambassador’s role is not to be a knight on a white charger hurling epithets and massive darts of negativism at everybody that is failing to do what some of us think perhaps they ought to be doing.”

Here in British Columbia, we have taken a terrible public beating for the alleged misuse of our forests. Some of it has been legitimate criticism, but there are other places that ought also to be looked at. We are also very concerned about our fisheries. Why shouldn’t we be? We have misunderstood and mismanaged the Atlantic cod to the point where, even as recently as two weeks ago, scientists seemed to be concluding that the cod are not recovering—and we may not even know why. In British Columbia we have lost an abundance that we once took for granted, especially with anadromous fish. So we have reasons to be concerned. But if one goes around the world, and considers the reports of the UN agencies, the fact of the matter is that it is happening everywhere. Some figures show that at least 70 per cent or more of the fisheries in the world are at their maximum exploitation or declining.

The position of Ambassador for the Environment of Canada was established after Rio to do four things:

- 1) To make sure that Canada keeps the commitments that we made at UNCED;
- 2) To make sure that everybody else keeps their commitments;
- 3) To identify the things that we did not achieve at Rio and the things that we discovered need attention since Rio, and
- 4) To work collaboratively and act in a liaison capacity with the provincial governments, the academic community, non-governmental organizations, the industrial and technological sector of our country, and the public generally.

The Ambassador’s role is not to be a knight on a white charger hurling epithets and massive darts of negativism at everybody that is failing to do what some of us think perhaps they ought to be doing. It is, instead, to explain and promote Canadian policy within and outside the country.

For a moment I want to remind the Canadians here today, and perhaps inform others, about the Canadian position on biodiversity. You know that the Secretariat of the Biodiversity Convention is presently in Montreal. In 1992, Canada became the first industrialised nation to ratify the UN Convention on Biological Diversity. The theme for the fourth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to this Convention, which will take place in May in Bratislava, happens to be freshwater biodiversity and we will be well represented there. The theme for the Conference of the Parties which took place in November 1995 was “Marine and Coastal Biodiversity” and we were well represented there. Out of that came what has been called the Jakarta Mandate, supported by Canada, which led to the creation of an international roster of experts on marine and coastal biodiversity. That roster of experts met in March 1997 and the report of the first meeting of this group will also be tabled for discussion at the meeting in Bratislava. In that report were proposed elements for a three-year working-plan that will cover, among other

things, the evaluation of the 'precautionary approach', innovative marine and coastal area management, marine and coastal living resources, marine protected areas, mariculture and alien species. The effectiveness of those recommendations and whatever actions might be agreed upon afterwards is going to depend on the determination of everybody there to deal with facts, not fancy.

And when you are going to deal in facts, you have to get down to the places where these things are happening. And that is sometimes embarrassing for countries. It has been embarrassing for Canada. But nonetheless, unless we are prepared, all of us, to put the facts on the table at these international fora, we are not going to be able to take the action that is necessary. This has nothing to do with one place seeming to be superior to another. It has everything to do with facing the facts. It has everything to do with, I suppose, the scientific approach. Here in British Columbia, we are shortly going to announce the establishment of the Pacific Salmon Fisheries Conservation Council. It is to be an independent council established by both the provincial and federal governments. It is not there to manage the fishery. It is not there to allocate fish between competing gear types. It is there to report to governments on the state of the stocks and their habitat. The thinking behind the Conservation Council is not to manage the fishery, but to have an independent body that reports, at least to the degree that it is possible to do so, what has actually happened up and down this coast and in our rivers.

Now it is not true to say that nobody in the Department of Fisheries and Oceans knew anything about this until the council was set up. That is not so. But it is correct to say that for years, here on this coast, we have listened to so much self-serving rhetoric from different groups that it has been extremely difficult for the public to know what is the truth. The 'disconnect' is really quite extraordinary. On the one hand, the media report almost daily on local and international fishing collapses, but a magazine targeting the sport fishing market in British Columbia is still capable of publishing an article inviting anglers to flock to our coasts for the fishing experience of their lives!

Here again is the disconnect, which has got to be considered extraordinarily alarming by any sane person, between what we are getting from the science side and what we are getting from the "every day and every way the world is getting better and better" side. This is a disconnect which confounds intelligence and flies in the face of any kind of legitimate intellectual inquiry. It certainly doesn't seem to be consistent with what science is telling us. I asked the Department of Fisheries and Oceans to give me some background for my address to you today. And I said this is a meeting made up not of people who are likely to be wandering around waving placards, and not people who are searching for a microphone to condemn the Prime Minister or the President of the United States for problems we've got with

"For years, here on this coast, we have listened to so much self-serving rhetoric from different groups that it has been extremely difficult for the public to know what is the truth. The 'disconnect' is really quite extraordinary."

“Here again is the disconnect, which has got to be considered extraordinarily alarming by any sane person, between what we are getting from the science side and what we are getting from the ‘every day and every way the world is getting better and better’ side.”

the Alaskans over the salmon fishery but for people who are primarily trained in science, trained to look at what the realities are. I want to read just a couple of pages of some material that was put together for me by one of our top fishery scientists, Dr. Dick Beamish, here in British Columbia. Dr. Beamish writes:

“Although the word biodiversity is commonly used, it means different things to people depending on their background. Scientists want to relate biodiversity to ecosystems and managers want to know how to preserve and protect animals and plants of commercial interest. There is an urgent need to find scientifically acceptable definitions and measurements of biodiversity. But if past experience with similar issues is any lesson, definitive answers are not just over the horizon. It is clear, though, what concerns us. The general public are worried about the health of the ocean. They hear stories of overfishing; they see images of pollution and the destruction of marine life. For the average Canadian, biodiversity represents the need to preserve our marine habitats or ecosystems.

The concern is real but the management methods are almost unknown. The truth is that no-one knows how to preserve and protect full ecosystems. The new Oceans Act (a Canadian piece of legislation) requires that we learn, but it must be made clear that ecosystems management is a ‘learn as we go’ process. That’s the most important problem we have in retaining our biodiversity: we are not sure how to do it. Some strong leadership should quickly focus our attention and, like many issues, we will find that we have useful knowledge that was already available. However, a broader understanding of the factors that regulate the abundance of fish stocks will provide better management and will protect ecosystems.

On the west coast of Canada the specific biodiversity issues are the declining abundance of wild coho and chinook salmon, the declining abundance of total salmon catch, the introduction of exotic species (e.g. Atlantic salmon), and the very poor understanding of ecosystems. The coho situation in British Columbia in 1998 is extremely serious. Coho abundance has been declining in the 1990s as a result of low survival in the ocean. Marine survivals have declined from 15 to 20 per cent in the 1970s to less than 2 per cent in 1997. The release of large numbers of hatchery coho has not stopped the decline in abundance. Equally alarming is the relatively high percentage of hatchery fish; estimates in 1997 indicated that hatchery fish could represent 65-75 per cent of the population.

It is difficult to define what we mean by ‘wild coho’ and it is equally difficult to know how many truly ‘wild coho’ are left. The crisis in 1998

results from this uncertainty and the possibility of higher marine mortalities because of El Niño. A similar situation exists in Washington and Oregon. Unless the trend is reversed, wild coho stocks will become extinct. Reversing the trend will not simply result from eliminating fishing; we need to protect fresh water habitat and understand the impact that hatchery fish may have on wild stocks in fresh water, in the oceans, and in the fishery.

There is also concern about the declining abundance of salmon in the total catch—that is, salmon of all species. The recent total returns are well below the average catches for this century. Since 1920, the average catch of all species has been 68,000 metric tons for about 22,000,000 salmon. In 1995, 1996, and 1997, the total catch was 44,000 metric tons, and in terms of numbers, 14,000,000 (1995), 9,500,000 (1996), and 12,500,000 (1997). It is expected that the catches in 1998 could be even lower, possibly the lowest ever. The low abundance could result in extinctions, if overfishing occurs at the same time as an extreme environmental change.

We also do not know if the elimination of fishing would reverse the trend. It didn't for Atlantic cod or Atlantic salmon. Scientists believe that in southwest Vancouver Island, 14 of 65 chinook stocks (that is 36 per cent) could be at a high risk of extinction, and an estimate of 46 stocks in total could be in a state that is close to extinction. Authors of this report believe that 17 chinook stocks—or about 2 per cent of all BC stocks—are extinct. As with coho, the issue is that the inevitable errors in management or extreme environmental conditions or both will cause additional extinctions when natural abundance of some stocks are at their current levels.

The long term concern is the virtual absence of direct studies on biodiversity. We avoid studying ecosystems and we do not support taxonomic studies. The reasons vary. But the high priority on assessing the impacts of fishing on single species and providing annual fishing quotas leave little time and resources for other research. The paradox is that it is unlikely that we will improve our assessment capabilities until we understand more about the mechanisms that regulate abundance. The concern of the Convention on Biological Diversity is that human activities around the world are causing irreversible harm to coastal marine ecosystems. There is some evidence of such harm in British Columbia. However, there is no integrated and co-ordinated process to study and protect our coastal marine ecosystem. It is important to look around the world and be concerned and it is equally important to get started on our own ecosystem."

“One of the things that we have to cope with in the real world is that those who draw our attention to problems are seldom thanked for it.”

Now, ladies and gentlemen, that is not something that was dreamed up by eco-freaks or extremists. That comes from a respected senior scientist at the Canadian Department of Fisheries and Oceans. And what he said relates only to this coast, and to anadromous fish. What you are doing today is extraordinarily important. It needs to be repeated all over the world. The situation is by no means hopeless, and there is much that we can do. One of the things that we have to cope with in the real world is that those who draw our attention to problems are seldom thanked for it. And one of the reasons for that, of course, is that suggestions are seldom made as to what it is we ought to do about it. But the first thing we have to do is to find out the facts, and we have got to transmit those facts in intelligible and legible terms to the peoples of our different countries and to those who are elected to office. There is no use having a mass of scientific information which is not getting out to the public. It is going to require people of scientific training to assist others to put it out in a form that maintains its accuracy and its integrity but at the same time has some punch.

I was in politics for many years. One of the things that you try to learn is that there is no use spending all your time preaching to the converted. I am going to make the assumption that most of you really don't need lectures. What you do need is encouragement from someone who speaks for a lot of other people who are not here. You need to be told that what you are doing is of intense importance; you need to be encouraged to make sure that what you are considering, what you know, and what you don't know is made clear to a lot of other people who ultimately have to make the decisions, in other words to act on the facts. I want to say to all of you how much I appreciate the fact that you are here, at this Conference. I commend you for your work and I wish you good luck in your deliberations.