

Fish farms, lobster don't mix, expert says

BY BRETT BUNDALE BUSINESS REPORTER

Coastline will be an aquaculture dump site, marine biologist warns



Alexandra Morton at her research station in Echo Bay, B.C., in 2008. (THE NEW YORK TIMES)

An independent marine biologist says Nova Scotia's coastline is slated to become a dump site for the aquaculture industry.

Alexandra Morton, who has spent 20 years studying the impact of fish farming on wild marine species in British Columbia, is warning that Nova Scotia's fisheries are in peril.

"There is a tremendous conflict between fish farms and the lobster industry here," Morton said in an interview Sunday from Freeport, a fishing village at the end of Digby Neck on Long Island.

"Fishermen here feel like aquaculture is destroying their way of life."

Morton will give the fifth annual Ransom A. Myers Lecture in Science and Society at Dalhousie University in Halifax on Friday.

A renowned marine biologist and conservationist, Myers was passionate about halting the deleterious effects of overfishing on the ocean's fish stocks, especially Atlantic cod.

Morton has picked up the mantle of defending wild marine species, but it is aquaculture, not overfishing, that she sees as the threat.

She arrived in Nova Scotia a week before her lecture to learn first-hand how fish farming is affecting communities in the province.

Her concerns with the aquaculture industry include fish fecal waste accumulating beneath the cages, excess fish feed, chemicals, sea lice and viruses.

"Not only does the industry pollute the shorelines, but it threatens lobster grounds," Morton said.

She said some of the drugs used to treat sea lice can be harmful to shelled marine species such as prawns on the West Coast or lobsters in Atlantic Canada.

Another issue is the location of fish farms.

Morton said on the West Coast, fish pens are located in deep waters, but in Nova Scotia, many are being placed in shallow bays close to homes and popular fishing grounds.

"They are putting these farms on top of viable lobster grounds where it's shallow and there is low flush. It seems a real conflict of interest to have one industry allowed to come in and set anchors down right on top of the prime fishing grounds."

Morton said she was surprised by the number of homemade signs in people's yards and strong opposition to fish farming in Nova Scotia.

"People feel abandoned by the NDP government. They tell me they feel betrayed by (Premier) Darrell Dexter, who criticized the Conservative government for not listening to the community, then turned around and granted fish farm licences and gave \$25 million to Cooke Aquaculture."

Despite two decades of striving to protect sockeye salmon in the Fraser River, Morton said she does not have a quick solution to Nova Scotia's aquaculture dilemma.

“I wish I could point to one place in the world where the wild fisheries were working around the salmon farms. I would study that and say, ‘Here’s what we need to do,’ but that place doesn’t exist.”

She said alternatives, such as getting fish farms out of the ocean and into closed, onshore pens remains elusive for now.

“They say it’s the cost of building the tanks, so they keep putting fish in the ocean, which is acting like a big, free flush for them.

Morton said “this coastline has been clearly slated to become a dump site for this industry.”

“I can’t believe how beautiful these communities are and how viable the lobster fishery still is. But the coastline will suffer if aquaculture continues this way.”

The lecture will take place at 7 p.m. in the Potter Auditorium of the Kenneth C. Rowe Management Building.