

Opinion piece - Glenn Cooke, Cooke Aquaculture:

Why we need to farm the oceans

Atlantic Canadians and our family-owned salmon farming companies deserve a respectful conversation about the realities of fish farming, both the challenges and the benefits.

There is no such thing as open pen salmon farming. Our ocean farms, where our salmon spend the latter half of their lives in their natural habitat, are not open. Farms are securely moored on the ocean floor with systems that are designed and built to withstand local conditions by experts right here in Atlantic Canada. A multiple system of durable nets keep the salmon on the farm and the predators out, and our track record of containing our fish has been exemplary.

Cooke Aquaculture has been investing in closed containment, recirculation salmon farming systems for many years. Our salmon spend the first half of their lives — from egg to smolt — in hatcheries where they are nurtured by a team of freshwater experts led by Dr. Jake Elliott, a world leader in this field. His expertise has frequently been sought out by the very same conservation organizations that attack us.

In fact, it is in one of our hatcheries on the Magaguadavic River in New Brunswick that we have been growing native Atlantic salmon in partnership with local and international conservation groups since 2007. Our people, our expertise and our facilities are playing an important role in this salmon recovery program — in fact, our hatchery is now the sole keeper of this native Magaguadavic River strain of salmon. This fish's future is now in our hands. We do not take this responsibility lightly and we are eager to assist with similar programs in other parts of Atlantic Canada.

We just commissioned a state-of-the-art recirculation hatchery in Swanger Cove near St. Albans, N.L., and we will soon be building a similar facility near Digby, N.S. These new hatcheries will play an important role in the future of seafood production in Canada. They can also become Centres of Excellence for conservation.

Our farms have not caused widespread pollution, escaped fish or disease outbreaks. We have taken proactive measures to improve the performance of farms that we acquired over the years. A review of the environmental monitoring results and underwater video from farms that are in operation today will confirm our commitment to maintaining a healthy marine environment. As far as fish health is concerned, our recent proactive and aggressive management of a naturally occurring virus in Nova Scotia was applauded by the federal Canadian Food Inspection Agency, which was quoted in a March 7, 2012, press release: "The government of Canada appreciates the proactive approach taken by the company following the suspect finding. Their actions are an excellent example of how the industry takes its responsibility for fish health and these situations seriously."

The well-financed anti-salmon-farming lobby has been promoting a false concept that salmon farms can and should be moved from the ocean — where the fish can school and thrive at low stocking densities in their natural habitat — to land-based tank farms. We are already experts on growing salmon in tanks in hatcheries. We know how much energy and how much water is required and we know how much that costs. We know we can raise small numbers of fish to maturity in our land-based hatcheries, but we also know it isn't feasible to raise production fish for market in this environment. That is because the environmental impact of land-based salmon farming is far greater because of the electricity that is required to pump, heat, cool, recirculate and filter the water as well as the disposal of waste.

At the same time, we know the benefits of mirroring nature by moving salmon to the ocean when they are physiologically ready to move from fresh to salt water. It is exactly because this land-based argument makes no environmental or economic sense that none of the salmon farming countries are moving salmon farms out of their natural environment.

There was a time when our oceans were teeming with wild fish. There is nothing unnatural about using a small part of our working waterfront to grow fish to feed the world. Let's have an intelligent, science-based and respectful dialogue about how to do that responsibly.

I am a fifth-generation Atlantic Canadian, a salmon angler, conservationist and fish farmer. The “either-or” debate does a disservice to our coastal communities. We need to protect a healthy fishery and a healthy marine environment, but we also need to grow fish to meet a growing demand for healthy seafood. Our company and 2,000 Atlantic Canadian employees are playing a significant role in feeding the world; it's the responsible thing to do.

Glenn Cooke is CEO of Cooke Aquaculture.

Responses:

Self-serving piece

Glenn Cooke's July 21 opinion piece, “Why we need to farm the oceans,” was a brazen, self-serving article. He got one thing (and only one) right, when he said that we all deserve a “respectful conversation” about the realities of fish farming. This is the very thing that has been asked for by people who are concerned about damage to our coastal ecosystems. But the Dexter government stubbornly refuses to listen, just taking the industry line every time.

Cooke pretends that his feedlots are not “open.” Of course they are — all of the feces, waste feed and pesticides mix freely with the natural environment.

He refers to the lobby arguing against open-pen feedlots as “well-funded.” What a joke. His industry has millions in taxpayers' money thrown at it by the government, seemingly whether it was asked for or not.

Mr. Cooke fails to recognize that the people who are against his open-pen feedlots are not against all aquaculture, just the non-sustainable methods that his company practises. Most shellfish farms are acceptable in their environmental impact, and closed-containment is

certainly supported. There should be a separate industry association to represent them, so that they are not tarred by Cooke Aquaculture's damaging methods.

Graham Smith, Brookside

Far from good-news story

Glenn Cooke's comments are rich in irony (July 21). He plays the victim card, lamenting that Cooke Aquaculture has been "attacked." Meanwhile, he is running a multinational company that has just been given 25 million reasons to feel like a lottery winner. He also has the undying loyalty of at least one Nova Scotian who really does count — Darrell Dexter. The premier has Cooke's back, even when the rest of us may not. So he should quit complaining. Lottery winners should take their proceeds graciously.

You couldn't make this stuff up if you tried (and they are certainly trying to make stuff up). Fortunately, open-net fish farming is being exposed for what it is: bad for the environment; bad for wild catch fisheries; bad for coastal communities that become sacrifice zones; and bad for the taxpayer who has to pay to clean up the damage in more ways than one. Nice try, Mr. Cooke, but it isn't working. You cannot spin open-net salmon farming into a good-news story. It's anything but.

Stewart Lamont, Managing Director, Tangier Lobster

Need solutions

I am a follower of the fish-farm stories because they directly affect me. Living near Saddle Island and enduring the noise has been a difficult challenge. Trying to figure out the truth behind the claims of the fish-farm management and the political jargon is also difficult.

I was pleased at the recent remarks by the Conservative leader, who basically said: Look, there are just too many different positions in place on this issue and we have to keep open minds and work through the problems. We must try to find a common ground and solve these problems. Basic logic, move forward, study the situation, find a solution for everyone affected and achieve solid growth for this industry, and do it with an open mind. Now that makes a lot of sense to me.

So, Mr. Fisheries Minister, stop with your foolish retorts and solve the issues. We need solutions, not NDP political dictatorship.

Ross Blackburn, Bayswater

Farewell to Nova Scotia

I live beside an organic lobster farm called Jordan Bay. Because it is clean and healthy, the bay replenishes itself with lobsters and irish moss every year, providing employment for over

150 people. These lobster fishermen and irish moss harvesters are my neighbours — they live and work in our small fishing community. They harvest the product that Nova Scotia is known for — premium, high-quality lobster.

The NDP government is about to change all that forever.

The NDP government has said: We are funding ocean feed-lot farms now. These farms have problems with disease, and they are going to dump their tons of raw sewage on your farm every year. But don't worry, sometime in the future, when feed-lot farms can figure out how to grow fish that don't get sick, your great-grandchildren can work for them at minimum wage.

In the meantime, they need your bay and about 100 other bays to practise in.

Farewell to Nova Scotia ...

Sindy Horncastle, Jordan Bay