

## Damning Salmon

**Darrell Dexter once sagely opposed open-pen salmon farms, but has apparently swapped wisdom for power**

by [Chris Benjamin](#)

In 2007, leader of the opposition Darrell Dexter spoke passionately from a Port Mouton beach: The provincial government is "not listening to [coastal communities]...they could turn this around by demonstrating that, with respect to this project, they are going to say no."

"This project" is an open-pen salmon farm. Dexter was right. Open-pen finfish aquaculture is devastating, ecologically and economically.

Lewis Hinks of the Atlantic Salmon Federation, at a press conference last week featuring hundreds of people from 108 organizations---conservationists, fishing operations, anglers, tourism operators---calling for a moratorium on open-pen finfish farms, said our Atlantic Salmon population shows signs of recovery. "These fish aren't extinct and there is no reason not to work hard to bring them back."

In Newfoundland salmon runs have been historic, except on the south coast where there's a large aquaculture operation.

Fish farms humble land-based industrialists in their capacity for pollution. Consider the poop, putrefied fish and feed, antibiotics and pesticides pumped into oceans, metals leached. These create dead zones with 300-kilometre radii.

Like the behemoth cattle feedlots of the Midwest, pens are fin-to-tail packed, allowing lice and disease to spread rapidly. "Because there are more lice than fish they can expand outside and infect anything swimming by," Hinks says.

To prevent infestations, simply coat food pellets with emamectin benzoate. Problem solved, unless you're a female lobster, in which case you have a 44 percent chance of moulting prematurely. If you're carrying eggs, they're aborted. Sometimes the fish get sea lice anyway. Next step: dump a pyrethroid pesticide, lethal to lobsters, into the water.

Raymond Plourde of the Ecology Action Centre notes that other jurisdictions with salmon-farm industries, "Norway, British Columbia, Chile, they don't have a multi-million dollar...Atlantic lobster fishery to worry about."

Stewart Lamont, managing director of Tangier Lobster, says the threat to lobster outweighs any benefit. "We have 10,000 workers in Atlantic Canada and Quebec who fish lobster commercially on a seasonal basis." It's a billion-dollar industry in a poor province.

Ultimately, pesticides can't eliminate lice, which leaves fish susceptible to disease. "I liken diseases in sea pens to a cold in the classroom," Hinks says. "Young children walk into a classroom where one kid has a cold, the whole class gets it---you've got it and everybody's got it."

Even if passing wild fish don't get lice or disease, farmed fish escape. A 2008 lit review found escaped farm salmon in 87 percent of rivers studied within 300 kilometres of fish farms. "In 2010, over 230,000 salmon were *reported* escaped from open-net pen aquaculture in the Bay of Fundy," Hinks says.

A 2008 Dalhousie study found death rates in wild salmon near salmon farms 50 percent higher than elsewhere, thanks to interbreeding messing with time-tested survival mechanisms.

*Opposition leader* Dexter was right to oppose this mess. So why is *premier* Dexter its biggest proponent? Lamont observes, "We have the government in the awkward position [of being] both promoter and regulator."

The party line is: fish farms = jobs. But there is far less work in them than the lobster industry they threaten.

The Nova Scotia shellfish industry employs 82 people per million dollars in revenue, compared to 28 for angling, 12.5 for lobster and seven for open-pen aquaculture. That last number shrinks as operations expand.

The only conceivable benefit is the slight chance of nudging GDP but, besides millions in start-up subsidies, taxpayers pay to destroy diseased fish---as much as \$21 million for the recent Shelburne outbreak alone. Dealing with New Brunswick disease outbreaks cost \$75 million from 1996 to 2006.

There is a profitable alternative: inland closed-containment finfish farming. Several non-salmon versions of these run successfully in Nova Scotia, and salmon ones operate in the US. They carry none of the risks of open-pen aquaculture, and foster homegrown innovation of the *JobsHere* variety.

"We are a world-leading marine district with scientists at universities and federal research institutes," Plourde says. "We could develop a world-class solution."

Chris Benjamin is author of *Eco-Innovators: Sustainability in Atlantic Canada*, which won the 2012 APMA Best Atlantic-Published Book Award and is shortlisted for the Richardson Non-Fiction Award