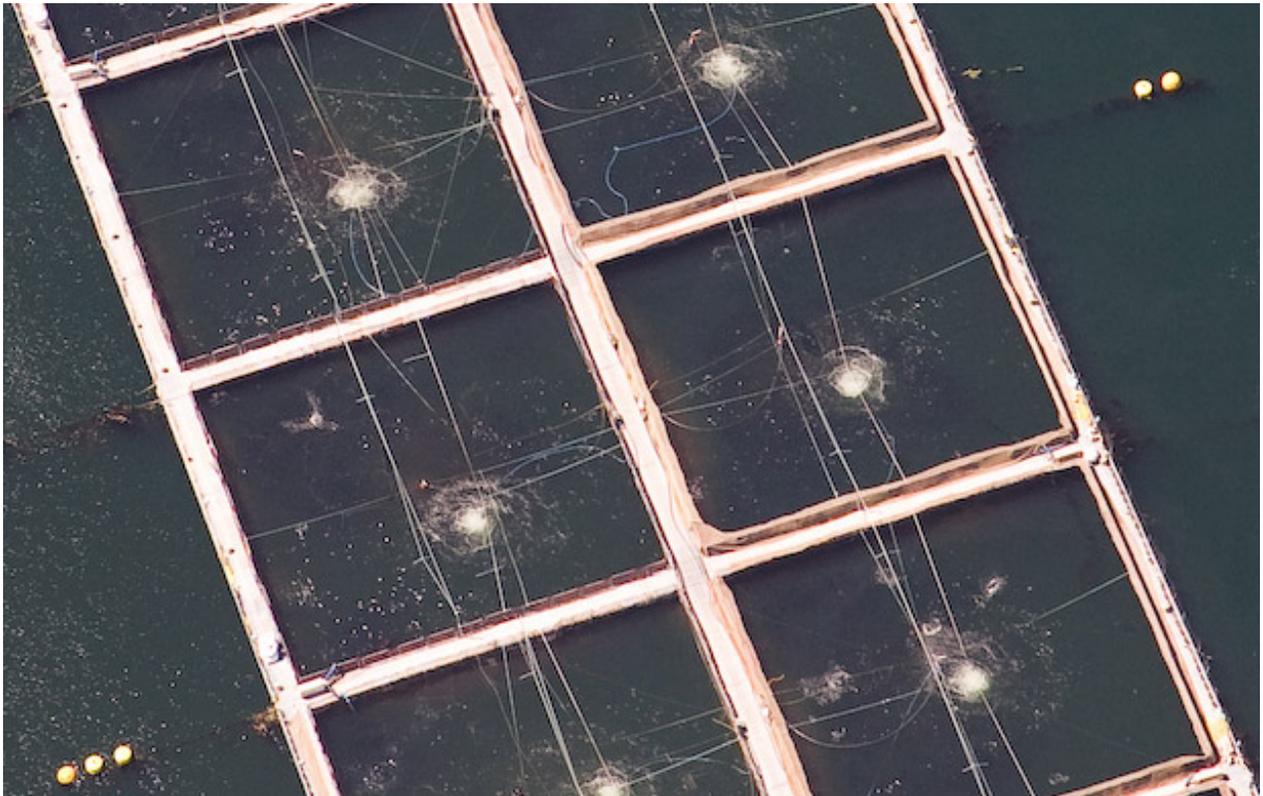


# Pristine Coast doc reveals surprising, untold history of salmon farms

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Rafe Mair

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My first brush with the fish farming industry on our coast came around 2000 when I was broadcasting for CKNW. At that point, this was considered to be a “good” industry because their product would ease the pressure on the wild salmon.

The big issue became the [escape of Atlantic salmon](#) from the farms which were entering B.C. rivers and spawning. This was denied by the government but easily proved by the work of Dr. John Volpe, a fish biologist who was a regular guest on my show.

## Enter sea lice, Morton

If nothing else had developed, this would have been serious enough. However, In the next year or so I became aware of the work being done by Alexandra Morton in the Broughton archipelago on the question of sea lice destroying migrating salmon smolts. Alex and I did a number of shows on the subject.

Working as one person alone against the massive might of the federal government, Alex – who would later be granted an honorary doctorate by Simon Fraser for her courageous efforts – produced irrefutable evidence that sea lice were indeed destroying our salmon runs.

The federal government, rather than congratulating her on her work and helping her, threatened to throw

her in jail for “illegal testing”. To this day the work of Alexandra Morton has been ignored by the government and she has been subjected to ongoing hassling and discrimination.

Her contribution and courage are remarkable beyond description and it is she who has led and sustained the fight.

## The plot thickens

By 2008, I had lost my “bully pulpit” on the radio and had taken an assignment as spokesman for Tom Rankin’s Save Our Rivers Society, joining my colleague-to-be Damien Gillis. After the election of 2009 he and I founded *The Common Sense Canadian*, which he now so ably publishes. I lost contact with the fish farming issue not, I assure you, because of a lack of interest, but because I was 100% busy on my new endeavours.

My, oh my, have things changed since then.

Thanks in large measure to Alex, the whole question of sea lice expanded as we learned of their spreading deadly disease through all the wild salmon populations with tragic consequences. With Alex’s work, this was [scientifically documented and publicized](#).

The entire story has been brilliantly told by film-maker Scott Renyard in an extraordinary documentary called *The Pristine Coast* which Wendy and I were privileged to see a few days ago and which has been recently featured at the recent Vancouver Film Festival.

## Film brings astonishing new revelations

Scott traces the history of the terrible consequences of fish farms on our coast from the beginning up until the present time, revealing some extraordinary conclusions.

For one example, we have always been concerned that global warming was destroying our wild salmon. It turns out that it may be quite the other way around and that the destruction of wild salmon has contributed to global warming!

Scott has discovered that the Atlantic cod, hake, etc. problem may well have had more to do with the sea louse than overfishing. Atlantic sea lice, very closely related to their Pacific counterpart, carry and spread disease, just as happens to our salmon. There seems to be a connection between the events on both coasts which I had not heard about. It’s quite a story and now credibly documented.

I don’t want to give away the whole plot but you will be fascinated, I am sure, by this highly presentable presentation of what has become partly farce and all tragedy.

## What happens to our environment if salmon disappear?

Scott is not optimistic by any means. Without drastic action on the part of the federal government in particular, he sees tragedy on our coast and laments not only the passing of the Pacific salmon and other fish but asks the highly pertinent question, what happens to our environment then?

The blame can be [laid squarely on the federal government](#) and Department of Fisheries and Oceans, as



Alexandra Morton displays pink salmon smolt with lice (Photo: Nick Didlick)

directed by grossly negligent politicians. As many of us have long suspected, there has not only been no understanding by Ottawa of these problems, but an utterly uncaring attitude. The fact is, they just do not give a damn.

## Importing disease

One only has to look at the importation of the fatal diseases that have hit our wild salmon stocks to see this negligence in its starkest terms. For the most part, these fatal diseases have come from farmed Atlantic salmon and the ova used to reproduce them, spread in large measure by the over abundant sea lice. It's more complicated than that, but that's where it starts and that's where it should end.

The federal government, far from just doing nothing, [has encouraged more of the same](#). (You should know that DFO, supposedly the custodian of our salmon, [is also mandated to promote fish farming!](#))

You will, of course, be appalled by what you see but you will recognize that this is a documentary put together so that all of the technical details are there but everyone can understand.

## Film features whistle-blowing ex-fish farmers

Never fear, the fish farmers have their say although one of the "stars" of the show is a very credible former fish farmer who verifies Scott's evidence of the Department of Fisheries Policy, or lack of it, to a "T".

For the next few months, The Pristine Coast will only be available at various film festivals and I strongly advise readers to keep an eye out for them. Thereafter it will become available on DVD.

This is a remarkable effort by a brilliant filmmaker, Scott Renyard.

## About the Author

Rafe Mair

**Rafe Mair**, LL.B, LL.D (Hon) a B.C. MLA 1975 to 1981, was Minister of Environment from late 1978 through 1979. In 1981 he left politics for Talk Radio becoming recognized as one of B.C.'s pre-eminent journalists. An avid fly fisherman, he took a special interest in Atlantic salmon farms and private power projects as environmental calamities and became a powerful voice in opposition to them. Rafe continues to make regular appearances on radio and television, writes regularly for [theyee.ca](#), and writes a regular blog at [rafeonline.com](#).  
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