

The great salmon debate

Susan Sampson

For Canada's most famous scientist, it's wild salmon or nothing.

But what about the average family who can't afford it? The difference in price between wild and farmed salmon can be \$7 a pound.

"It's not our inalienable right to eat salmon," David Suzuki says. "I would never feed a child farmed salmon. It's poison!"

Suzuki seems annoyed by the price question. Too bad. Because it's the average consumer who needs to hear (and heed) his message about an ecosystem on the verge of collapse and about individual responsibility to turn the world around. The same average consumer who picks up Atlantic (read farmed) salmon at the supermarket, or even the fast food masses who think Harvey's new salmon burger is the height of maritime cuisine.

At Feast of Fields on Sunday, where he led a forum on salmon aquaculture, Suzuki was preaching to the converted: chefs, growers, organic activists and business people, and the gourmet grazers who could afford to pay \$100 for a ticket.

Organizers say more than 1,000 people attended the 15th annual Feast of Fields run by Organic Advocates — reorganizing, regrouping and returning after a one-year hiatus. On a glorious day at Rouge Park, close to the Pickering border, visitors sampled organic tidbits, wines and brews, served in delicious harmony with the environment. For the first time, a forum was held as a prelude to the fundraising feast.

So many factors have made salmon farming a disastrous enterprise. Salmon are raised by the millions in vast, submerged net cages patrolled by divers who collect the dead. Crowding makes the fish prone to diseases and parasites like sea lice. They are treated with antibiotics and biocides. They are fed fish pellets, which promote the concentration of toxic chemicals like PCBs and mercury in their flesh. (A recent study warned people not to eat farmed salmon more than once a month.) Waste from feces and uneaten food pollutes surrounding waters. Fish that escape mess with the gene pools of their wild cousins. The salmon are even fed pink dye to look pretty; fish farmers can customize the colour.

When we're talking about wild Canadian salmon here, we're talking B.C. salmon. The wild Atlantic breed has been fished close to extinction. So when you see Atlantic salmon,

a good guess is that it's farmed. Canned salmon is usually wild. As for organic farmed salmon, that's an oxymoron, says panelist Jennifer Lash, executive director of the Living Oceans Society and co-ordinator of the Coastal Alliance for Aquaculture Reform.

The trouble is, labelling systems are unclear, so you often don't know what you're buying. Proper labelling is one facet of what Lash's groups want from salmon farmers. Here's what's fair, she says: 0 escapes, 0 per cent risk of disease transfer, 0 farms in communities that don't want them and 0 risk to the environment.

"The environment," she says, "is bearing the cost of salmon farming."

Activists are pushing for closed containment systems, but panelist John Volpe, for one, says that's not likely to happen. Volpe, an expert on seafood production systems, teaches at the University of Alberta. He says Chilean salmon farmers, already doing a booming business, plan to double production. Canadian farmers, he says, won't find switching to closed containment systems cost-effective.

Farmed salmon is cheaper for the consumer, he adds, but costs are "offloaded on to the environment."

In response to the barrage of criticism, the Canadian Aquaculture Industry Alliance paints a picture of salmon farmers as regular folks with the same concerns, who want to "do the right thing" and who are working hard to fix their problems.

"The people who work on our farms are not some nefarious group," says executive director David Rideout, another panelist. "We believe we have a very safe, healthy product. We believe our work is sustainable."

According to the alliance, eating farmed salmon is just as healthy as eating wild salmon. It says PCBs, for example, are widespread in many different types of foods — and at higher levels. It says there are minimal differences in PCB levels between wild and farmed salmon. And farmed salmon is cheaper. (Last week, I spotted some at \$8.99 a pound, compared to wild salmon at \$15.99 a pound.)

Problem is, Rideout wants us to take it on faith that the industry will change. "Time will tell," he says.

Suzuki counters that we're out of time. And we're not looking at the big picture.

"We are living in a critical period in the life of the planet," he says. "One single species has the ability to undermine the capacity of the planet's life control systems — air, water and soil."

Only a century ago, most people farmed and lived in rural areas. Now we are an urban species with a different relationship to food, distant from the source. We don't see cause and effect, he says, or flow with the seasons. Globalization brings us food from everywhere, all year.

I encountered a rare exception one summer day in Muskoka. My 9-year-old daughter Emma caught a rock bass that we decided was big enough to eat. She named it Earl (because it was caught early). She was very solicitous of Earl, keeping it alive in the sink of the cottage and refreshing its water frequently. Then the time came time to put Earl on the barbecue. For Earl's platter, Emma made a sign saying: "Thanks Earl. You were our friend, now you are our dinner." She even tried a few bites before pronouncing Earl "too fishy."

Now that's what I call a relationship with food. On other hand, Suzuki has spoken to

children who believe fish spend their lives in Styrofoam and plastic wrap.

With his full head of gray hair, hippie beard, smooth complexion and fit body, Suzuki seems only gently touched by age, a testament to healthy living. At age 68, he has evolved from a geneticist to a compelling voice in the wilderness of our consumer society.

He calls modern economics "a form of brain damage," since it considers the work of Mother Nature irrelevant and foolishly touts growth, growth, growth.

"We should put our focus back on the real world that sustains us, not the world of business and economics," says Suzuki.

Like a lot of food ventures, salmon aquaculture is mired in the world of economics. Suzuki says it is not sustainable and the salmon industry is living in denial.

Which leads us leads us back to the average person. "What we do as consumers has an enormous impact," Suzuki says.

That may mean buying wild salmon if you can afford it — or no salmon at all.

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