

Hey Kirk, no proof farms hurting wild salmon

The news that William Shatner of Capt. Kirk fame is boosting the NDP-backed battle to torpedo our fish-farm industry is weird, but not entirely from another universe.

After all, there is nothing an impassioned movie actor loves more than a cause . . . and the applause that goes with it.

The 79-year-old Shatner said in a conference call last week his “rage” was directed against companies that act without conscience and care only about the bottom line.

But in the real world, there is no proof that B.C. farmed salmon, the supposed villain of this torrid West-Coast drama, are killing off wild salmon or even causing them extraordinary distress.

There is research by marine biologist Alexandra Morton suggesting



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this might be so. And she is backed by union supporters, eco-campaigners and members of special-interest groups who'd love to kill off competition in the B.C. and Alaska salmon market.

But the fact is that experts appear heavily divided over whether fish farms, stocked with Atlantic salmon,

really are responsible for putting wild Pacific salmon at risk through the widespread transfer of potentially deadly sea lice.

Former fish-farm consultant Vivian Krause, for example, has written a report strongly critical of Morton's research and that of other activist scientists.

“They excluded all the data that didn't fit their hypothesis in order to manufacture something that substantiates their marketing campaign,” she said.

Krause, who has a master's degree in nutrition, told me Saturday that Shatner has allowed himself to be badly misled.

“He should consider that salmon farming avoids overfishing which is, after all, the worst risk to wild salmon,” she said. “You want to save wild salmon, Billy Boy? Eat farmed.”

Moreover, Mark Sheppard, our province's leading aquatic veterinarian, told a federal fisheries committee in April that the presence of lice on farmed salmon in B.C. is low compared with other countries and regions, and isn't a growing problem. “In general, the lice abundance on both farmed salmon and wild fry have actually declined for five consecutive years,” he said.

But last month federal NDP fisheries critic Fin Donnelly introduced a private member's bill to force our salmon-farming industry to switch to so-called closed-containment on land.

This, of course, would effectively drive the industry into the ground. For one thing, the capital costs of the land-based pens would be prohibitive. Also, they'd almost certainly be less humane for the fish.

Now, I'm the first to acknowledge that farming salmon is far from ecologically pure. But neither is commercial fishing. So we should be sure we know all the facts before we regulate a profitable aquaculture business to death and put thousands more folks on the dole.

We should also be careful about caving in once more to the insatiable demands of rabid eco-groups, many of them funded by elite American foundations.

Too often, their sky-is-falling appeals and selective use of “science” hoodwinks the public and leads to poor government decisions.

My advice to the Canadian-born Shatner, meanwhile, is to control his rage — or at least redirect it toward the money-grubbing lice and other parasites in Hollywood.

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