

The Honourable John Fraser

Former Minister of Fisheries and Environment speaks out about DFO

John Fraser is currently Canada's Ambassador for the Environment. He was a Member of Parliament in the 1980's with the Conservative government, and was Minister of Fisheries and Oceans as well as Minister of the Environment in his time. He spent 21 years in the House of Commons in Ottawa, much of it as Speaker for the House. Fraser was honoured with the Order of Canada and there is an Environmental Achievement Award named after him. As Minister of Environment early in the 1980's, Fraser was instrumental in moving on acid rain, and eventually got to oversee a mitigation agreement signed between Canada and the United States. He was in attendance in Rio de Janeiro and Kyoto for the world summits on climate change.

Since officially leaving politics and law, which was his profession, Fraser has occupied many roles as a government-appointed councillor on fisheries matters. He led the Pacific Fisheries Resource Advisory Council and the BC Pacific Salmon Forum, and is still a member of the latter.

John Fraser is a respected thinker and actor in fisheries and environmental matters and continues to be very busy, recently giving of his time and insight to Justice Bruce Cohen and his assistants in the judicial inquiry into the 2009 Fraser sockeye collapse. In July he took the time to share some of his experiences, personal and political, on the salmon streams and with the Department of Fisheries and Oceans.

From an interview with Kerry Coast at his home in Whistler, here are some of a veteran's thoughts on the current crisis in the fisheries.

"When I was in the military, as a young man, I remember one of our instructors saying, 'when you get to a situation where all is chaos,' and he used a much more vulgar army expression for that, he said, 'you ask who is in charge. If no one knows, then you know what the problem is.'

And that applies to all sorts of situations, including what's happening in the Department of Fisheries and Oceans. I can't stand a situation where you don't have someone in charge - then no one is responsible. Things go from one committee to the other and no one is held responsible for saying or doing anything, and it goes on and on.

From the early 1990's the salmon have been declining, and you don't need to be a scientist to know that things are going wrong, but what the hell has that Department been doing? DFO is run in Ottawa, by people a long way away. I remember someone said, Vancouver is 3,000 miles from Ottawa, but Ottawa is 30,000 miles from BC. It's true."

Mr. Fraser had a lot of documents on his dining room table. One was a draft report from a number of DFO scientists with evidence of extenuating circumstances that would have affected the smolts leaving the Fraser in 2007 - the smolts that should have returned as adults in 2009.

"The information in this report was available to DFO long before they made their prediction in 2009 that ten million sockeye would be returning. Why weren't they using it?

Wendy Watson-Wright was the Head of Science for DFO, she has recently left the Department and has a glorious position

in Europe now. But how is it that the Head of Science didn't know about that declining graph on the front page of your paper? What kind of briefings was she getting? That's a legitimate question. Was the Head of Science being given this information?"

Justice Bruce Cohen, heading the Commission into the 2009 Fraser sockeye collapse, was an articling student at Ladner Downes when Fraser was a partner in that law office.

"I was visiting with Cohen to discuss the context of his inquiry, and I said there are two things he needs to look at. What happened to this run; who knew; what was being done? And second, how did the Department let this happen? How does this Department function?

I'll tell you some stories about that.

Several years ago, a guy named Blake Coverington got together with some others and went to see the main Pink salmon stream in the Broughton Archipelago, the Glendale River. Years before it had gotten an enhanced spawning channel, but it wasn't maintained and it became less and less productive.

Coverington and the others raised \$150,000 and, under the advisement of DFO scientists, they designed a wholesale restoration of that river. They said they would do it at their own expense. So they got a barge and equipment and workers and set off to the Broughton to fix this stream.

I heard about it, so I phoned Paul Sprout, the Regional Director for DFO Pacific Region, who I knew well, and I asked, what's going on here? And he didn't know anything about it. Even though his own fisheries staff was advising on



"Look at the sacred headwaters of the Stikine, Skeena and Nass Rivers. Companies are exploring for coalbed methane up there. Tell me why DFO has been sitting on their ass about this? Aren't they supposed to be protecting fish? It's like somewhere in DFO they said to those companies that it's okay to go ahead. They must have done, or those companies would not have gone ahead and spent millions of dollars on exploration. Well, if DFO can't protect the last three great salmon streams in BC, who can?"

it. I asked the scientists about it and they said, 'oh, we never get to talk to anyone that high up.' This might be an egregious, unusual event, but I don't think so.

I want to show you just how DFO administers itself.

A few years ago, I was told by senior DFO scientists that there would be no funds to monitor the Pink return to the Broughton Archipelago. We had been spending millions of dollars doing top quality research on that run. We had to know how many were coming back. Because the outgoing smolts were picking up sea lice from the

fish farms in quantities that might affect the survival rate of these fish, we had to know how many adults of that flock were coming back.

So I got told, as Chair of the BC Pacific Salmon Forum, that there was no budget to monitor the return that Autumn. I said, that's incredible; there will be a complete gap in our statistical data!

So I phoned Wendy Watson-Wright's office. She was away. I tried to contact Minister Regan, but he was always away, and his staff wouldn't give me his home riding's office number. I could never get through to either of them, but when I got the secre-

tary, I finally asked, what is your name? She wouldn't give me her last name. So I asked, who do you work for? She said, what do you mean?

Well, eventually she got someone on the phone. I explained the situation and said we, the BC Pacific Salmon Forum, will help with some of our money to get those Pinks counted. He called me back the next day to say that \$70,000 was available to monitor the return. Later the same day, I got a call from Paul Sprout saying 'I don't know how you did it, but we're getting the money.' But how could the Deputy Minister and the Head of Science not have understood the importance of that?

the Minister what you want them to do.

When I was Minister and we were losing the Atlantic salmon, I said, I want to know everything about it, and I found out what we had to do. So we didn't lose the Atlantic salmon. First we stopped the netting, then we bought back the licenses.

Rafe Mair and I grew up together, all through high school. We both ended up as lawyers, Environment Ministers, in politics. When he gets exasperated, he starts calling people names. For me, I ask them, what have you done? When there's a head of Science in DFO, I ask, what have you done?

There are piles of recommendations that DFO

"I caught my first trout when I was six years old. I looked around at the stream and the forest and asked my dad, who made all this? He said, 'God made it, and he expects us to take care of it.' Now, I'm not a theologian or a philosopher, I'm a lawyer, but I think he was right."

was told there was a discussion about Pacific salmon and resources, and there was a senior official there from the department who was an economist and an expert in government finance. He said, 'why should we spend money on wild salmon in BC? It's a dying industry.'

What was obvious about that accountant was that he knew nothing about the west coast, nothing about the ecological make-

economics class, the kind of person who could get high marks on exams but was bereft of any real brains. He had influence without the intelligence and judgement to go with it."

Mr. Fraser has been writing letters asking for government accountability in the matter of sea lice from fish farms since at least 2002. In December of 2004, he accepted the position of Chair of the new BC

Pacific Salmon Forum to make recommendations on fish farming, at the personal request of Premier Campbell. Their report came out in January of 2009.

"With the Salmon Forum we said to government, if you can manage lice so there's no more than what should occur in natural background conditions, then you can do it. We said there must be no

expansion, they must seriously test on-land closed containment, there must be industry transparency, the precautionary principle must apply, and, as in any ecosystem, any activity must be measured against the capacity of the environment to accept it. We made a lot of recommendations, but those are key.

Two weeks after we made our recommendations, Judge Hinkson said the 1987 transfer by the federal government of authority to BC to manage fish farms was unconstitutional, and ordered the federal government to take over regulation of coastal fish farms.

"Back in 2000, Alexandra Morton began to

find lice on smolts. The Department of Fisheries, in an act of the most bureaucratic silliness, told her if she continued to go out in her tin boat and scoop up smolts, they would charge her under the Fisheries Act.

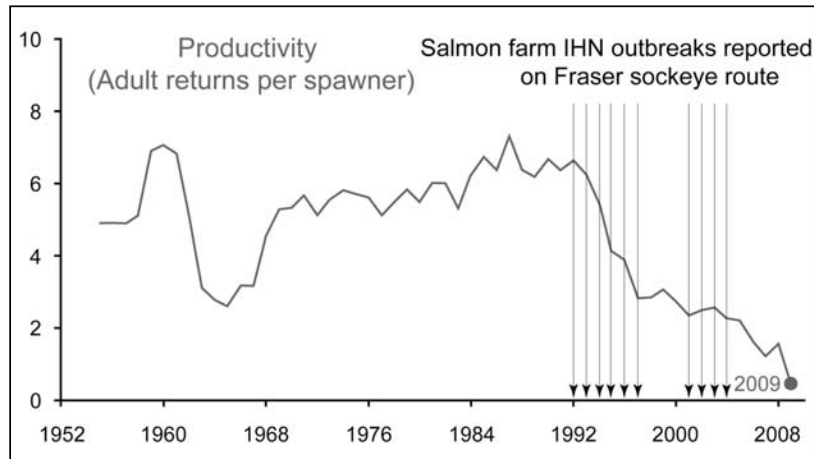
What they should have done was put together a team to study it with her. Out east they ran a not-so-subtle campaign promoting the fish farming industry.

Now in the last year the same Alexandra Morton has found lice on sockeye and, as a consequence, fish farms are being considered by some as a possible cause of the decline of that particular sockeye run. So what was DFO's response? Just about the same as it was ten years ago. They deny any connection between sockeye declines and sea lice, when they still should be putting together a team of experts to go and study it.

We spent millions of dollars studying the Broughton Archipelago (where upwards of 30 farms are located), and they haven't got a team together. Why aren't they pursuing this to find out the truth? If Alexandra's findings are accurate, that's very serious. If they're not, we need to know that, move on and find out what the real problem is."

"When we used to watch the old movies, the cowboys and Indians, I was always on the Indians' side." Mr. Fraser remarked on the importance of native and non-native cooperation in conservation in British Columbia.

"I am acutely aware that we never could have achieved the conservation that we have without aligning with First Nations. We never could have saved South Moresby or Clayoquot, and I know they arrested hundreds of people out there, but we never would have done it. And I don't just mean lining up First Nations, which comes very close to using those people for our own purposes, I mean aligning with them."



"The Fraser sockeye decline began at the same time government failed to cull millions of IHN virus infected feedlot salmon on the Fraser River migration routes." - Alexandra Morton. This graph appears in Morton's response to the recently announced Federal regulations for aquaculture in BC.

I could go on all morning with examples like that, but what I'm trying to get across is that there are a lot of questions about what goes on in the Department.

If you're trying to fix things out here, it's not enough to look at one run. You've got to look at the way the Department functions.

"After the Summit on the Salmon conference (March 30 + 31, 2010), where are the ten things we want the Minister to do? That's a piece of advice to university professors and scientists: you have to tell

has never done anything with, and if you had someone in the Department with the drive to pull those out and implement them, then maybe you wouldn't need an Inquiry."

Mr. Fraser has been closely involved with government for long enough to have heard of a great many goings-ons in policy. Some of these are less than positive.

"A few years ago, and I can't give you names, someone from BC was meeting with then Fisheries Minister Regan in Ottawa. I

up of life here, nothing about the role of salmon in thousands of years of First Nations history, and had no understanding of what salmon mean to the children and grandchildren of so many European settlers that came here a hundred years ago or more.

He did not understand the value of salmon to BC's economy in terms of tourism, recreation and trade that are dependent on salmon, all of which would collapse if there were no salmon at all. His comment sounded like something I would overhear in first year