

Will David Suzuki please shut up?

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Photo: Terry Farrell/The Globe and Mail

Salmon farmer Linda Sams: 'There are more PCBs in breast milk.'

Campbell River — Linda Sams is dressed for the weather in a bulky woollen sweater. She's got her hair in frizzy pigtales. As our little boat jounces across the waters around Quadra Island, she strikes me as a down-to-earth person, as well as a committed environmentalist.

Yet according to some famous people around here, she's Public Enemy No. 1. Linda Sams is a salmon farmer. And in B.C. there's a war on over salmon.

As she sees it, salmon farming is a sustainable way to harvest bounty from the seas to feed the world at a reasonable cost. It also offers economic hope to remote coastal communities that have no other livelihood. As others see it, salmon farming is considerably more sinister.

Over there on Quadra Island lives David Suzuki, who's been voted by CBC audiences as one of our greatest Canadians. He says farmed salmon is "poison," and he'd never feed it to his kids. He has persuaded chefs across Canada not to serve it, and warns the rest of us to stay away from it. Many Hollywood celebrities have signed on to the cause. "This food scare stuff," Ms. Sams sighs. "It preys on vulnerable people."

With degrees in biology and environmental toxicology, Ms. Sams is among the most knowledgeable and respected people in the salmon-farming industry. She is taking me to a salmon farm, so that I can see first-hand what all the fuss is about.

According to the activists, farmed salmon are laced with deadly cancer-causing chemicals such as PCBs. They blame farmed salmon for depleting the wild salmon stocks by spreading sea lice and disease. They'd like you to believe that farmed salmon are destroying the ecosystem of the seas.

"There are more PCBs in breast milk," says Ms. Sams, who happily ate salmon through both of her two pregnancies. "But it's difficult for us to get our side of the story out."

The salmon farm lies across from Quadra Island in one of the world's most spectacular spots. From here you can see seals, whales, and snow-capped mountains. The fish are kept in deep-water net pens. In the water you can see the smolts — 730,000 of them. They're only a few inches long now. In 15 months, they'll weigh in at 3.5 to 4 kilos each. A day or two after they are harvested, they'll be in supermarkets and restaurants as far away as California.

Aquaculture, which now produces 30 per cent of the world's seafood, is the reason you can buy fresh salmon year round. This little patch of water will produce a phenomenal amount of protein. Yet it's no bigger than a football field — a tiny pinprick in these vast coastal waters. All the salmon farms in B.C. would probably fit comfortably into Stanley Park.

Salmon farming today is high-tech, and very highly regulated. This farm is operated by a Canadian outfit called Marine Harvest, which is in turn owned by a large Dutch multinational. Everything that happens here is tracked, measured and monitored by computer.

Last year, a headline-grabbing study warned about the PCBs in farmed salmon. The study was quickly debunked by experts who pointed out that chicken has more PCBs than salmon. The benefits of eating salmon are well known (it's full of omega-3 fatty acids, good for your heart), and other scientists concluded that not eating farmed salmon is much riskier than eating it. But the damage was done. "The food scare definitely affected our prices," says Ms. Sams.

The activists like to paint themselves as the plucky little guys up against the evil multinationals. But the David Suzuki Foundation, one of the chief opponents of farmed salmon, is well funded by U.S. organizations such as the Packard Foundation. Its message is also supported enthusiastically by the government of Alaska, which wants to keep B.C. out of the farmed-salmon business to protect its own wild-salmon market.

For the Kitasoo First Nation, salmon farming has been a spectacular success. Four years ago, their remote community of Klemtu survived on welfare. Then they teamed up with Marine Harvest. Now every household has a job in salmon farming or processing, and the people have new skills. The Kitasoo retain final say over anything that could affect the environment in their traditional territory. "If it was doing damage to the environment, we wouldn't hesitate a minute to shut it down," says band chief Percy Starr.

"This makes you wonder about David Suzuki's professed concern for the First Nations," says Patrick Moore, a Greenpeace founding member who broke with that group because of their extremism. He once studied genetics under Mr. Suzuki. He's convinced his former teacher's scaremongering harms the very people he says he wants to help: "He wants an end to industrial forestry, commercial fishing, and salmon aquaculture. He basically wants the coast to be evacuated of human beings, it would seem, except for First Nations ecotourism. He seems to want them to be hotdog salesmen to the tourist industry."

The activists' biggest weapon is fear. Without fear, they'd be out of business. Without fear, there would be no headlines, no celebrities, no funds. Without fear, they'd be out of work. And David Suzuki would be out of a mission, which is to rescue the Earth from the sins and wickedness of mankind.

Linda Sams has complicated feelings about Mr. Suzuki. Unlike him, she's not an absolutist. "You can probably find many good things in his work," she says. Recently her son's class was assigned to write stories about environmental heroes, and the teacher suggested David Suzuki.

"To many, many children he's a hero," says Ms. Sams. "But for people in our industry....." She sighs. "He's a very, very powerful man."