

Organically farmed salmon is an oxymoron

A view by Don Staniford

It is my contention that the intensive rearing of carnivorous fish such as salmon is abhorrent to the original ideals of the organic movement. Cramming a migratory species in densely packed cages, producing large quantities of contaminated wastes, spreading parasites and disease, creating a situation where mass escapes can occur and finite marine resources are depleted is hardly nature's way. In fact, 'organic' salmon farming is fundamentally flawed and differs from conventional 'factory' fish farming only at a cosmetic level.

For example, instead of the equivalent of half a bath tub of water to swim around in, organic fish have a whole bath tub. But, bullying and deformities such as 'hunchback', cataracts, fin damage so the fish can hardly swim and sea lice damage to the skull – so-called 'death crowns' – all represent the less savoury side of salmon farming and occur in both conventional and organic systems.

Waste discharges from a medium size salmon farm of 1,000 tonnes are equivalent to a town with a population of 20,000. In organic systems untreated wastes discharge directly into the sea, adhering to the mantra 'the solution to pollution is dilution'.

Farming carnivores high up the food chain is not a sound ecological system, and can actually lead to a net loss of resources. The diet fed to farmed salmon contains over 70% fishmeal and fish oil, which comes from harvested wild fish. A paper in the science journal *Nature* last year calculated that one tonne of farmed

salmon required over three tonnes of wild fish for feed.

Yet farmed salmon have been accepted into the organic fold by certifying bodies including the Soil Association, the Organic Food Federation, Naturland and Debio. Astonishingly, wild salmon – the so-called 'King of Fish' – are having difficulty securing organic status in Alaska, and shellfish, which recycle nutrients and are biological indicators rather than agents of pollution, are being left out in the cold entirely.

That organic standards have accepted factory farmed salmon rather than its distant wild relative shows the inherent anomaly in the current system and threatens to devalue the whole organic brand. Consumer confidence is at the cornerstone of the whole organic movement, and standards must, therefore be able to stand up to scrutiny. It would seem to me that by accommodating farmed salmon the organic standards, which were founded on the principles of locality, sustainability and environmental stewardship, have been watered down to such an extent as to render them meaningless. Even the Soil Association – which prides itself on being a world leader in organic certification and certifies around a dozen salmon and trout farms in Scotland – concludes in its *Fish Farming and Or-*

ganic Standards that 'There are clearly some compromises that have to be made in defining organic standards for fish farming'.

In their diluted definition of 'organic' it is far more profitable to certify a salmon farm producing 1,000 tonnes per year than a shellfish farm producing 10 tonnes. For example, in Scotland the entire shellfish sector (including scallops, mussels and oysters) is worth less than £5 million, accounting for 2,000 tonnes, compared to salmon farming which is worth £350 million and produced 130,000 tonnes in 1999.

Fish surely represent the final frontier for organic standards and there should be no compromises. The transition from fishing to fish farming is fundamentally changing the way fish reaches our plates, with profound environmental consequences. Aquaculture is developing at such a rate that by 2030 it will have overtaken traditional fisheries. And with farmed cod, halibut, haddock and even tuna following in the wake of salmon the stakes will inevitably get higher.

Common sense dictates that there has to be a line beyond which 'organic' is out of reach. Whilst wild salmon and shellfish are logical candidates for inclusion, 'organically farmed salmon' is surely an oxymoron. ■

Don Staniford is an independent researcher. He writes frequently on aquaculture issues and is author of a report called The One That Got Away: Marine Salmon Farming in Scotland, published in June 2001 by the Friends of the Earth, Scotland.

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