

Commentary

We Are Losing the Branding Game

The consumer is forgetting just how devastating the commercial fisheries can be, and how variable and uncontrollable the food safety aspect of wild fish can be....

COMMENTARY BY HUGH MITCHELL

In Washington State, home of a substantial commercial salmon fishing community, rare are the once-plentiful farmed salmon specials in the supermarket flyers. Wild salmon is “en vogue” and expensive again. This is due to a campaign employing the latest in sales and marketing strategies and orchestrated by potent market savvy. With its 100-year old monopoly threatened, the commercial salmon fishery has realized that the power of “branding” can help stave off the “newcomer,” which, according to a University of Alaska economist, had reduced the fishery from a \$400 million a year business to \$130 million in four years.

Branding is a marketing concept which recognizes that consumers, as meticulous and analytical as we think we are, still buy on image and trust – a visceral basis for decisions, not a logical one. We attach an emotion to a product and this emotion influences our perceptions about the product, more than the facts. We can also only handle one – or two at best – thoughts or ideas about a particular brand. Complex, elaborate messages are the killer of a brand.

Branding works especially well if you negatively brand your competition in the

whether through marketing, or otherwise, it is also very hard to change. Consumer research also shows that we do not necessarily buy the best product, but the one that is the least risky choice. This means that creating seeds of doubt about a competitive product conveys a powerful image.

The commercial salmon fishermen and their marketing consultants know how to harness this consumer psychology, and have set about to brand wild-caught salmon. The branding message is clear: “Eating wild-caught salmon is healthier for you and the environment (as compared to farmed)”. It is a brilliant campaign. They have managed to convince several environmental groups to believe this message. And, as with many branding efforts: “truth be damned!”

We are familiar with their fear-mongering techniques and exaggerations: organic pollution, genetic pollution, biological pollution, aesthetic pollution, dyes, organic contaminants, etc, etc, ad nauseum! Study after study has shown that salmon farms have almost no impact on the environment and that they are probably one of the most environmentally benign and sustainable resource industries in existence. Attacks on the wholesomeness of farmed

bad experimental design and analysis! Furthermore, there is ample evidence that this bad science was not inadvertent, but was carefully crafted with a clear agenda towards this branding concept.

The science was bad because it tried to draw conclusions about all of farmed salmon and all of wild salmon with experimental design and poor sampling technique. In science, we sample because it is usually impossible to measure values pertaining to every single individual in a population. This sample must be large enough, representative, and unbiased in order for us to

make a confident conclusion regarding the whole population. In addition, any conclusion that is made should be put in context with previous research and findings on the subject. None of this was done in the study, and the editors of *Science* should be ashamed for either not spotting this, or worse, being willing participants in the branding game.

The wild salmon samples were “stacked” with high latitude, lower-fat (hence lower pollutant) Pink and Chum salmon – not the comparable Chinook, Coho, Sockeye, or even wild European Atlantics. The amount of sampling (sample size was exaggerated – tonnage of

ample evidence of the bias of the authors, and their active participation in the brand-creation process.

It will be difficult, because the brand message is setting, but the farmed salmon industry has to take it back. We are being out-manoeuvred. To portray commercially wild-caught salmon as healthier and better for the environ-

less hunter slaughtering whole species of animals without heeding the consequences. With earth's burgeoning human populations to feed we must turn to the sea with new understanding and new technology. We need to farm it as we farm the land. This is called mariculture. It has just begun... In such controlled volumes the ideal conditions can be maintained all year and by ensuring fertilization

CULTIVATION vs. WILD EXTRACTION

Becoming Increasingly Ecologically and Resource Efficient

- Self-contained
- Wild forage needed: 1.5:1 to 3:1
- Wild forage used to be 92% of feed, now 35%
- Cannot pollute own waters or productivity & fish health suffers

Everything put into feed can be measured, Q-ced, regulated & cleaned (if necessary)

Processing plants near farms must institute treatment protocols for own fish health

Vitamins and minerals (eg astaxanthin for flesh colouring) pure and consistent

Internal parasites rarer due to processed feed

Most High value Species Proven to not be sustainable (eg: Salmon)

- 1.5 billion juveniles released from Alaska's enhancement program in 2002 only 3% return rate
- Resource competition impact with truly wild salmon ??
- Wild forage needed: 10:1 to 40:1 (not easily improved on)
- By-catch impact

No control over persistent organic pollutants or quality of forage

Processing plants have often been allowed to pollute waterways

- EPS websites (fines)
- No incentive (fish far away and out of site)

Vitamins and minerals (eg astaxanthin for flesh colouring) must be obtained through forage

- Other pollutants, inconsistent

Internal parasites more prevalent from intermediate hosts ingested in feed

Like wild game

WHY IS FARMED SALMON SO COMPETITIVE?

CULTIVATION vs. WILD EXTRACTION

Tending one's own crop

Investment and risk in fish

Taking of public resources for profit

"Mad Scramble"

Fish held in one place

Red. time, energy, resources

Chasing

Excess marina & hydrocarbon use

Point source accountability

Stationary, activities more visible and more easily monitored by regulators, traced back to source easier

No point source accountability

Ghost nets, boat refuse, lead line impacts on bottom, hooking mort., gillnet dropout, size selection mortality, marine mammal and bird impacts

Ecological costs more Easily assessed

- Minimal, local and traceable
- Excellent track record

Ecological costs are extremely difficult to account for

- Complex interactions
- Wide ranging
- Accountability more difficult
- Poor track record

process. Burger King successfully attacked McDonalds assembly-line speed in the eighties with its simple “Have it your way” campaign. The message: “You don't have to stand to the side and feel like a reject when you request your food prepared to your own particular tastes.”

A brand's image does not have to be based in fact – it is perception that rules – and sells! Once a brand is set in a collective consumer's mindset,

salmon reveals the depths and extent with which they will go to promote their brand message.

The PCB study in *Science* (Hites et al, 2004. *Science*: 203 (226-229)) is a prime example of how they will even dupe or hire the scientific community to further their goals. In all the critiques about the significance of the findings presented in that paper, what has been lost is that it is simply bad science:

salmon, instead of number of pooled samples actually analyzed). There was no review of all previous research showing identical wild and farmed salmon values, or any context that revealed that all values were in the same ballpark as other foods we regularly eat. From the anti-farm comments in the abstract, the one-sided title, the “stop light” color-coding of the graphs (red for farmed – green for wild) and the funding sources, there is

ment is ludicrous. What is happening is that the consumer is forgetting just how devastating the commercial fisheries can be to the conservation of our oceans, and how variable and uncontrollable the food safety aspect of wild fish can be. Farming is more efficient, both economically AND environmentally. It works because of private ownership (not a mad scramble for a public resource). It is static, observable, and accountable (unlike inefficient and energy-hungry wild extraction). Everything that goes into farmed fish and comes out of a fish farm can be measured, monitored and held to the highest quality standards available. With the latest efforts by animal rights activists, the message should be promoted that cultivated salmon are housed, handled, and slaughtered in a much more humane manner than wild extraction fish could ever be.

We, in the salmon farming industry, embarked in this field, partly because of its pioneering spirit. It is the future, and many of us saw it as a necessary adjunct to the wild fisheries, not a competitor. We somehow misjudged that any sharing of the seafood consumer would be welcomed – or at least truth would prevail. It is high time that we reminded the consumer who the good guys really are. Jacques Cousteau, the famous ocean explorer/conservationist, wrote in 1973:

“In his exploitation of the sea man is still a barbarian, a ruth-

and protecting the larvae from predators, incredibly high yields can be obtained from a number of protein-rich populations. High efficiency sea farms totalling the size of Switzerland would produce more food than all fisheries combined.”

We must take back our brand for what it is. Farming is the echelon of food production. If we were to raise chickens in the same fashion as the Alaskan salmon fisheries we would hatch them, raise them to a certain size and then release them into the forest. When we were hungry, we would then get on our hydrocarbon-burning ATV's, tromp all over the forest, and recover maybe about 3% of what we released – plus a whole lot of other birds we didn't release!

They started this branding war, and it is high-time we realized that consumer emotions are being played with. Changing them will be tough. First impressions tend to stick, but the global salmon cultivation community must copy the “wild extractors” lead, and get high-powered marketing help to go beyond the current defensive mode in which we have been placed. Our brand is the future of seafood and the future of conserving our ocean environment. This is too important to let vested interests highjack and pervert the truth.

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