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The Red Herring of the Dismantling of DFO Loys Maingon

A major headline this year has been the closing of Department of Fisheries offices throughout Canada. Together with recent changes in the *Fisheries Act*, these changes signal a formal deregulation of environmental checks and balances and a culmination of a four-decade trend towards the privatization of public environmental concerns.

However, the environment is only protected if we have the means to do some hard accounting, and only if that accounting is sustained by on-the-ground verification and enforcement. The effective dismantling of DFO, as we have known it since 1973, seems like the destruction of the very tools necessary to do verification and enforcement.

The Paradox Of DFO

In fact, that is not really so. An irony in these developments is that DFO has been in conflict of interest ever since its creation. This fact has been borne out time-and-again at every inquiry into the failure of fisheries policies, as once again affirmed in the latest findings of the Cohen Inquiry.

It pays to re-visit the history of DFO, since the dismantling of the Fisheries Research Board in 1973. This was excellently described by Dr David Schindler in his 2008 Killam lecture. What DFO has been since its inception is well-summed up by Schindler: 'Instead of answering to a panel of the country's most eminent scientists, we now reported to politicians and their deputies. Half of our building became occupied by bureaucrats who had little background in science, and no concerns about the role of science in making sound policy ... major concerns were the sort of spin that could make the Minister of Fisheries look good...'

Dr Schindler's account does much to explain why over 3-4 decades of oversight by the DFO the state of fisheries in Canada has been on a continuous decline. Too much of the DFO's focus has been on government public policy rather than on promoting environmental values and responding to the leadership of science.

DFO involved the abdication of provincial rights and responsibilities to federal fisheries, and a separation of fisheries from the ministry of environment, as though—against everything science tells us—fisheries existed independently of the environment.

In light of the dismantling of the *Fisheries Act*, there is once again talk of re-assuming provincial prerogatives, and we face once again, a problem of enforcement. Under the proposed changes, we face a downloading of responsibilities to the semi-private sector. Instead of funding the DFO, the government will be funding the Pacific Salmon Foundation, in what is in fact yet another exercise in public relations, rather than an assumption of environmental responsibilities consistent with science-driven policy.

The Days of World Class Research

To understand what all this means we have only to consider that the Fisheries Research Board was the world's pre-eminent institution in freshwater and ocean research. Just about everything we know today about freshwater ecosystems and ocean systems was based on research associated with the Fisheries Research Board of Canada. A lot of the work published by the Fisheries Research Board continues to pose difficulties for unfettered industry to this day. This unparalleled leadership was greatly inconvenient to industry and politicians of all stripes.

DFO's Real Purpose

The DFO was actually created by politicians to buffer politicians and industry from the acid truth of science. The DFO has over the years relegated its science branch to a minimal capacity and has always placed its priority in managing policy information and public relations. (If you want confirmation of that, all you have to do is read Dr Ransom Myer's account of cod fishery politics.) So this latest re-organization or 'change in environmental governance' comes as no surprise. It is the simple logical outcome of the DFO's 1973 creation.

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understand what this means. It means that the buffer is no longer felt to be needed, that science is now sufficiently trivialized not to pose a threat and that the interests of industry are now sufficiently secure, to embark on a new partnership with the private sector.

That entity is now the Pacific Salmon Foundation (PSF). Some may be in awe of the PSF, I am very much less so. While it is undoubtedly a well-intentioned public interest group, it has neither the enforcement capacity of DFO, nor the scientific robustness of the Fisheries Research Board. It will, however, have the means to fund publicly-driven projects that neither of the former institutions had. PSF will meet Ottawa's public relations objectives, but little else, unless it wishes to jeopardize the funding it receives from Ottawa.

Back To Basics

'Reducing bureaucracy' might at first blush be a catchy concept, but the reality quickly settles in when we face the consequences for nature of de-regulation. Once the accrued benefits of regulation are spent, it quickly becomes clear that someone has to start paying for the accumulating deficits and the repair of nature.

Naturalists and scientists have an obligation to the future of nature. Therefore, if we believe that nature is worth caring for, we should care more for truthfulness and less for the niceties of bureaucracy.

The facts always speak for themselves. We need no intermediaries, just more blunt pragmatism and the courage to speak. Time is running out. ✍