

# PROFILES



## Ask an Eco Expert: Alexandra Morton

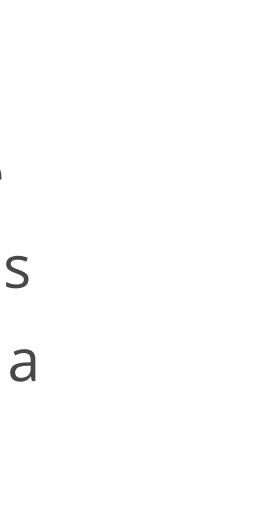
by Sheri Radford / Jul 7, 2021

For decades, this tireless scientist has been fighting against Canada's fish farms

[Alexandra Morton](#) left California in the early 1980s to study orcas in British Columbia. She soon learned about the devastating effects that fish farms were having on wild salmon and, consequently, her beloved killer whales.

Through countless Freedom of Information requests, she discovered how the Canadian government has systematically suppressed evidence about the harm caused by open-net salmon farms. She has written thousands of pages of letters, published scientific papers, launched court challenges and joined with Indigenous activists to fight against industrial aquaculture. Her recent book, [Not On My Watch: How a Renegade Whale Biologist Took on Governments and Industry to Save Wild Salmon](#), recounts the many decades of her environmental crusade.

We chatted with Alexandra Morton about fish farms, eco activism and more...



### E911: How did you get drawn into environmental activism?

**Alexandra:** A friend—a fisherman neighbour who was a real teacher to me because he knew so much about salmon—asked me if I would write a letter to Fisheries and Oceans Canada to let them know they were putting salmon farms in all the wrong places. I had a good relationship with Fisheries because the whale research group was so fabulous.

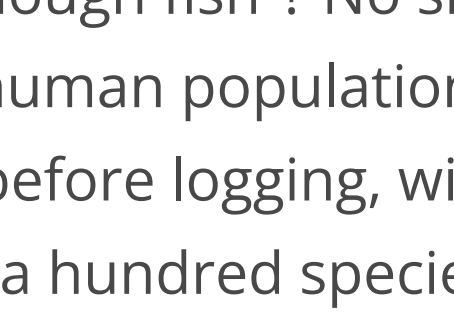
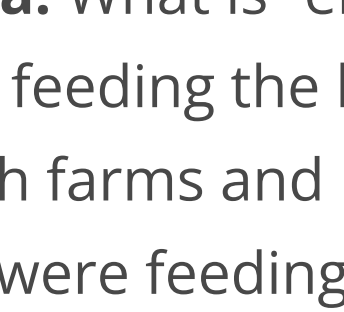
I wrote that first letter in 1987, and the answer came back: Dear Ms. Morton, there's no evidence. And so I thought, OK, let me just try again. I wrote so many letters. I kept thinking if I just line my words up in the right order, they're going to understand. I was so naive and so trusting, thinking government was trying to protect my community and the environment and the salmon

It took a toll on me, because I was so angry. I developed a twitch, and I was waking up and writing letters at two in the morning. I was trying to find different ways to explain it to them.

### E911: How do you explain the problem with fish farms to a layperson?

**Alexandra:** They're so unnatural. They have too many fish, the fish are not allowed to migrate, and no predators can get in. Disease gets in, and then it just circulates and amplifies and mutates into higher virulence.

In nature, when something gets sick and it slows down, a predator takes it out, so there's no chance for an epidemic. But in the farms, epidemics are the norm, with one or two or three percent of the fish constantly sick and dying. That doesn't happen in the wild. These are feedlots, and all of their waste, all of their pathogens, are flowing into the ocean.



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### E911: Is there a way for humans to have enough fish without fish farms?

**Alexandra:** What is “enough fish”? No single wild animal species should be tasked with the job of feeding the human population. But we could have a lot more wild salmon. Before fish farms and before logging, wild salmon so overproduced for their own needs that they were feeding a hundred species all around them.

In British Columbia, the salmon farming industry has had the single greatest sustained impact on these fish. It forms these bottlenecks where all of these fish are trying to migrate through from different watersheds and spawning grounds. Where it's perfect for the farms, there are already wild fish, because it was perfect for them.

Really, the way to make the most fish is to learn to work with these natural systems. Whether it's herring or halibut or salmon or anchovies, if you understand the system that makes those fish, and you pull back and basically let the system run the way it's supposed to, that's the way to maximize the amount of seafood that we would get and at the same time have a healthy ocean that is producing oxygen and taking down carbon and all the other natural services we want. They're all linked together.

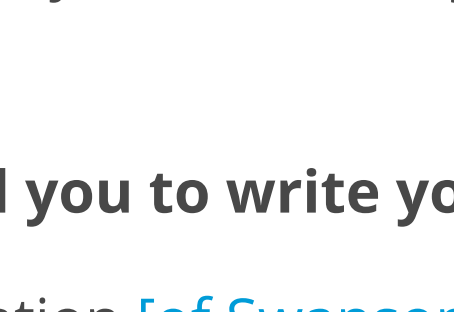
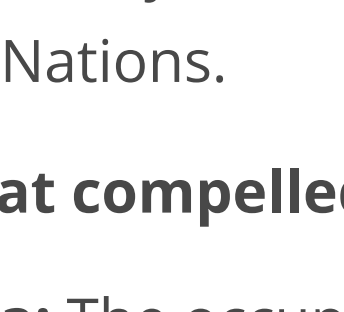
Fish farms are not making food. They are making money for shareholders. That is their purpose.

### E911: Why should everyone be concerned about this issue—not just Indigenous people, not just environmentalists, not people who eat seafood, but everyone?

**Alexandra:** Because salmon are like a power cord to British Columbia. They pick up the energy of the sun hitting the open ocean, and they package it into their bodies, and they carry it to this coast, and then they climb up the rivers and they pour that nutrient down over the watersheds after they die. So they're feeding the trees that make the oxygen we breathe.

People that are studying this have taken core samples out of the trees and correlated it with salmon runs. The bigger the salmon run, the bigger the growth ring on the tree. Nitrogen from the ocean is different than the nitrogen from land. When you've got marine nitrogen a thousand kilometres into the interior of British Columbia, well, you know the salmon brought it there.

Salmon are one of the better tools we have to fight climate change. If you want your maximum carbon drawdown and oxygen release, it is in the big trees. Salmon also feed the orcas, they feed the bears, they feed the eagles, they feed everything that really makes beautiful British Columbia. They feed this ecosystem. They keep this whole thing alive.



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We have acted like children in the worst way, in that we don't understand how things work. And so we run around breaking things and cutting these all-important power cords. But when you start doing that, you threaten your own life.

We live in a system where we need oxygen. We don't pay for it, but we do need it. And the alarming thing I've noticed is that the non-Indigenous governments really have no mechanism for protecting the things we don't pay for, or that are not owned by a corporate entity with lawyers. That's why I have found myself naturally allied and working with First Nations.

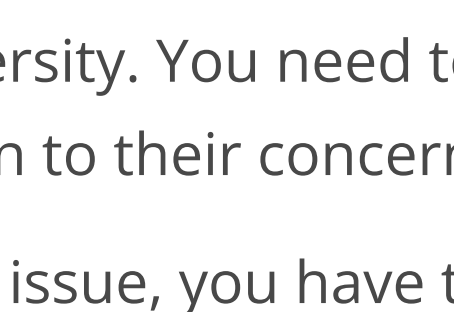
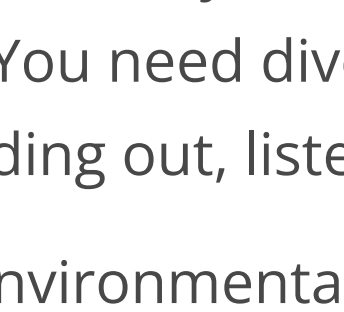
### E911: What compelled you to write your book?

**Alexandra:** The occupation [\[of Swanson Island fish farm in 2017\]](#) that I participated in was the most extraordinary event of my life, to watch a situation that had been stagnating for years—decades—suddenly ignite, and change happen.

I just kept thinking, what happened here? What caused this? How do you make this happen in an easier way? Do we really have to occupy, to put our bodies physically in the way of the things that are killing us? Currently my understanding is that we do, that there is no other way to go at this because, as I detailed in the book, I tried everything legal: I went to court, I went to the AGMs of the companies, I did an enormous amount of science that turned my home into a research station, on and on and on. And it wasn't until we stood in the way that change began.

I also wanted the government to know how dirty this whole thing was. In addition to doing the research and activism, I've also done an enormous amount of requests for documents through the Access to Information Act. I began reading the actual emails that were causing the damage, and it's just dirty. It's covering up, lying by omission. And covering up the danger of these diseases, the origins of these viruses, the impact of the sea lice.

### E911: What would you say to someone who wants to help with this issue or another environmental issue?



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**Alexandra:** The reason I was able to do as much as I have is because I'm an eyewitness to it. I went out to look at everything that I heard about. I didn't just read about it on paper or hear it secondhand.

You need to find your allies. You need to talk to the people in the area who are also affected. You need diversity. You need to bring everybody along with you, tell them what you're finding out, listen to their concerns.

If it's an environmental issue, you have to reach out to the Nation whose territory the problem is in. Knock at the door and say, “I'm here to look into this, if you need help.” Another thing is, use your anger very carefully and sparingly, because anger makes you sick. You cannot maintain anger. It's a chemical reaction in your body that is going to make you ill. You've got to stress endurance and creativity and tolerance.

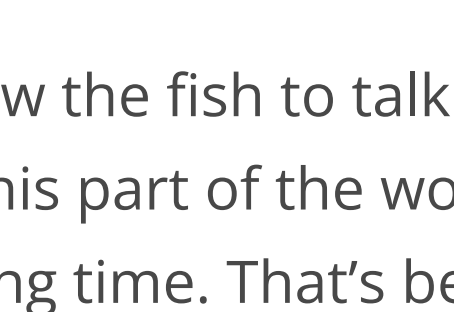
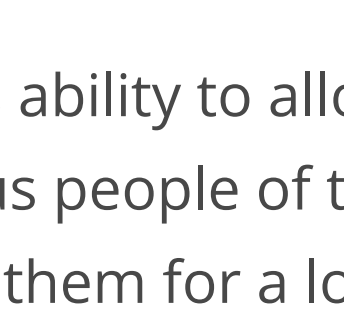
There's this island off the east coast of the United States where there's these little stout woolly ponies called Chincoteague ponies, and there's these pictures of them in the storms with their heads up, and the wind is just billowing over them. Then the sun comes out, and they're prancing around, doing their thing. I think of myself like that. I just bear up, just take it.

With salmon, we know they need rainfall and they need the ocean and they need their rivers, but they also need all the people that are fighting for them. We have become part of the biology of these fish. When you think about it that way, for me, it feels like I'm on a big team. It makes me feel better. It also imparts a sense of responsibility, and I can't quit. But it's really true, because every species left on Earth right now needs its people, because it's not going to continue to exist if the psychopathic corporate mentality is allowed to play out its game.

I love talking to the young activists. They are as concerned about people as they are about animals. I always tell them to take care of themselves. We are in a moment on Earth right now where there's no room for error. You've got to keep yourself running. And if that means stepping back for a couple of days or a week, because it's the longest haul that matters.

### E911: What's next for you?

**Alexandra:** I'm not really sure. That's actually a big and confusing question. I've been doing this for literally my entire adult life.



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### E911: What's next for the salmon?

**Alexandra:** The next thing for the salmon is this remarkable science that reads the fish's immune system. It's called genomic profiling. It's basically like when you go to the garage with your car and they plug in a computer and it tells you everything that's wrong with the car. It's the same with the fish. Our immune systems are already doing stuff in the background, and you can read what they're doing.

If you were to take a reading on these fish as they migrate, their immune systems will come on, where there's warm water or viruses or pollution or starvation, and you can go to that area and go, oh, why is that happening? What could we possibly do to correct that?

But then the incredible power of the science is you can go back the next year and you can ask the fish, did we make it better for you? You take the sample again, and if their immune system is no longer activated to deal with a virus or high water temperature, well, you know that you fixed it for that year. And so the fish become our teachers. We don't have to remove *all* the stressors. We just have to remove the ones that are really igniting the immune systems of these fish.

If genomic profiling was used, I guarantee that every country in the world would come to extinction and say, how did you do that? You took your salmon from the edge of the world and you brought them back. How did you do that? So, that's the future of salmon.

Using this ability to allow the fish to talk to us, it really goes back to the legends of the Indigenous people of this part of the world. They will tell you the salmon have been talking to them for a long time. That's because they were such keen observers, and their lives depended on it. Science is catching up with them. And whether we do or not really speaks to whether we have the guts to decide to take our place in the natural order and allow the world around us to thrive while we do. That's a huge mental shift.

### E911: It feels hopeful, like maybe positive change is finally coming.

**Alexandra:** It does. It's close. These companies are in bad shape because COVID already knocked them down quite a bit, because of the restaurant closures around the world. So they're a smaller enemy now, but they're very determined and they have not given up.

The really dangerous thing about them is they're based on share price. They'll never be satisfied with any number of farms. They'll only be satisfied with *more* farms. And, well, that's a cancer model. That doesn't work.

### E911: But you feel hopeful?

**Alexandra:** There's a little bit of hope here for sure, if you can just hold the course.

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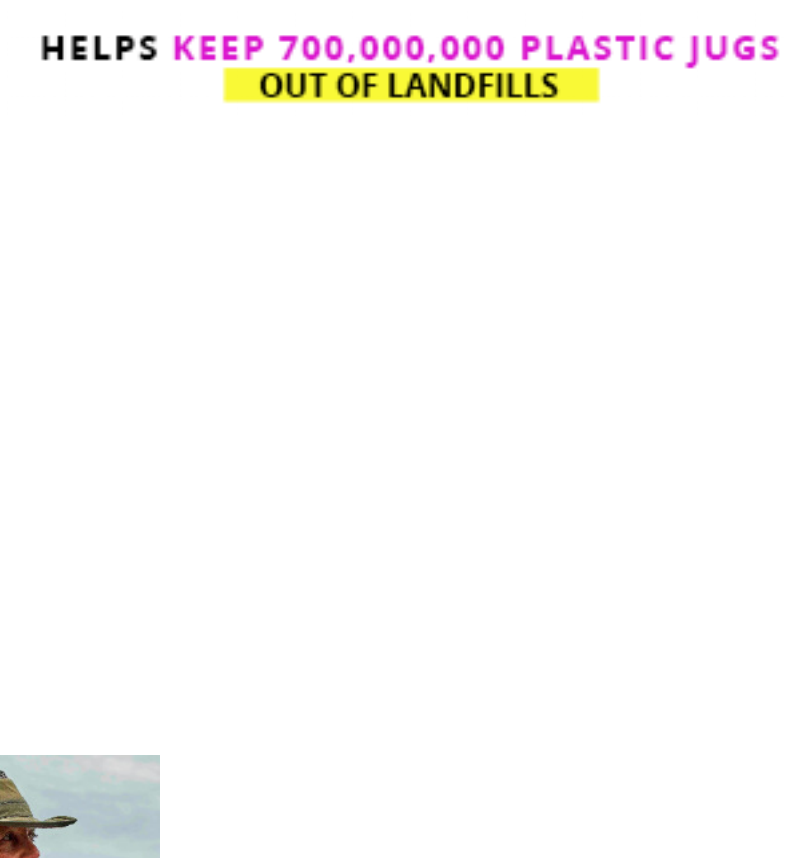
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