

If salmon are sacred, God help us all



Andy Clark, Reuters

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Last Monday, anti-fish-farm activists arrived in Vancouver to present an elk-hide scroll, bearing the signatures of some 200 "wild salmon champions," to B.C. Supreme Court Justice Bruce Cohen, who is heading a federal commission of inquiry into the health of the Pacific salmon fishery.

The public-relations stunt capped a months-long publicity campaign staged by a band of tireless environmental advocates who have assembled themselves under the provocative catchphrase, "Wild salmon are sacred." You can check it out by visiting their web-site, salmonaresacred.org. Living on Canada's left coast, I long ago grew accustomed to the non-stop emotional enthusiasms proffered by the innumerable green groups which grow so rapidly in the bountiful bosom of southwestern British Columbia's mild and moist climate.

Nevertheless, I must admit that the religious implications of the "salmon are sacred" declaration came as a bit of a shock. Indeed, while there have certainly been many examples over the past few decades of environmentalists' use of spiritual imagery to advance their cause -- and just as many critiques, it seems, warning of the dangerously pantheistic nature of their philosophies--the forthright assertion of one particular category of animal's sacredness is unique at this time and in this place.

One imagines devotees of a new religion bowing before a monstrous statue of a scarlet-backed, hooked-nosed sockeye, incanting the words, "Our salmon, which art in spawn, hallowed be thy fry...." Next up, a 3-D film by James Cameron.

Lest there be any confusion here, allow me to point out that the meaning of the word "sacred" is quite clear. The primary definition in the Canadian Oxford Dictionary reads, "exclusively dedicated or appropriated (to a god or to some religious purpose); made holy by religious association; connected with religion [or] used for a religious purpose."

The dictionary's second and third definitions are also directly associated with the realm of religion and spirituality. It is only when one reaches the fourth and final definition that an obscure, secular meaning of the word emerges: "treated with utmost respect; inviolable."

Is this what the "wild salmon people" mean by their declaration? Or have they embraced the more common meaning and are they, therefore, suggesting that wild salmon have special religious significance?

If so, then one might logically ask whether we are on the cusp of the foundation of a new salmon-worshipping eco-cult.

I rather doubt we are. Nevertheless, seeking clarification, I decided to engage in further research. I was disappointed, however, not to

find in the group's literature any explanation of their bold declaration of wild salmon's sacredness, let alone a detailed theological treatise.

There were, however, repeated calls to rally "all wild salmon people," a phrase that conjured images of a strange hybrid creature that, given the group's apparent spiritual bent, might be considered especially sacred or powerful. Think of a Minotaur with a fish head.

Still, we are left with the word "sacred." The wild ones are clearly saying that salmon have this quality. The fish folk may very well be engaging in hyperbole to advance their anti-fish-farm cause (which, it must be stated, is not entirely unsupported by scientific data), but the word is still theirs and they must live with its consequences. Either wild salmon are sacred or they are not.

And, since there is a clear declaration by the wild ones of the fish's sacredness, it follows that the activists believe either that wild salmon have special (yet unspecified) religious significance or are to be treated with utmost respect.

Naturally (or, as you will see, un-naturally) enough, my thoughts turn now to B.C.'s numerous farmed salmon. Boycotted by environmental pressure groups, rejected by taste-conscious chefs and diners, belittled by 100-mile-diet locavores, the low-cost, high-protein farmed Atlantic salmon just don't get any respect in this equation.

If their "wild" cousins are "sacred," then what does this make them, profane? If so, then are their lives to be considered less worthy? And if that's true, it's almost as if they are carrying the burden of some sort of original sin --doomed to damnation by the circumstances of their birth and upbringing. (That many so-called wild salmon are spawned in man-made hatcheries is another matter entirely.)

And here's another question arising from the wild people's assertion of wild salmon's sacredness: Do they mean that life is sacred only if it is in the wild? If so, then why do the salmon people's animal-rights brethren protest so vehemently about the treatment of laboratory mice -- which are bred and raised for the specific purpose of scientific experimentation?

Then again, perhaps it's not the nature of the creature itself that makes it sacred or profane, but the level of its wildness. It would be a tenuous proposition, but if this is where the wild salmon people's way of thinking leads us, then where does that leave the six billion or so decidedly non-wild humans who currently live on the planet Earth? The mind reels.

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