

Canadian women claiming their place in aquaculture

Ruth Salmon, Special to Financial Post · Jun. 10, 2011 | **Last Updated: Jun. 13, 2011 2:27 PM ET**

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The image of a quintessential Canadian fisherman is a rugged, “salt-of-the-earth” man who braves the elements to bring home his catch. But traditional capture fisheries can’t meet growing demand for seafood, and aquaculture has emerged in Canada to provide both domestic and international markets with a sustainable supply of seafood.

With this new approach to producing seafood comes a new breed of worker: Canadian women with a passion for the environment. Canada’s \$2.1 billion aquaculture industry has become a magnet for women seeking full-time, year-round employment. Canada’s aquaculture associations are largely run and staffed by women. Key roles in research and development, fish health, environmental sustainability, processing and communications are increasingly being filled by women, and approximately 40% of Canada’s 14,500 aquaculture jobs are held by women.

Jennifer Woodland, a 37-year-old mother of two, is part of this workforce. Ms. Woodland is the environmental compliance and regulatory affairs manager for Newfoundland’s Cold Ocean Salmon, and her professional interest in sustainable aquaculture parallels her personal commitment to quick and healthy food.

“Salmon is rich in omega-3 fatty acids, which are great for my daughters’ heart and brain development,” Ms. Woodland says. “Being a working mother, I’m pressed for time. I can prepare salmon for my family in about 15 minutes.”

Aquaculture — the farming of finfish, shellfish and sea plants — is about more than just healthy food. It’s about conservation, and Ms. Woodland has seen firsthand the need to protect wild stocks, many of which are in decline. “I became interested in aquaculture through my conservation work with the wild fishery,” she says. “Growing up in Newfoundland, I’m all too familiar with the collapse of our cod fishery. My dad was also part owner of a processing plant in Atlantic Canada, so I grew up with fish.”

Ms. Woodland studied aquaculture at Memorial University in Newfoundland, before getting site work at a B.C. salmon farming company that’s now called Mainstream Canada. Wanting to get a better understanding of how the industry interacts with the environment, she took a position as an environmental manager. She eventually moved back to Newfoundland to work at Cold Ocean, where she oversees the implementation of the eco-certification program in the company’s operations.

As far as she’s concerned, women and aquaculture are an obvious fit. “Women by nature are environmentally minded and protective,” she explains. “These aspects attracted me to the industry. I’ve noticed that positions relating specifically to the environment are most compelling to women. That natural tie-in to sustainability has led to a high percentage of women in the industry.”

As the ‘new kid on the block,’ aquaculture has been slow to gain public acceptance. Ms. Woodland, however, is a steadfast ambassador for the rapidly evolving industry. “The more I learn how sustainable the industry is, the more I support it. I’ve been in this industry 13 years, and my support hasn’t wavered. Anyone who knows me, knows I’m an environmentalist.”

Canadians may be surprised to learn there's a thriving aquaculture industry in Ontario, where trout is farmed in fresh water lakes. With an educational background in resources engineering technology and an interest in water resource management, aquaculture was a natural fit for Karen Tracey, executive director of the Northern Ontario Aquaculture Association. "Our motto is Environmentally Responsible, Environmentally Accountable," Ms. Tracey says. "Fish farming is the most strictly regulated agricultural industry in Canada and is a legitimate user of our water resources. Continuous improvements to our farms is achieved through research & development, and spurred by a spirit of innovation. I'm proud to say that we meet or exceed federal, provincial and international environmental standards."

On the west coast in particular, First Nations have realized both the economic and environmental benefits of aquaculture. Marguerite Parker, program administrator for the Aboriginal Aquaculture Association in BC has helped develop the association's Aboriginal Principles for Sustainable Aquaculture, a First Nations third-party certification initiative. "Aquaculture is a growing industry with great potential that is being given serious consideration as an economic development option by First Nations across Canada," she says. "Our association recognized the potential that aquaculture could have in diversifying and strengthening our community's economy."

Ms. Woodland sees how aquaculture is filling the employment gap left by declining resource industries in coastal and rural communities. "Harbour Breton, my home town, is booming as a result of aquaculture development," she says. "The area is referred to as the Coast of Bays, and fish farming has become a huge economic driver. It's heartwarming to see. People don't realize how many career opportunities exist, because there are jobs for every interest."



Photo L to R: Michelle McCray, Health and Safety Coordinator – Cooke Aquaculture, NB, Betty House, Research and Development Coordinator - Atlantic Fish Farmers Association, NB and Jennifer Woodland - Environmental Compliance and Regulatory Affairs Manager, Cold Ocean Salmon, NL.

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