

# Interview: Charles Fitzgerald

In addition to serving as director of such organizations as RESTORE the North Woods and the Forest Ecology Network, Charles Fitzgerald of Atkinson, Maine has been intimately involved in a number of crucial environmental battles in Maine, from efforts to stop pesticide spraying in Baxter State Park in the 1970s to the litigation that brought about the placement of Maine's wild Atlantic salmon on the federal Endangered Species List in November 2000.

The federal government has identified salmon aquaculture operations as a prime threat to the survival of Maine's endangered wild salmon. Mr. Fitzgerald is a member of the U.S. Public Interest Research Group and a plaintiff in the three Clean Water Act enforcement lawsuits filed by NELC against the salmon aquaculture industry in Maine (see article on page 1).

## **Do you recall a time when wild salmon were plentiful in Maine?**

Oh, yes. I would bring friends from all over the world to fish the Machias River, which was one of the best-kept secrets in Maine. There were very strong runs of salmon, hundreds of fish returning each year. The place was loaded with fly fishermen. I would regularly see salmon redds [egg nests] each fall, and returning adult fish leaping out of the water. It was a beautiful river with beautiful habitat, a pleasure to see. And it was like this into the 1980s. Now, just a

handful of wild salmon are returning to spawn in Downeast Maine rivers.

## **What does the decline of the wild salmon mean?**

Well, salmon are an indicator of healthy rivers and wildlife; they are the aquatic equivalent of eagles and wolves. Also, wild salmon mean a lot to the local people and the local economy of Maine.

## **What other impacts does salmon farming have on the environment of Downeast Maine?**

You can see environmental impacts wherever there is intensive agriculture of any kind. And make no mistake, salmon farming is intensive agriculture, using chemicals and a mono-crop system. They are the factory hog farms of the ocean. It's ironic that we're constantly working to keep the pollutants generated by land-based agriculture from running off into the ocean, and here we have these factory salmon farms located right in the water, discharging nutrients, chemicals, pesticides, antibiotics and vectors for disease.

## **Why do you think litigation against the Maine salmon farming industry is necessary?**

The salmon farms are run by huge corporate entities putting in minimum effort to get maximum profit, in ways that will cause serious damage for

a long time to come. We can see the results of unregulated salmon farming in Scotland, where estuaries have been destroyed, and in Chile, where wonderful marine fisheries are threatened. We've seen no voluntary corporate responsibility in Maine and we won't see any without some kind of enforcement.

The Maine state government has been particularly weak on this issue - they're encouraging the entry of industry whatever the cost. Litigation is the only tool we have in this vacuum where aquaculture companies are running rampant.

## **What is it you'd like to achieve with these lawsuits?**

I want to hold this industry accountable for the impacts it creates. I want to see regulations put in place that minimize or prohibit the discharge of pollutants into the ocean, particularly toxic pollutant. And it is extremely important that the public get information on what these farms are doing: which chemicals they're using - which pesticides, colorants and antibiotics - and how many fish are escaping.

This industry is like an iceberg - seven-eighths of their operations are literally and figuratively "under water" and the public has a need and a right to know what's going on. ♦

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