



NOT ON MY WATCH: HOW A RENEGADE WHALE BIOLOGIST TOOK ON GOVERNMENTS AND INDUSTRY TO SAVE WILD SALMON

By Alexandra Morton, Random House Canada, 2021

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Salmon, both Atlantic and Pacific species, are perhaps the best known and most charismatic fish on the planet. Their life cycle connects the rivers and oceans of the north, numerous cultures who rely on these fish, and even the terrestrial ecosystems reliant on nutrient inputs that spawning salmon provide. Despite their similarities, schools of Atlantic and Pacific salmon did not physically interact until the recent advent of aquaculture. *Not on My Watch: How a Renegade Whale Biologist Took on Governments and Industry to Save Wild Salmon* is a compelling autobiographical account of a citizen scientist's slow evolution from an early career focused on whale research to a passionate advocacy for wild salmon in the waters off the east coast of Vancouver Island, British Columbia. Alexandra Morton, a field marine biologist with expertise that includes diseases and pollution associated with farmed salmon, provides a captivating account of the negative impacts of Atlantic salmon farming on orca, wild Pacific salmon, and First Nation communities. The book is surprising in many of its details and beautifully told by an environmentalist who has lived and breathed this topic for decades.

The author was first drawn to the Broughton Archipelago of British Columbia to study whale communications among resident orca pods. From there, her life took a series of interesting twists as her scientific mind chased a never-ending tangle of interrelated questions related to declines in the marine species she observes. Eventually and reluctantly, she found herself tackling big industry and government inaction to save the waters of Queen Charlotte Strait, Johnstone Strait, and the Strait of Georgia. Her personal and professional sacrifices provide a rousing backdrop as she recounts her actions to save not only salmon and whales, but the whole food web of the region. Morton's story documents her own growth as a scientist, her evolution as an advocate, and the personal challenges associated with becoming the face of an environmental movement.

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In a story all too common, multinational corporations prioritize profit over environmental concerns, pursuing business as usual through a combination of slick public relations campaigns, closed-door negotiated government agreements, and legal action against concerned citizens. Morton narrates her nontraditional route to becoming a scientific expert responsible for uncovering many critical links between the costs of farmed raised salmon and their impact on the local ecosystem. A persuasive communicator with a passion that oozes from the pages of her book, Morton describes the complex genetic and biologic science of farmed salmon in an approachable and digestible format. She presents a gripping, fact-filled, and swaying argument based on her own impressive research record and selfless sacrifices. Understandably, the author had hoped that scientific proof was all that was needed to enact change. It was only after the failure of science to change political thinking that Morton began to wade into what was, for her, the unfamiliar and uncomfortable arena of environmental advocacy.

The book is full of jaw-dropping and frustration-inducing revelations of corporate greed and a government bureaucracy that places short-term economics and politics above environmental protections and the rights of Indigenous nations. Morton shares accounts of industry and government scientists' refusal to acknowledge evidence, even from their own internally generated data. These events are disheartening and alarming given the underlying risk of extinction for one of the region's most important natural resources, wild salmon runs. One weakness of the book is that it fails to fully explore some of the concerns other researchers have documented with "wild" salmon runs that are maintained primarily through hatcheries. Furthermore, while Morton's own research is impressive, she relies on it too heavily, with limited reference to corroborating studies from the extensive literature on the impacts of salmon farming. Therefore, just as an isolated minnow on the fringe of a school of fish becomes a prime mark for predators, Morton becomes a prominent target for personal attacks from pro-salmon-farming advocates looking to undermine the mounting scientific evidence of the negative impacts of salmon aquaculture. Fortunately, Morton is a survivor.

Morton reveals her own learning process as she fights to understand and disentangle the Canadian policy apparatus that consistently fails to respond adequately to known scientific problems. She is open and honest about struggles with insecurities as she faces harassment in this David-versus-Goliath struggle. Gradually, the author begins to join forces with First Nation tribal leaders from across British Columbia to advocate for the removal of salmon farms in the coastal waters of the region. As she works with increasing numbers of hereditary and elected tribal leaders, Morton begins to recognize and acknowledge her own limited understanding of First Nation culture. She expertly relays the sense of frustration and distrust of First Nation leaders as their traditional needs, official requests, and territorial rights are consistently disregarded by government and big business.

Morton's humility and occasional self-doubt help to humanize what is mostly a story of perseverance and passion, as she works to uncover and publicize the uncomfortable truth about farmed salmon. As a reader, I found myself constantly wondering how she continually withstands the onslaught of character slandering and legal perils. Fortunately, Morton does not seem to know the meaning of the word *quit*. Whether you are interested in a story of personal resilience, a how-to book on environmental advocacy, or an explanation of the complex issues surrounding farmed and wild salmon, *Not on My Watch: How a Renegade Whale Biologist Took on Governments and Industry to Save Wild Salmon* will keep you engaged and thankful that Alexandra Morton is on guard.