

Saltspring Islanders Rally Against Fish Farm

By Suzanne Fournier
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Sablefish farm has disturbed native burial site

A controversial sablefish hatchery on Saltspring Island has run afoul of a united front of opponents.

Sablefin Hatcheries Ltd., the first major hatchery of its kind in B.C., has drawn the ire of residents, the \$25-million-a-year wild sablefish industry and natives who are furious their ancestors' bones have been dug up.

"We're calling on the provincial government to immediately force Sablefin to cease operations because we have serious concerns about the effect on three very rare ecosystems in this area," said Suzanne Connell of the Georgia Strait Alliance, a marine conservation group speaking for about 50 environmental, labour and recreational groups.

The alliance says it is an "ecological abomination" to pipe hatchery effluent through an ancient native burial ground, filter it into a rare sandy feature known as a tombolo and then discharge what remains into the ocean.

The Hul'qumi'num Treaty Group, representing the Penelakut, Cowichan, Chemainus, Halalt and Lyackson peoples in the southern Gulf Islands and Vancouver Island, has told the B.C. government it is horrified that the hatchery's pipes and wells have disrupted a burial site of an estimated 1,000 people and already dislodged 13 remains.

Penelakut elder August Sylvester, who saw hatchery bulldozers digging up human remains, said the site is an ancient Coast Salish village known as Syuhe'mun, with a huge midden containing human burials.

"I am outraged that the digging did not stop once human remains were unearthed," Sylvester said in an affidavit to the Environmental Appeal Board, which held lengthy hearings last March but has yet to hand down a decision.

Donna Martin, who lives near the 9,500-square-foot facility with humming wells and pipes, said residents fear the 2,618 cubic metres a day of effluent the hatchery will pump into sandy Walker Hook will ruin "a fragile ecosystem."

Sablefin Hatcheries president Gidon Minkoff said yesterday he has done everything legally under a temporary permit and has applied to the Ministry of

Water, Land and Air Protection for a permanent permit to discharge effluent and run five injection wells and two groundwater wells.

"There will be no impact on Walker Hook from the hatchery, no bacteria or viruses will find their way into the ocean, there will be no erosion of the sand or marsh, and any water from the hatchery that enters the ocean will be as pure or purer than the ocean itself," said Minkoff.

He said the environmental charges are "completely false" and he blamed opposition to the hatchery on the wild sablefish industry, which is unwilling to share profits with farmed sablefish.

Minkoff admitted that skeletal remains were disturbed, but says he thought he had native approval to lift and reburial human remains.

The Canadian Sablefish Association, which represents the 48 licence-holders who catch wild sablefish, an oily, white delicacy known as black cod, has a campaign against the hatchery and has gone to court to stop it.

Eric Wickham, executive director of the association, admitted his group fears competition as embattled salmon farmers apply to farm sablefish.

Ministry spokesman Max Cleeveley said comment would be "inappropriate" because the Environmental Appeal Board decision is pending, the hatchery has applied for another permit, and the sablefish association has applied for an injunction.

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[Illustration]

Colour Photo: CanWest News Service / Gidon Minkoff says his sablefish farm poses no threat to the environment.; Colour Photo: Island residents worry Walker Hook beach will be ruined.