



MLA-012-Fish Deformities-U.S.A.

How do we save coral reefs?

Vic Ferguson

The World Federation for Coral Reef Conservation 281.886.7428 P.O. Box 311117 Houston Texas 77231

6.18.13

Fish deformities linked to oil pollution in U.S. and Alberta

Alberta scientist calls for research on fish malformations in Lower Athabasca River

Max Paris, Environment Unit, [CBC News](#)

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Trent University students conducting an experiment at the Experimental Lakes Area in northwestern Ontario last summer. (Lindsay Furtado/Trent University)

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A renowned Alberta water scientist is urging the federal government to take action after he discovered deformities in fish in the Athabasca River downriver from oil sands developments bear a striking resemblance to ones found in fish after spills in U.S. waters.



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University of Alberta ecologist Dr. David Schindler said the only way to know for sure which petrochemicals — and in what concentrations — cause the deformities is to conduct whole ecosystem experiments at the Experimental Lakes Area (ELA) in Northern Ontario.

"I propose that the ELA site and laboratory should be kept open to conduct these important experiments, which have implications for future effects of oil extraction and transport in or near both marine and freshwater ecosystems," Schindler wrote in a letter to Environment Minister Peter Kent and Fisheries Minister Keith Ashfield.

The ELA was shuttered on March 31 after its funding was cut in last year's budget. The Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) says it is in negotiations with other parties to take over the operation of the one-of-a-kind facility. The government will save \$2-million a year by off-loading the outdoor laboratory made up of 58 small pristine lakes.

Schindler cited a number of studies that looked into the effects of oil and chemical contamination on fish after the Exxon Valdez spill in Alaska and the Deepwater Horizon accident in the Gulf of Mexico, as well as in the lower Athabasca River. He included photos of fish from the Athabasca with two tails, bulging eyeballs and gaping sores.



A Walleye with an enlarged eye caught near Ft. McKay, Alberta, on the Athabasca River in 2010. (David Schindler/University of Alberta)

"In both the Gulf of Mexico and the Athabasca River, the high incidence of malformations and the grotesque appearance of some of the fish make consumers reluctant to eat them," wrote Schindler. He added that was a threat to the Gulf of Mexico's commercial fishery and the Athabasca's subsistence

fishery.

Schindler's "eureka moment" came last week when he was forwarded an article about a study done on fish in the Gulf of Mexico.

"I was really struck with how similar some of those malformations were. And of course, they'd come on in only a little over a year since that Gulf spill," Schindler told the CBC.



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The timing of the letter is hard to ignore. It comes hard on the heels of the ELA's closure with a September 1 deadline looming for Ottawa to find a new operator or return the property to the province of Ontario. Schindler is a vocal member of the advocacy group "Save ELA."

Asked if this was just a ploy to keep the facility open, Schindler responded: "That's exactly what they said when I proposed that acid rain was a problem in 1974."

Research from the ELA was instrumental in helping Canada and the U.S. negotiate, draft and sign the Acid Rain Treaty of 1991.

For Ottawa's part, Environment Canada insisted it is taking its responsibilities around the oil sands seriously.

"Our government launched a comprehensive oil sands monitoring plan that enhances the monitoring of water, air, land and biodiversity," Kent spokesperson Rob Taylor wrote to the CBC.

DFO said it is happy with the freshwater science being done at other facilities across the country.

"On the Experimental Lakes Area, the government continues to actively work towards establishing a new operator for the ELA site so that research there can continue," wrote Ashfield spokesperson Erin Filliter.

Schindler is glad to hear that.

"Frankly, I would like to see the Experimental Lakes Area funded independently of DFO. It's always been a Cinderella project and for 30 years DFO has been a very bad stepmother."

DOCUMENT

PAGES

Zoom



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Honorable Keith Ashfield
Minister of Fisheries and Oceans
Parliament Building
Wellington Street
Ottawa, ON
K1A 0A6

Honorable Peter Kent
Minister of Environment
401 Confederation Building
House of Commons
Ottawa, ON
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Dear Ministers Ashfield and Kent:

Recent publications have revealed some remarkable similarities in the problems suffered by fish in the Athabasca River, and following the Deepwater Horizon and Exxon Valdez oil spills in the Gulf of Mexico and the Gulf of Alaska, respectively. These problems have not been a part of the public debate over the safety of extraction and transport of petrochemicals, yet they are important to the health of marine and freshwater fisheries.

The Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico has caused dramatic increases in the incidence of malformations in fish and crustaceans, as described in the attached:
<http://oceansnrg.com/2013/03/18/gulf-seafood-deformities-alarm-scientists/>

Similar observations were made after the Exxon Valdez oil spill in the Gulf of Alaska (Carls et al. 1998), as well as in the vicinity of heavy industries on the Great Lakes (Karrow et al. 2003).

Remarkably similar malformations occur downstream of the oil sands region of the Athabasca River, where both our university studies and those of the Alberta Regional Aquatic Monitoring Program (RAMP) have found high incidences of abnormalities in fish (see attached photos of some of our specimens taken in 2009 and 2010). According to local people, these began occurring in the 1990s. Investigations by both DFO during the AOSERP studies (Bond and Machniak 1979a,b) and private consultants (McCart et al. 1982) do not record malformations in fish in the early decades of oil sands mining, confirming these observations. It seems that some threshold for exposure has been reached.

Given the parallels in the cases from various locations, it seems likely that some chemical or suite of chemicals in crude oil is causing the malformations. The most likely suspects are probably polycyclic



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aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), their alkylated derivatives, or closely related dibenzothiophenes. Some of these compounds are known or suspected carcinogens, mutagens or teratogens, while the toxicity of others is largely unknown. Physiological studies also implicate polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), which are known to cause immune suppression. In the Gulf, the result has been that many fish species have become vulnerable to a broad suite of bacterial and viral diseases and myxosporidian parasites (Dr. James Cowan, Louisiana State University, personal communication). High concentrations of PAHs are also associated with the appearance of lesions in red snapper. Other suspect chemicals in the oil sands may include dissolved compounds found in oil sands processing waters, such as naphthenic acids. In the Gulf, chemical dispersants may also be involved.

In both the Gulf of Mexico and the Athabasca River, the high incidence of malformations and the grotesque appearance of some of the fish make consumers reluctant to eat them. In the Athabasca River, a subsistence fishery of importance to thousands of downstream users is at risk, and there are already complaints about the high incidence of malformations. In the Gulf, the commercial fishery is under threat.

Environment Canada and university scientists have also documented high mortalities of fish embryos from the oil sands hatched on bitumen-rich substrates, with high incidence of malformations in the survivors (Colavecchia et al. 2004, 2007). While in the lower Athabasca River, PAHs and related contaminants occur naturally, the recent high frequency of malformations suggest that industrial inputs have caused some threshold for malformations to be crossed. This seems unlikely in the mainstem river, but it may be occurring in some of the fish-bearing tributaries where watersheds are heavily mined, such as the Muskeg River. This river has an important fishery in its own right (Bond and Machniak (1979a).

While Environment Canada scientists are now doing an excellent job of monitoring the river, it will be impossible to determine which chemicals are responsible for the malformations in the complex chemical soup that occurs downstream of oil sands mining. **A more expeditious way of identifying them would be whole ecosystem experiments where small amounts of selected chemicals are applied to whole lakes, and effects determined on several key species in the food chain. Short term, laboratory studies are unsuitable, because to protect whole ecosystems, it is the response to long-term, chronic exposure that we must know.** Once the chemicals are identified, engineering solutions to eliminate them can be sought, but first we must know what they are.



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The Experimental Lakes Area in northwestern Ontario (ELA) is ideal for such a purpose. **I propose that the ELA site and laboratory should be kept open to conduct these important experiments, which have implications for future effects of oil extraction and transport in or near both marine and freshwater ecosystems. I am copying this letter to selected Canadian and American scientists who are familiar with the chemistry and toxicity of petroleum products. You may want to discuss the topic with them, as well as the authors of the attached references. I am also copying it to selected media, because it is an issue that must be addressed in the ongoing public debate over the safety of petroleum extraction and transport.**

Sincerely,

D.W. Schindler, OC, AOE, DPhil, FRSC, FRS

Killam Memorial Chair and Professor of Ecology

cc.

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