

# Canadian government hinders scientists from talking about climate change

— ST. ANDREWS, NEW BRUNSWICK —

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Story by **Colin Woodard**/ Staff Writer

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Half of the Gulf of Maine ecosystem lies in Canada, where much of the water feeding the gulf and affecting its temperature comes from.

Getting information about scientific research relevant to the future of the ecosystem isn't easy, however, because of the outgoing Canadian government's controversial policies that have prevented government scientists from speaking freely with journalists, and sometimes from speaking at all.

While researching this six-part series on climate change in the gulf, the Portland Press Herald/Maine Sunday Telegram was repeatedly blocked from speaking to Department of Fisheries and Oceans scientists by communications officers based in Halifax.

Multiple attempts to speak with a researcher based at the St. Andrews Biological Station here about temperature-driven changes in marine species distribution were blocked, even though scientific colleagues both inside and outside the institution said his work was relevant to the questions at hand. "Nobody is willing to talk about this topic at this time," a DFO spokesman said in a voice-mail message.

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Multiple requests to speak to John Loder, director of DFO’s Centre for Ocean Model Development and Application at the Bedford Institute of Oceanography near Halifax, about new sea surface temperature forecasts for the gulf were also denied by department spokespeople, who would only provide written answers to written questions about earlier results from 2013.

A request to speak to any of the scientists involved in the ongoing Atlantic Zone Management Program – which analyzes oceanographic and biological developments across the region – was approved only after two months of effort. The sole researcher who was ultimately allowed to be interviewed, Catherine Johnson, asked not to be quoted, as the department had not yet developed talking points for the topics discussed.

“I would say this doesn’t surprise me in the slightest,” says biologist C. Scott Findlay of the University of Ottawa, a co-founder of Evidence for Democracy, a group of scientists protesting the federal government’s communications policies. “Issues that are either directly or indirectly associated with climate change are something the government has been particularly concerned about controlling.”



The St. Andrews Biological Station in New Brunswick, Canada has a sign at its entrance advising visitors that electronic surveillance is in use. **Photo by Colin Woodard/Staff Writer**

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After taking power in 2006, Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s government prevented government scientists from speaking to journalists about a wide range of topics, including the Arctic’s ozone hole, regional snowfall patterns in Ontario, the decline of sockeye salmon populations and a study several of them had published in the journal *Nature* on a flood that occurred 13,000 years ago in northern Canada.

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including the Arctic's ozone hole, regional snowfall patterns in Ontario, the decline of sockeye salmon populations and a study several of them had published in the journal *Nature* on a flood that occurred 13,000 years ago in northern Canada. Previously, DFO scientists were easily accessible to journalists, even those critical of federal fisheries policy during the politically sensitive collapse of the overfished cod stocks in the Grand Banks.

Harper's Conservative Party was defeated in a landslide election on Oct. 19. The next prime minister, Liberal Party leader Justin Trudeau, is likely to revisit these policies, as his party's platform includes a pledge to "ensure that government science is fully available to the public, that scientists are able to speak freely about their work, and that scientific analyses are considered when the government makes decisions." The new Liberal Party government will be sworn in Nov. 4.

In the spring of 2012, scientists from Environment Canada attending an international scientific conference in Montreal were assigned minders from the department's media relations unit and instructed not to agree to be interviewed by the press, according to a 2013 report by the University of Victoria's Environmental Law Clinic.

The report – which prompted Canada's information commissioner to launch an ongoing investigation – reproduced DFO's 2008 media relations handbook, which instructed spokespeople to "be familiar with what the Minister (of DFO) or other officials have already said on the topic and be sure your messages are consistent." When requests come from national media outlets, the Minister's Director of Communications in Ottawa "needs to be notified ... before an interview with the journalist is granted."

"In many cases, the talking points have to be agreed upon between the scientists and the staff in the minister's office before the discussion can take place," says Jeffrey Hutchings, a professor of biology at Dalhousie University in Halifax who has been critical of the media control. "Even for what, from a political sensitivity perspective, are the most mundane requests, it can be turned down or take forever to be approved."

Hutchings, a fellow of the prestigious Royal Society of Canada, says the situation is stifling to researchers. "If you inhibit the communication of science, you're inhibiting science itself," he says. "Government scientists find it extremely frustrating and demeaning."

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A 2013 survey of 4,069 government scientists by the Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada found that 90 percent of respondents had been prevented from speaking publicly about their scientific work and more than a third had been prevented from responding to public or media requests.



Bay of Fundy baykeeper Matt Abbott. **Photo by Colin Woodard/Staff Writer**

On retiring from DFO this year, fisheries scientist Steve Campana told the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation that government scientists were working in a climate of fear and were rarely allowed to talk to the media, even about their own groundbreaking research. “We have very strict directives of what we can say and the approval steps we have to go through, and very often that approval seems to be withheld for totally arbitrary reasons,” he said.

Matt Abbott, the Fundy baykeeper, lives in St. Andrews and knows many of the muzzled scientists. “How is it a bad thing, a government scientist speaking to a reporter doing serious-minded work about a potential impact on an important industry?” he asks, referring to warming effects on aquaculture and fisheries. “It’s so unfortunate.”

At DFO’s U.S. equivalent, the National Marine Fisheries Service, journalists can contact scientists directly, and the scientists can arrange interviews themselves.

Nature, one of the world’s most prestigious scientific journals, has condemned Canada’s media policies. “Nature’s news reporters, who have an obvious interest in access to scientific information and expert opinion, have experienced directly the cumbersome approval process that stalls or prevents meaningful contact with Canada’s publicly funded scientists,” the magazine editorialized in 2012. “The way forward is clear: It is time for the Canadian government to set its scientists free.” 11/20/15, 4:27 PM

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The Press Herald did obtain permission to talk to three Canadian scientists, including one involved in estimating climate effects on fisheries populations and another working on sea lice control in aquaculture pens. All interviews had to be organized through regional communications specialists in Halifax.

Asked to explain why they had such policies in place, the media relations department at DFO headquarters in Ottawa did not answer the question but sent a written statement saying the department approved over 90 percent of the 682 science-related interview requests it received in the last two fiscal years, and that some of those that were not approved were for sources who were unavailable by reporter's deadlines or were for information "outside the scope of DFO's mandate."

"Communicating our science is a priority for (DFO) and our record is solid," the statement said.

The department did not respond to questions about why and how many requests were denied that were made to scientists who were both available and being asked about their own research.

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