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## HANSAN: Enviros to babies: We hope you're born dumb

*Eco-falsehoods about mercury in fish expose activists who put politics before health*

By Mary Anne Hansan

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Thanks to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), everyone will breathe a little easier in the new year, apparently, as the agency begins enforcing tougher emission standards on coal-fired power plants. It was a cause celebre for the Sierra Club and its inside-the-Beltway campaign "Beyond Coal," which exposed Washingtonians to endless ads of coughing babies and tuna-fish sandwiches.

What's the connection between power plants and tuna-fish sandwiches? There is none.

So what gives?

A tuna-fish sandwich is iconic - it evokes memories of brown-bag lunches, picnics and late-night snacks. In a word: wholesome. Which is why, perhaps, activists were quick to conflate it with "coal on whole wheat." A Sierra Club executive told a reporter recently, "Mercury pollution from coal-fired plants affects us every day, from the can of tuna fish we eat to the air we breathe."

It was a catchy quote, but entirely untrue.

For far too long, environmental groups have been given free rein to say whatever they want because we assume they have our - and our planet's - best interests at heart. But increasingly, as in this case, their assertions fly in the face of sound scientific evidence, with reporters recording each one without question. So much for the old journalist creed: "If your mother says she loves you, check it out."

This is a very dangerous trend. The Sierra Club got a free pass when it plastered commuter rail cars and websites with advertisements designed to scare pregnant women into thinking a womb is a "reservoir of mercury" delivered simply by eating tuna. That's patently false. Even worse, it hurts the very people it purports to protect: pregnant women and children. Study after study shows that babies need the nutrients in seafood for optimal development in utero.

Yet no one questioned the Sierra Club's tactics, let alone exposed its ulterior motive - not the media, the EPA or even the Department of Health and Human Services, which issued the following recommendation in its latest Dietary Guidelines for Americans: "Eat at least 8 and up to 12 ounces of seafood every week during pregnancy and breastfeeding."

No one pointed to well-publicized research led by the National Institutes of Health, which concluded that children whose mothers eat no fish during pregnancy are 29 percent more likely to have abnormally low IQs.

No one looked to specialists with the Harvard School of Public Health, either, or its study that calculated that 84,000 people die each year because they don't get enough of the omega-3 fatty acids found in fish. Another found eating seafood once or twice a week could reduce the risk of coronary disease by 36 percent and the overall risk of death by 17 percent, concluding, "Seafood is likely the single most important food one can consume for good health."

Clearly, no one spoke with experts at the Institute of Medicine (IOM), who found "confusion may have scared people out of eating something that is beneficial for them. People should not be scared about eating seafood."

But the Sierra Club scared people with its lobbying campaign - inventing a narrative in its favor regardless of the consequences.

Let's stop assuming that the environmental lobby always has our best interests at heart and start using our heads. The facts are clear and easy to find:

- c Tuna is commercially fished from oceans - not rivers and lakes susceptible to industrial pollutants.

- c All commercially caught fish contain trace amounts of organic mercury released from underwater vents and volcanoes - a natural phenomenon that has continued uninterrupted for millions of years.

- c Trace amounts of mercury in the commercial seafood we eat are nearly identical to levels recorded over the past 100 years.

- c Pregnant women aren't eating nearly enough seafood. According to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, the average pregnant woman eats less than 2 ounces of fish per week - a paltry amount for her and her developing child.

When it comes to reading about human nutrition in the mainstream press, ask yourself why more and more quoted sources represent environmental organizations that are not registered dietitians, physicians or credentialed authors of peer-reviewed research. We would never take our car to a restaurant and ask the chef to rebuild the transmission, and yet by some strange voodoo, environmental activists are allowed to decide what is and is not healthy for us.

As the late Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan quipped, "Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts." Good public policy should stand on its own merits, and there are far better ways to lobby for a cause than to jeopardize the health and well-being of pregnant women and children.

*Mary Anne Hansan is vice president of the National Fisheries Institute.*