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Cave Hill Campus

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- Creativity to the Fore
- How to Grow a Medical Cannabis Industry
- Panellists Urge Education Reform
- From Sweet Potato to Plastic



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# Blackfish Caution

by Camille Russell

Scientists have cautioned blackfish consumers in St. Vincent and the Grenadines after discovering high levels of mercury in these species.

Recent research based at The University of the West Indies (The UWI), Cave Hill campus found that mercury levels in these mammals, particularly the killer whale, had the highest levels of mercury ever recorded worldwide. The samples of these blackfish, including false killer whale, killer whale, short-finned pilot whale, and Risso's dolphin, were collected from the waters of St. Vincent and brought to Cave Hill for analysis. For all the species sampled, the study found the average concentration of mercury in the muscle tissue significantly exceeded the recommendation of the **Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)** and the **World Health Organization (WHO)** by an average of between three and



Dr. Russell Fielding, visiting Lecturer in Environmental Studies at The UWI, Cave Hill

forty-eight times the suggested upper limit, depending on the species.

Project leader of the study Dr. Russell Fielding said samples of meat and other parts of the mammals that are used for consumption were collected during

the course of a year. They were sent to the laboratory at the Cave Hill Campus for initial analysis and subsequently shipped to the United States for further tests.

*"We found that not only were the mercury levels high enough to be of concern, but for certain aspects of the analysis, we were finding the highest numbers recorded on earth."*

He stressed that for the killer whale (orca) being hunted in the region's waters, the mercury values recorded were the highest ever for orcas: *"This is comparing them to other samples from other parts of the world, including places where there are not even consumed."*



Dr. Fielding expressed concern about the findings, since these whales are used as a food in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. From the recommendations of the study, he advised the Government of St. Vincent and the Grenadines to consider the establishment of dietary recommendations and/or whaling policies to mitigate this apparent public health risk. Dr. Fielding added that the local government is keen to understand the issue in the interest of preserving the country's food security and public health.

Dr. Fielding is a visiting Lecturer of Environmental Studies and researcher at The UWI, Cave Hill.



Major contributors to the study included Meaghan A. McCormack and Jessica Dutton of **Texas State University**, Jeremy J. Kiszka and Valeria Paz of the **Florida International University**, Brian P. Jackson of **Dartmouth College**, and Don R. Bergfelt of **Ross University School of Veterinary Medicine** in St. Kitts and Nevis. Key collaborator from the Cave Hill Campus was Dr. Emma Smith of the Department of Biological and Chemical Sciences who said that, while the campus was happy to

facilitate the research, the results do merit concern and the campus looks forward to facilitating the next stage of research to investigate the effects on the consumers.

This study comes at a time when focus is intensifying on the region's blue economy, with the hope that prudent, sustainable management of its marine resources could see the sector become an even greater contributor to regional development. ♦

