

Seaflora CEO Diane Bernard

“The Seaweed Lady”

REPORTING BY BELLAMY PAILTHORP



'Seaweed Lady' Diane Bernard, the founder and CEO of Seaflora, on the beach near her home in Sooke, BC. | *Bellamy Pailthorp*

Beneath the surface of the Salish Sea, hundreds of species of seaweed provide habitat and nutrition for many forms of marine life. Some varieties are also harvested as food for humans or made into supplements. In Sooke, just west of Victoria in British Columbia, one entrepreneur has developed a line of skin care products made from foraged kelp.

“Poor seaweeds, they have such a PR problem!” exclaims Diane Bernard, the founder and CEO of [Seaflora](#).

“So part of my job is to really improve that and to have people understand this coastline,” she said, standing in the tide pools on her local

beach, surrounded by a collection of plant material in diverse colours and textures.

We see bright green sea lettuce and bubbly rockweed, large sheets of chocolate coloured leaves and iridescent *Iridaea cordata* that shimmers blue in the light. Bernard shows off the bounty collected, swiftly correcting any disparaging descriptions of the wild ingredients that power her company.



Diane Bernard walks amongst the seaweed on the beaches in Sooke, B.C. | *Bellamy Pailthorp*

“We don’t call it slimy, we call it gelatinous,” she said. “That gelatinous material is actually extremely healthy and clean.”

Seaflores has earned USDA organic certification on the foraged seaweeds they use.

Known in many circles as “The Seaweed Lady,” Bernard has become a kind of ambassador for the ecosystem and the plant life it supports. She said there are upwards of 600 different species of seaweed in the Salish Sea, making it one of the most diverse seaweed ecosystems.

“The entire British Columbia coastline, from the US border through to the Alaskan border is extraordinary. It has huge tonnage of seaweed,” she said. And she says the vast majority of what grows is clean and fresh. Despite that, there is still battle to get people to not think of seaweed as the stinky and slimy vegetation they often encounter buzzing with flies on the

shoreline. She likes to ask people to put on a pair of rubber boots and join her for a walk at low tide.

“What I say to people is that you’re in the Victoria zone, and it’s the city of gardens, and I actually have the wildest garden in that zone, and it’s the ocean garden,” she says. “And like any garden it grows, it fruits, it reproduces, and it sloughs off.”



Seaweed in Sooke, B.C. | *Bellamy Pailthorp*

The seaweed most people see on the shore is the cast-off waste of the ocean garden.

“We would never judge a garden by the looks, smell, or texture of a compost pile. But essentially that’s what the seaweeds on the shore are, that’s the compost pile,” Bernard said. Once she can show people the fresh crops she gathers a little further out, they start to understand her passion for wild ocean seaweed.

Bernard said it’s a sustainable resource – “the most beautiful wild resource in the world” – and it can be kept that way if managed well.

“It’s subject to real issues and problems, but if we work smartly with our coastline, then we can have this resource for a long, long time,” she says. She founded the company in the late 90s, a time when she says coastal communities were particularly hard hit, with logging and fishing going

down and tourism somewhat shaky. She wanted a sustainable business model that would provide lasting, family-wage jobs. Initially, they experimented with culinary seaweed. But, Bernard says, the margins were razor thin.

“The reality is that North Americans, while they love the challenge of eating local and wild, to actually pay for that is another story,” she said. In fact, it was a chef who introduced her to the more profitable world of spas. She found skin care products that advertised the benefits of seawater, known as thalassotherapy, but actually contained very little of it. “All we’re doing is making the industry honest,” she says. “We’re actually taking the wild seaweeds, subtly treating them, keeping that fiber, keeping as much of the vitamins and minerals as we possibly can, from the cleanest areas in the North American continent, and making it into our product, which speaks so strongly of the Pacific Northwest.”

Victoria is a community that has become somewhat notorious for dumping raw sewage into its surrounding waters. Bernard says potential customers need not worry.

“It is a huge embarrassment here for us on Vancouver Island, at the largest city, that the capital city of the province is not up to speed on water quality around waste management systems,” Bernard says. “Having said that, they are now moving in that direction. The feds have now stepped in and said get going on it.”

The region is building a treatment facility for Victoria, to be operating by 2020. Sooke, located 40 km west of the capital, is far enough away to remain unaffected. She says her community has also had its own system in place for nearly twenty years.

“I have to have our oceans tested here, I have to have our seaweeds tested. It’s quite an onerous task to show that we do not carry high levels of toxins or chemicals or issues from insecure waste management systems,” she said.

After all, Seaflora is producing products for the largest organ of the human body: The skin.

“We want to maintain a very high standard, that’s why went for the USDA certification,” she said. “We want to promote a product that is toxic free, really clean, and represents the great ecosystem that it’s actually harvested from.”

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