

INSIGHT

TELESCOPE

Searching the frontiers of science

PETER CALAMAI

SPECIAL TO THE STAR

"Compared with other nations, Canada is extremely good at supporting university-based research. . . We rank first among the G7 countries and our government's goal is to stay number one."

— Gary Goodyear, federal minister of state for science, on Mar. 18

Fewer wild minks: Birds do it, bees do it, and minks really, really do it. That's why it's a bad idea for animal rights activists to free horny domestic animals from mink farms.

The result could be rampant cross-breeding between domestic and wild mink, genetically weakening the wild population, as has happened already with farmed salmon escaping into the ocean.

Sure enough, biologists from Sudbury's Laurentian University found that two out of three mink running wild in some southern Ontario locations were actually either domestic mink or domestic-wild hybrids.

The locations, in Essex County and the municipality of Niagara, have been home to mink ranches for two decades, so there was a good chance of mink escaping and crossbreeding

To test the hypothesis, biology researcher Anne Kidd applied a sophisticated genetics ancestry test to 50-plus mink live-trapped there. In one area, only one in five was actually wild, while in the other, barely more than half were.

In the current issue of the journal *Molecular Ecology*, Kidd and her colleagues warn that such hybridization can lessen survival chances of the wild population by introducing inbred genes from the domestic population. As well, farmed mink are prone to Aleutian disease, an often-fatal virus, which could spread to the wild.

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