

Salmon is a true symbol of our province

By Iona Campagnolo, Special to the Sun, May 18, 2010

The "romance" of the Pacific salmon has ancient roots. From "time immemorial," first nations inhabitants of the land that is today's British Columbia revered the primal odyssey of the salmon as representative of our own capacity for constant regeneration and renewal. Predating the formal establishment of this province by eons, salmon have sustained us and have come to help signify the love of human beings for this beautiful place that is also our home.

Is it time to formalize the iconic relationship between the salmon and today's British Columbians?

It is true B.C. has a selection of formalized icons, yet with all our significant waterways, streams, bogs, lakes and coastline, there is no fish among them. There is the dogwood, blooming on a tree that like the Garry oak and arbutus can be found in special places in southern B.C. and whose distinction proudly anchors the very highest Medal of Honour of our province. Then there is the ultramarine blue and iridescent black beauty of the talkative Steller's jay whose insistent voice can be heard throughout the province.

In this time of grave concern for the future of B.C.'s wild bears, the latest of the symbols to officially symbolize our province is the Kermode bear. Now called the Spirit Bear, it is a regional creature, that as a white, black bear speaks volumes about British Columbia's distinctive natural wildlife legacy.

Finally, we are formally defined by the western red cedar, a tree that waits patiently in the understory of our remaining forests to secure our inheritance should we fail to control resource exploitation and the effects of advancing climate change.

Storied in the myths and legends of this place, represented in the most ancient and modern of art forms, the Pacific salmon has a broadly accepted spiritual significance, in addition to all its familiar practical applications. With a remarkable and still not clearly understood capacity to return to the waters that gave it life, salmon have gained human respect as well as a sense of wonder and admiration over the centuries.

Each autumn, crowds gather along some of our still-productive rivers: the Adams or the Horsefly, for example, where people watch in rapt attention as the annual miracle of the salmon takes place. Salmon swimming in couples, ritually endure a last act of life by laying and fertilizing a new generation and then yielding their bodies to the waters to be rendered by winter into nutrients to feed the smolts of a new generation of their kind, that will emerge from the gravel of their home-waters in the next spring freshet to begin again their momentous cycle of life.

Salmon have long meant much more to British Columbians than a source of income or a fine meal. As with so many of our signposts in this time of immense change, the species of salmon found in our countless rivers, streams and waterways represent a precious inheritance that is

deserving of our formal recognition. Sun columnist Miro Cernetig started a movement to adopt the salmon as a B.C. icon; now we ask you to add your support by requesting a permanent place for the Pacific salmon in our pantheon of symbols of our province.

Iona Campagnolo is the former lieutenant-governor of British Columbia.

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