

Terry Glavin: Get your hands off my salmon

Terry Glavin, September 3, 2010



Plenty for everybody - Ian Smith/ PNG

While the world looks on in astonishment as sockeye salmon continue to pour up the Fraser River in abundances far greater than anyone has seen in their entire lives, you'd think that Canadians might be allowed to take the event as an occasion for some happiness. It could be an opportunity for some reflection on our good fortune, and we might even be possessed of the tiniest bit of humility as we ponder the implications. This is the biggest run of salmon to the biggest sockeye spawning stock on Canada's west coast since 1913, and nobody saw this coming. Nobody.

Still, you can't pick up a newspaper in this country without being hectored and shouted at and instructed to fall in line and be miserable about it and to shut up and pick up your torch and your pitchfork like everybody else: Them dang environmentalists have been lying to us all along, the gummint scientists have mismanaged the fishery, this just proves we should act more like Alaskans, and by the way, if we don't hurry up and catch eight out of every ten homeward-swimming salmon the result will be an ecological disaster.

There are great mysteries that remain unexplained in the vast ocean pastures of the North Pacific's subarctic gyre, where the sockeye spend their lives, and there are riddles that remain unresolved within the microscopic genetic architecture of *Oncorhynchus nerka*. This may always be so. But none of that is as mysterious as the matter of how it is that such a phenomenally high occurrence of *Homo sapiens* who wholly lack the gene for embarrassment end up in the ranks of Canadian fishery "experts," and how it is that journalists who couldn't tell a salmon from a sablefish ensure that their every bleating and crackpot theory will fill the front pages of the dailies.

There is so much to laugh at in all this it's hard to pick just one freak show. But for my money, the most uproarious lament making the rounds is the popular recrudescence of an old and long-debunked superstition. This is the idea is that unless we let the fish buyers get even more fish

than they're being allowed, the Fraser's sockeye will swamp their spawning grounds in Adams Lake and ruin everything for themselves and dig up their own egg nests, and doom will surely result.

When was the last time the folkloric hysteria of "overspawning" moved in such high-traffic volume? It was in 2002. The progeny of the spawners from that so-called disaster returned in fairly healthy numbers in 2006, and it is their offspring we are seeing swarming up the Fraser Canyon as I write this. Some disaster. Some catastrophe.

While you're being hectored to set fire to the federal government's fishery-management garrisons out on the west coast, you might want to notice that the Adams-bound sockeye are not the only salmon heading home to the Fraser River this year. As always, dozens of other sockeye runs are co-migrating with the Adams run. Many of those runs are in terrible shape. The vast majority of ordinary Canadians have made it clear that they are not content to see them fished into extinction. British Columbians have been particularly clear about this.

So Fisheries and Oceans managers have been a bit timid lately in carrying on with their custom of giving a puny and increasingly irrelevant consortium of fishing companies anything and everything they always want. That's why they waited a few extra days this year before letting the industry wail away on the Adams sockeye run. If you think you should be angry about this and scream that they should all be fired, go right ahead. Scream yourself blue.

To be fair, the greedier gasbags in the fishing industry – an ever-louder but an ever-diminishing minority – may well be right. It could well be that if Ottawa let them catch eight or nine out of every ten homeward-swimming Adams sockeye this year, no long-term calamity would befall the Adams run. But ask any fisheries scientist – even one who's eccentric enough to be enlisted to that argument – and they will tell you that such high harvest rates would likely mean the loss of Cultus sockeye, Bowron sockeye, Harrison sockeye, Pitt sockeye, and any number of other sockeye runs, to say nothing of Fraser-bound salmon of other species, like coho and chinook.

Well, why the hell should Canadians allow this? To prop up an antiquated and grotesquely subsidized annual jamboree that consists of a lumbering fleet of seine boats pulling into the Steveston docks to be paid pennies a pound for the best marine protein on the planet just so that it can all be stuffed into freezer trucks and shipped across the border to Seattle, while the rest of us are expected to call this an "industry"?

No thanks. You can keep your torches and pitchforks and crackpot superstitions. I am going to be happy, my freezer will be filled with sockeye any day now, and I'll be canning some, too. I will have contentedly paid my pals in the gillnet fleet a premium for those fish, and I'm going to be well pleased with myself, and there's nothing anyone can do to stop me.

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