

Unfounded fears of too many sockeye threaten future returns

By Stephen Hume, Vancouver Sun, August 30, 2010

These are days of miracle and wonder for those of us who care about the fate of wild salmon.

And yet word was barely out that 25 million sockeye were bound for the Fraser River before worries arose about surplus salmon being "wasted" by permitting too many to spawn.

The B.C. Fisheries Survival Coalition, which usually vents its spleen complaining about aboriginal poachers, was spouting this specious nonsense as justification for more fishing opportunities, even though freezer capacity on the south coast is fully utilized, catches are reported rotting on boats because they can't be processed, and fishermen are practically giving away sockeye.

Still they fretted that too many spawners would result in mass mortalities as fish fought on the spawning grounds. This rationalization has been deployed as justification for over-harvesting before.

Similar stupidity arose in 2002. Science found no adverse effects from "over-spawning" then. In fact, this massive run in 2010 descends from the "over-spawned" brood of 2002 that returned to spawn in 2006.

There is no waste in nature. These surpluses are genetic insurance, a species' strategy for ensuring adequate reproductive capacity in the face of adverse conditions.

Historically, the more fish you put on the spawning grounds, the more fish return.

Science has found a direct correlation between decaying salmon on those same spawning grounds and nutrients available to the aquatic insects that sustain the next generation of hatchlings.

Pent-up demand following a series of lean fishing seasons is understandable but if there's something to be learned from the 2010 run it's this: First, we are indebted to conservationists who fought for the precautionary principle. Second, fisheries managers who stood their ground despite vehement complaint from industry were right.

Back in 2006, the shrieks from industry over limited openings during what was characterized as the best salmon run in nearly a decade were deafening. More and longer openings were demanded. There were complaints about too many aboriginal openings. And once again there were claims that too many fish would spawn.

<http://www.vancouver.sun.com/news/todays-paper/Unfounded+fears+many+sockeye+threaten+future+returns/3459274/story.html>

Here we are, four years later, with a return that should instil awe in anyone who cares about the environment. We should celebrate nature's ability to confound our best science and our worst instincts.

So let's hope fisheries managers have the fortitude to once again withstand the voices of greed and stupidity and manage this stock, not for the discredited values of maximum sustained yield, but by planning long range for future abundance.

This run is cause for humility, not hubris.

Let's put it in perspective. The magnificent return of 2010 is not a triumph of fisheries management. Nor is it proof things have returned to normal in the salmon fishery. It's a reminder that we still don't understand the dynamics of salmon ecosystems and that when we take less, nature provides more.

Even with this immense run, vast stretches of pristine salmon spawning habitat remain barren. Chinook are in trouble. Coho are in trouble. Chum are in trouble. Steelhead are in trouble. Despite this astonishing return, sockeye are still in trouble.

Even with this enormous run, there could yet be problems.

Water levels at Hell's Gate, the major choke-point for salmon migrating to the upper Fraser, are only at 68 per cent of normal. Water temperatures in the river are still above average and spawning sockeye are temperature sensitive.

So far, so good. The Pacific Salmon Commission reports that fish arriving on the spawning grounds are generally in satisfactory condition.

But let's not forget this "record" run, the best since 1913, is no pinnacle of achievement. It's a pathetic remnant of past glory; a source of wonder to us, perhaps, but a remnant, nonetheless.

Before commercial fishing of Fraser River salmon runs, before development of management schemes, back when there was no fishing to reduce the "waste" and the "surplus," when the escapements to the spawning grounds were incalculably vast, salmon returns on a dominant cycle are thought to have topped 150 million fish.

Let us keep that in mind. Let us practise prudence and caution. If we could restore the runs to but half their former glory, we'd think runs like this one a poor return. Imagine a B.C. in which we had 50 million sockeye a year return. We might know that abundance again if we can curb our greed and stay the course.

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