

Late spawning seen as climate change calamity

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The winter rains have arrived with a vengeance and with it the Goldstream River salmon run, albeit two weeks late.

"They are coming up stream in the hundreds. Chum are jumping over logs," Laura Hogan, a naturalist with the Goldstream park nature house, said on Monday. "It's quite spectacular."

Last week was a much different story. Fish were nowhere to be seen, and river watchers worried the run could be worse than last year. Darren Copely, also a naturalist at the nature house, said mostly chum, and a few coho started flooding up the river on Thursday.

"We are hoping it isn't just a pulse from the rain, but it's too early to say for sure," he said. "We were very happy to see fish on Thursday and Friday. It might be a good run if this continues."

As of last week, Goldstream hatchery volunteers counted less than 2,000 chum and coho in the river, similar to poor returns last year with 5,500 and 200 respectively. Only three years ago, volunteers counted almost 22,000 chum. Another count is planned for today.

Despite good signs, Copely noted that the changing nature of the run is rippling through the ecosystem. By now, spawning would be finished and the area would be flooded with seagulls and eagles picking at salmon carcasses. Under the new norm, visiting schoolchildren and seabirds are seeing longer delays for the seasonal ritual.

"The past two or three years we haven't seen much of a run until well into November," Copley said noting that for a decade prior to that, "the run was a week earlier."

To see fish runs change so dramatically and quickly in Goldstream River, a pristine river within a protected watershed, shows the troubling impact of climate change, Copley said.

"The fact that we have seen changes locally and on our lifetime scale is scary."

Other runs point to larger climatic problems. The chinook run, for one, has completely collapsed at Goldstream and in the Cowichan River near Duncan.

"This year is a calamity with the chinook," said Peter McCully a biotechnologist who oversees the Goldstream fish hatchery. "The run peaks at Thanksgiving where we use to average 300 fish. This year we've seen 30."

McCully said Cowichan River has seen its "lowest return in history." Part of the chinook run headed for Cowichan continues on to Goldstream, linking the fate of the two rivers.

"We are on a course with fish in Goldstream and Cowichan that they won't be there anymore."

McCully, who has worked on Goldstream River since the mid-1970s, said last week it was the shallowest in memory.

That would be even lower without extra flow from the Capital Regional District's watershed. "The water level is OK because of the release by CRD water. If not we would be in desperate shape," McCully said.

McCully said southern Vancouver Island is seeing a longer dry season, which alters spawning patterns. The bigger worry, though, lies with the ocean, where survival rates have plummeted in the past decade and scientists can only guess why.

Recent reports from Canada and the United Nations are warning ocean fish in general could be wiped out in the next 40 years.

McCully said in the Georgia Strait, salinity levels, temperature and Fraser River outflow have all changed, possibly influencing salmon runs. Other fish are thriving, he noted, such as hake, a species of cod.

"There is so much going on, in combination it may make a difference, but we know so little about the saltwater environment," McCully said. "The ocean is truly a black box."

Despite the critical condition of the ocean, McCully said the federal government is cutting stock assessment funding on the West Coast, which is key to setting the commercial harvest.

"For six years we've seen a dramatic cut in stock assessment," he said. "It's frustrating for scientists on the ground. They are forced to make recommendations in a vacuum."