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BC conservationists urge government to continue prudent management of banner sockeye salmon return

“Don’t succumb to sockeye fever”

Watershed Watch Salmon Society is urging the Department of Fisheries and Oceans to continue a path of prudent management of this year’s surprisingly high return of sockeye salmon to the Fraser River.

“We should all rejoice in this year’s bounty, but remember that returns of Fraser sockeye in this decade have been extremely low for reasons not yet understood,” said Dr. Craig Orr, Executive Director of Watershed Watch. “Fishermen should be able to fish but we cannot forget that the federal government’s Wild Salmon Policy sets conservation of wild salmon as Canada’s highest priority.”

The Fraser River sockeye fishery occurs mainly in marine waters and the lower Fraser River, and kills sockeye from over 40 genetically unique and irreplaceable sub-populations or “stocks.” Many of these stocks are severely depleted. Cultus and Sakinaw Lake sockeye have been deemed endangered by the federal Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada, with overfishing listed as a major factor in their decline. Most of this year’s abundant sockeye are from one place – the Adams River.

“We’ve endured a century of overfishing and collapse of smaller sockeye populations,” said Vicky Husband, senior advisor to Watershed Watch. “That’s a path we must now avoid, and we should instead ensure we have salmon for the ecosystem and for our future.”

Calls to fish harder are being made based on myths that salmon not killed today are somehow “wasted,” or worse, contribute to overcrowding and collapse. Salmon carcasses benefit the entire ecosystem, including bears, eagles, and the insects and plankton that provide food for juvenile salmon. Recent science, most notably documented in a 2004 study by the federally-appointed Pacific Fisheries Resource Conservation Council, also debunks the tired notion that overfishing leads to stock collapses.

“There is already more fishing than we’ve seen in a decade, and calls for even more are at odds with the fact that the market is completely saturated right now and the canneries are running 24-7,” said Aaron Hill, Watershed Watch ecologist.

For years conservationists have also been urging a shift in BC’s salmon fisheries to more selective fishing techniques which would allow more fish to be harvested from abundant stocks, while permitting endangered stocks to go unharmed or even recover. Such a shift would also reduce our tenuous reliance on pre-season abundance forecasts, which in recent years have been seriously wrong more often than not.

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