

Where have all the salmon gone?

And where on Earth are our public watchdogs? Scientists tipped them to this tragedy in 2007

BY STEPHEN HUME, VANCOUVER SUN COLUMNIST AUGUST 25, 2009



About 130 million baby salmon appear to have vanished in 2007. Is this a harbinger of disasters yet to come?

Photograph by: Bill Keay, Vancouver Sun files

Approximately 130 million baby sockeye from the Chilko, Quesnel and other interior river systems -- the largest producers of the most valuable commercial stocks on the Fraser system -- appear to have vanished during their annual migration to the sea in 2007.

This season's shortfall in predicted returns of sockeye salmon -- fewer than two million of the predicted 10.6 million are now expected to return -- actually points to something really troubling, a possible ecological catastrophe on a vast scale somewhere in the lower Fraser or the Strait of Georgia.

Even at the lowest marine survival ever recorded, the returning Chilko Lake run alone should be a million fish in 2009, noted one science journal in 2008. At even average survival, around six million mature sockeye should return to the system, observed the entry in *PICES*, published by the North Pacific Marine Sciences Organization. Instead it seems only a tiny number are now likely to return. In fact, this season's abundance is projected to be among the poorest in half a century.

What happened? What might the disappearance signify for future sockeye runs? Is this a harbinger of a coming collapse for other wild salmon stocks?

What might this mean for the survival of other species -- bears, eagles, killer whales, small aquatic creatures that depend upon nutrients from decaying salmon carcasses and provide feed for trout, sturgeon, insects -- that rely on these salmon returns?

Have we so degraded the Fraser that we are now in the early stages of an Atlantic cod scenario for British Columbia's iconic wild salmon? Is there something else going on in this enormous ecosystem that has implications for us humans who are perched atop the food chain, perhaps more precariously than we like to think?

Our provincial government has invested \$615,000 to help B.C.'s commercial fisheries obtain eco-certification as a sustainable industry from the London-based Marine Stewardship Council. How do you argue that a system where you lose 130 million baby fish, can't account for them and are having the poorest returns in 50 years is in any way sustainable?

Most important, why aren't we talking about this astonishing, colossal event in these broader terms instead of listening to Indian bands, sports anglers and commercial interests squabbling endlessly over the tattered remnants of what should have been a tremendous return while stunned fisheries managers blather about the difficulty of making the predictions they routinely make and try to calculate how many dwindling sockeye it will be OK to kill as by-catch in other fisheries?

The mystery begins at Chilko Lake where the number of smolts that had hatched in 2005 and left in spring of 2007, was stupendous -- double the greatest number ever recorded in the half century since fisheries managers first began keeping records.

Not only that, the escaping smolts were substantially larger and stronger than ever recorded and were therefore much better adapted to survive the rigours both of their migration down the Fraser and during the early stages of their two years spent growing to full size in the Pacific.

But surveys conducted in the Strait of Georgia by the federal department of fisheries and oceans in July of 2007 found only 157 sockeye smolts where test nets should have been teeming with specimens from the huge Chilko and Quesnel lakes outmigration.

Test fisheries in September picked up larger numbers of sockeye smolts, but I'm told that almost all of these fish were from a run originating in Harrison Lake that, unlike other runs, migrates almost immediately to the sea.

This remarkable event led scientists from the federal government's fisheries and oceans working group to advance a much more pessimistic prediction for sockeye returns to the Fraser in 2009, which it warned, "may be extremely poor."

What happened to those juvenile fish in such mind-boggling numbers represents a biological event that should be at the top of the agenda for every fisheries scientist, conservationist, politician, environmental organization and ordinary citizen who cares about British Columbia's ecological health, let alone the survival of wild salmon.

Yet there's just this mystifying, numb, business-as-usual wrangling about who should get to catch what among the various interest groups and a stunning, inexcusable, shameful silence from the politicians who oversee management of the resource.

Oh, I know, a couple of New Democratic Party MPs finally woke up to the issue late last week and started making political hay by blaming the federal Conservatives -- a fair point, since it's happened on the Tories' watch and they are the ones setting policy and are therefore accountable -- but where on Earth have our politicians been while this unfolded?

Why, since the scientists knew about it in 2007, did we only learn about it in 2009 when the overly optimistic miscalculations of the fisheries bureaucrats became undeniable? What does this say about the federal government's policy of muzzling scientists who come bearing bad news?

Where are Chuck Strahl and John Cummins on this issue? Where's Sukh Dhaliwal and Ujjal Dosanjh? Where are Ed Fast and Dick Harris? The Fraser River and its salmon runs affect all their constituencies.

Where, for that matter, is Barry Penner, the provincial environment minister from Chilliwack? Why isn't he on the front line advocating major reforms in the way this B.C. resource is being managed?

Most important, where's our invisible, deer-in-the-headlights federal fisheries minister, Gail Shea? What's the policy? What's the contingency plan? What's being done to find out what happened?

This isn't just about missing fish, embarrassed bureaucrats, squabbling stakeholders and tap-dancing politicians. It's about us. It's about who we are as citizens of a democracy. And it's about whether something big is going on that's causing an entire ecosystem to unravel -- an ecosystem on which we happen to depend, too.

shume@islandnet.com

© Copyright (c) The Vancouver Sun