

# Taking Stock of Salmon

by Tim McKay

In yet another effort to provide some clarity to the muddled waters of salmon politics, the NEC has cast its net and come up with a variety of perspectives on the state of salmon.

As of this writing, the northern California commercial salmon fishermen have once again had their season cut – and for the first time have had a quota imposed which will close the season as soon as 300,000 salmon are caught north of Point Arena and 265,000 salmon are caught commercially south of Point Arena.

By way of warning, my personal bias in this overview should be taken as yet another perspective.

Central to the plight of the North Coast salmon fishermen is the status of the Klamath river salmon stocks – or so it is argued.



Fisheries biologists believe that at least 40% of the salmon landed off of northern California and southern Oregon are attributable to the more than five million acre Klamath River watershed. Other Klamath River salmon will be caught further north along the Pacific Coast.

Fish which will spawn in California waters will pass offshore from British Columbia to central California. Salmon stocks from the Columbia River basin and other Washington and Oregon watersheds will also be caught off our shores.

Fish landed in California will also be destined for the Columbia River, one of the world's principal rivers and the largest watershed on the Pacific Coast.

More than 50% of the salmon spawning habitat in the Columbia Basin has been lost to dams, and salmon runs above the confluence of the Salmon and Snake rivers in Idaho are being reviewed for possible protection under the Endangered Species Act.

It should be pointed out here that the largest river system in California, the Sacramento/San Joaquin, has lost 84% of its historic spawning habitat to dams.

## Ocean Ranching

The loss of these coast-wide spawning areas was to be mitigated by the construction of salmon hatcheries, the successes and failures of which are discussed elsewhere in this issue.

While the implications of hatchery programs are not fully understood, questions raised to date suggest a serious re-assessment of the program. Are hatchery stocks depleting salmon food resources in the ocean? Are hatchery programs depleting the salmon gene pool? Do hatchery releases mask the decline of wild salmon stocks?

While this debate is just beginning, private industry has become well established in the hatchery business under the quaint term "ocean ranching." Names like Weyerhaeuser, Campbell Soups and Charter Oil are among the leaders.

Despite a decade or more of Oregon "ocean ranching," these concerns have yet to return the dollars to investors which were originally promised.

The implications of this aspect of the commercial salmon industry have only recently become clear to the commercial fishermen.

## Numbers Count

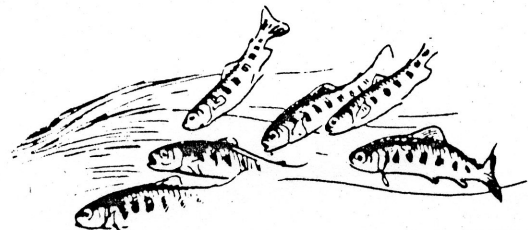
The extent of the commercial ocean fishery is somewhat muddled by the different recording techniques which have been employed by the different state jurisdictions in the past. Some states have measured deliveries, others the number of boats and others the numbers of trips out to fish.

Roughly put, about 22,000 fishermen search salmon off California, Oregon and Washington, and at least half of these fishermen are wholly dependent on that fishery for their sole income.

Fishermen who depend on salmon for a livelihood are an independent breed of people with a dangerous job.

Many other holders of commercial salmon gear are referred to as "weekenders" or the "mosquito fleet," those who supplement their income or their desire to catch fish with a commercial license but don't depend on the income for survival. This special class has yet to be dealt with in any special way.

The average annual take over the last 10 years off of northern California has been about 350,000 fish. In 1979, 438,000 salmon were taken commercially. In 1980 it was 299,000. Sports fishers on the other hand took 4,000 and 8,000 during those years, and the Indians on the Klamath River took 15,000 fish in 1979 and 13,000 fish in 1980.



The much-maligned biologists have sought to manage the fishery around a goal of 115,000 salmon returning to spawn in the Klamath River tributaries. The Pacific Fishery Management Council, which in recent years has come to set the seasons, quotas and goals, has established the Klamath River escapement goal at 86,000 fish.

Whatever the goal, what fish return has been another matter. Klamath River escapement (the collective term for those which get back to spawn) has been 70,000 fish in 1978, 38,000 in 1979 and 29,500 in 1980 (possibly an all-time low).

Recreational sports fishers have not escaped the cuts, and Oregon silver salmon quotas have been cut from a 1980 level of 508,000 fish to 224,000.

Indian fisheries, in my opinion, have come under especially vile criticism for a number of reasons - not the least of which is racism. The Indians' special treaty status has put them outside the regulatory structure of the PFMCC, and they fish with gill nets which have been banned in many other fisheries. Additionally, some argue that those who fish the rivers capture the best fish, those which have escaped capture by all of the other predators.

The Columbia River fishery has been equally partitioned between Indian and non-Indian after a case over treaty rights which was decided in the U.S. Supreme Court.

Indians on the Klamath have not fared as well. Historically these people depended on the salmon for subsistence and took an estimated 150,000 per year. With the coming of the whites the fishery began to decline.

A non-Indian commercial gill net fishery developed in the lower stems of the Klamath River which employed mostly Indians and which landed some 52,000 fish per year between 1915 and 1928. The state closed the gill net fishery in 1933, but Indians continued to take fish for ceremonial and personal use amounting to between 3,000 and 20,000 fish a year.

## Klamath Indian Woes

The Indians can now can take fish for "subsistence" purposes, but the definition of that term has been debated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the California Department of Fish and Game.

Pressure to curtail the Indian fishery has led to regular patrols by armed agents from U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Additional to the impacts chronicled above, the freshwater spawning habitat that hasn't been flooded by dams has been impacted by logging and related erosion.

According to a recent article in Gray's Sporting Journal, poor logging practices can kill salmon nine different ways. (For a copy of this review send \$.50 and a self-addressed envelope to Salmon, c/o the NEC.)

The effects of herbicides on salmon stocks is not fully understood, though studies suggest reason for concern.

Recent improvement efforts have aimed at clearing miles of log-choked streams to open new spawning areas. These efforts have largely been dependent on subsidized labor programs such as the California Conservation Corps, the Young Adult Conservation Corps and the Youth Conservation Corps. Such programs are in jeopardy because of federal funding cuts.



Current wilderness legislation pending in Congress also will have a decisive impact on some of the remaining spawning areas.

Other questions, too, have been raised in the flap over one of the world's most popular fish. For example, what are the impacts of marine mammals and other predators on the salmon population?

It is widely known that some commercial fishermen shoot sea lions on sight, and others have asked that the practice be made legal. Still other observers have suggested that everything from mergansers and herons to otters be eliminated.

The complexity of the problem and the intensity of the emotion has stirred the pot, and the goal of rehabilitating the salmon fishery seems as elusive as ever. Perhaps it was best summarized by the remark, "Maybe we can't get there from here."