

<http://www.straight.com/article-296696/vancouver/celia-brauer-recovery-fraser-river-sockeye-calls-olympian-effort-inquiry>

MISSING



Fraser R. Sockeye
last seen summer 2005

REWARD IF FOUND:

A Healthy Ecosystem with
Free Food for Whales, Humans,
Bears, Wolves & Eagles for Millennia
+ Nitrogen Rich Old Growth Forests

By Celia Brauer

Let's see a show of hands: How many people know that Team Canada won hockey gold on the last day of the 2010 Winter Olympics? And who knows that Justice Bruce Cohen is presiding over an [inquiry](#) into the collapse of the Fraser River sockeye salmon and that the deadline for applicants who can demonstrate a "substantial and direct interest in the subject matter" is Wednesday (March 10)?

Take note, patriots: hockey will live forever, but if Cohen's efforts are not successful we tragically stand to lose another Canadian icon.

When the inquiry was [announced](#) last fall, those of us familiar with the salmon tale had mixed feelings. After all, [five studies](#) in the past 18 years have attempted pretty much the same task, and the oceans and rivers of the West Coast are obviously not brimming with success. In 2004, a government report was even [titled](#) "Here We Go Again".

But, this year, nine million of the 10 million sockeye predicted [never showed up](#). So how else will we call to task those responsible in this last chance to get it right?

Oh Canada! It seems endless analysis by royal commissions and public inquiries are the only tools we have to find answers to complex questions. Admittedly, the salmon is a slippery fellow not easy to analyze and measure, let alone predict. But its falling numbers occur because it remains one of the easily available natural resources that were once bountiful in North America. *Oncorhynchus* is darned good to eat; its tasty and nutrient-rich pink flesh fetches a nice sum at the market so people will continue to pull thousands of its kind out of the water to earn a good day's wages. This is an ancient dance—fish as "commodity", human-being as beneficiary.

This was not always the case. Salmon have used the Fraser River's watershed—which drains a quarter of B.C.—as their highway to and from their spawning grounds for millennia. Salmon were the primary food source for many British Columbia First Nations who had strict rules about its use and care and a strong accompanying mythology. But since the arrival of the Europeans, salmon has become primarily a commodity and there lies the problem. Pairing this "nature as something we consume to exhaustion and then replace with something else" philosophy with advanced industrial fishing technology has been disastrous. Even when interventionist "science" stepped in with the cure-all of fish hatcheries and salmon farms, they failed to solve the problem of disappearing fish. Indeed many claim hatcheries and farms are a big part of the cause of decline. So can we really expect another inquiry to be successful given the numerous stakeholders, their conflicting interests, and these complicated circumstances? And are we sure intelligent recommendations will be followed?

At first glance, the [terms of reference](#) for the Cohen inquiry look friendly enough. The first point includes an emphasis on "the overall aim of respecting conservation of the sockeye salmon stock".

All interested parties are welcome to send their comments in writing or attend the inquiry. But looking deeper into the text a salmon lover becomes increasingly nervous. Only participants who have a "right" or "interest" can apply for "standing" at the actual inquiry—which circuitously brings you back to the discussion of whether an applicant can "demonstrate why the person has a substantial and direct interest in the subject matter". This last statement prompted Andrew Gage, a lawyer with West Coast Environment Law, to [ask for clarification](#) on the issue of who has "standing".

There certainly is cause for concern. We are once more going down the road where the needs of the present livelihood of humans threaten the continued existence of a cultural icon. If only those with economic interests have standing (i.e. people who harvest salmon in large numbers and industries who might threaten salmon habitat and health), who will speak for the survival of the species for its own sake? A landmark case on the rights of "standing" for flora and fauna was heard in California in 1972 (*Sierra Club v. Morton*, 405 U.S. 727). This was discussed by Christopher Stone in his book [Should Trees Have Standing](#). Four decades later, we are still arguing about whether wild lands and creatures have any legal "standing" today.

But even if we skip delving into the rights of animals and plants—what about future human generations? Will our descendants be able to consume salmon—an incredibly rich food source—on a modest and sustainable basis for centuries to come if we do not restrain ourselves now? If not, would this not indeed be a tragedy? Perhaps the time is not far off when our youth will be

storming the streets, demanding we reorganize our society before there are no resources left! Or will it get to the point where those in charge today will be back in court being tried for squandering what future generations should have inherited? Some will no doubt accuse me of excessive dramatization, but given how Atlantic cod were decimated, how would we explain ourselves if something equivalent happened on our coast?

If this inquiry is to succeed, the case of “man v.s. salmon” must include a moral discussion of the right of salmon to exist for their own sake. We were not the original creators of salmon—even though we go to great lengths to mimic biology in the hatcheries. So we should not be the ones to decide whether salmon have a right to a secure place on this Earth. Of all the management regimes we might think of adopting to accomplish this end, the only one that makes any sense is [ecosystem-based management](#). This approach will offer the Fraser River sockeye and their needs the upper hand from now on. We have gone too far degrading salmon habitat and endangering the lives of this precious creature and we do not know where the point of no return is. We must try whatever we can to reverse this, though it would be a real tragedy to fail and an even greater one not to make an “Olympian” effort.

This means the Cohen inquiry must hear from all the interested parties. This would include the nonprofit groups who work so tirelessly to save salmon habitat and monitor threats to salmon’s survival. These passionate advocates—stream-keepers, stewardship groups, educators, artists, and faith leaders, along with biologists, economists, and industry lobbyists—should apply for standing and be heard. In fact their evidence should hold more weight if they value the life of fish over their own livelihood. They are the salmon’s representatives for its own defence. They are clear on their mandate: if there is no fishery, the fisher or fish farmer will face hardship but they may well find another job. For the salmon, however, extinction is final and forever. These groups also indirectly represent bears, wolves, eagles, orcas, and countless other creatures which thrive because of salmon populations. Today we know, for example, that salmon carcasses are most important in fertilizing the temperate rainforest floors.

It is high time we took some greater direction from the older traditions of our First Nations brothers and sisters who made the salmon central to their lives in a respectful way and so allowed them to flourish under their centuries-old watch. Today, we can proudly say that the wild salmon does have many advocates. These people would happily speak for the salmon as a creature worthy of great reverence and whose interests they will honestly represent on the witness stand. For them, a salmon is not just a flopping carcass ready to be chopped up and sold nor just a number on the income statement of a large company.

Salmon lovers everywhere will be watching the proceedings of the Cohen inquiry very carefully, praying that our society can finally get the message that the true long-term value of a wild species must be more important than our selfish immediate needs. In the meantime there is no reason why every Canadian who has a personal connection with salmon can not write, draw, photograph or sing their views to the Cohen commission in the next few months. And so they should—the more the merrier!

Celia Brauer is the cofounder of the [False Creek Watershed Society](#) and works as a volunteer educating the public about the lost natural history of Vancouver, which once had 57 flourishing salmon streams. She was the creator and producer of the Salmon Celebration, a B.C. Rivers Day event, from 2004 to 2009

[Kerry Coughlin: What the MSC certification process means for B.C. sockeye salmon](#)

[David Suzuki: Vanishing sockeye salmon shouldn't be labelled “sustainable”](#)

[Craig Orr: A call to action on B.C. sockeye salmon](#)

[Gerry Kristianson: We need to improve our ability to predict salmon abundance](#)