

PUNTLEDGE RIVER RESTORATION COMMITTEE

.....1293 Kye Bay Road, Comox, B.C. V9M 3T6
250-339-0791 rfussell@shaw.ca

President: Don McRae, M.L.A.

This committee was originally set up by Evelyn Gillespie, M.L.A. and consists of representatives from government, federal, provincial and local, B.C Hydro, environmental groups, industry, business, recreational associations, and other organizations with special interest in the Puntledge River.



11 August 2010

Dear Prime Minister:

Last week the Comox Valley Record ran a poll. This paper is one of two serving Courtenay, Comox , Campbell River and areas. The poll was "Should seals be culled to protect Puntledge River salmon stocks?". We were to visit the website to vote.

The poll ran through the holiday weekend when people were occupied with other things, or not at home, and the notice was in a small insignificant box, where, as I found out later, many had not seen it. I missed it myself. I did not expect much of a voter response. However, the vote was heavy, and came in at 93% responding "Yes". This looks like resounding anger. Mr. John Duncan is unlikely to be re-elected.

This would be ironic because Mr. Duncan is publicly in favour of a seal cull, was instrumental in getting the last cull under the Liberal Government some ten years ago, and has offered a friend who would do it. However, he cannot get your Government to do it, nor to take any other effective action to save our salmon. We could take care of the problem ourselves, but the seals are protected from us by Federal law.

The seals- about 50 of them- occupy a narrow part of the Puntledge River downstream from your hatchery, killing juveniles coming down in the spring, and adults going upstream in summer and fall. They do not kill only for food, though they are inclined to eat some of the juicy bits, but they also slaughter for fun, and it is very difficult for a fish to escape. The seals are doing it now. As a result, our salmon are in sad decline. and have been so for some seven years. This year, when your hatchery needed 3000 adult summer chinook for stock, only 410 got through. Last year there were 1611 . You can see the reduction in numbers. They are an endangered species, clearly. Next year there could be none. The coho also are in desperate straits. Every year the salmon seem to decrease by half, or worse. Your Government knows this (Department of Fisheries and Oceans, DFO) but has done nothing effective to stop it. There have been radio interviews, newspaper articles, editorials, and many letters to the various Ministers, usually with copies to you in recent years. Mr. Duncan has been trying to get action to save the salmon, but

PUNTLEDGE RIVER RESTORATION COMMITTEE

it seems your government does not listen to him and thus he can not represent his constituency- so what use is a Conservative M.P?

I am writing on behalf of the Puntledge River Restoration Committee, but there are many other organizations involved in urging seal control- for example the Steelhead Society of British Columbia, the local Fish and Game club (2000 members), the Environmental Council, B.C, Provincial Government (The Environment Minister, Barry Penner, has called for a seal cull to protect the provincial steelhead, down to one and a half fish per kilometer of water at last count), and the B.C, Wildlife Federation, which represents nearly all of the sports fishers in B.C. These people get very angry, for example, when if they are lucky enough to hook a salmon, a seal takes it, probably with much of their tackle. This happens frequently. And the government is protecting the seal. Although I have no contact with the commercial fishers, I imagine they are also hostile to seals. They used to shoot them.

The industries based on salmon, including the relevant tourism, used to be very strong . These industries employed many people and, together with logging, were the lifeblood of this area. No more. I am surprised that, with all this talk of infrastructure, stimulation spending, investment and so on, that restoring the salmon industries was not top of your list. It would have been a magnificent investment, and very productive in both short and long term. What is happening now is very wasteful-your hatchery raises salmon to feed seals. And it would not have needed much money. Mostly concern, really.

Your Minister, Hon. Gail Shea, has always been polite and courteous, in her letters of reply to the Puntledge River Restoration Committee, and even apparently supportive. She has written to us a number of times that she “ has no problem with the removal of problem seals”, but it just does not happen. Last year DFO offered us a compromise by which the problem seals would be trapped and removed, We agreed. We are not bloodthirsty, but it seems that a cull is the cheapest and most effective method. However, any alternative that works would be acceptable But time passed and nothing happened. Eventually we were told that DFO has no traps, and no money to build nor buy any. So we suppose it was just another delaying tactic, and again this year the seals are massacring salmon.

We wonder of course, why DFO is so overcome with inertia, and incompetence. DFO sometimes claims to be taking action but many of their attempts are just plain silly, and none work. Sometimes they try to blame something else, like long past logging or global warming. I have the impression that DFO is a “Yes Minister” type of organization, run by civil servants for the benefit of civil servants. We are also told that DFO

PUNTLEDGE RIVER RESTORATION COMMITTEE

is terrified of some imaginary, self-styled “environmentalists” who might protest. We have one, a lady who lives on an island and who will protest almost anything, particularly when a DFO official phones her to leak information, which she can then use to protest, usually by a letter to a newspaper. DFO seem to have missed the point, perhaps deliberately, that at least three times the Environmental Council (an umbrella group for environmental organizations) has written to the Minister demanding a cull, for environmental reasons. Genuine environmentalists are quite reasonably nowadays, particularly around here, and thus the 93% vote

This is not the only area with seal predation problems, Nanaimo and Duncan in particular have also been complaining , It is entirely probable also that a large part of your trouble with the Fraser sockeye is due to seal predation as the sockeye pass this way. I doubt if the seals would miss such an opportunity. Georgia Strait has a vast number of seals, all under government protection.

Mr. Harper, I am sorry this letter has gone on too long. I have tried to be brief and to the point, but there is a lot to be said and I have already missed out a lot. I am asking you, on behalf of the Puntledge River Restoration Committee, and others,, to tell your Ministry of Fisheries and Oceans to deal effectively with the seal problem, now. It seems that 93% of the voters around here agree. We look forward to your reply.

Sincerely

Roy Fussell, Chair

Puntledge River Restoration Committee.

Copies to:

Hon. Gail Shea, Minister.

Hon. John Duncan, M.P.

Others with interest

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