

September 1, 2010

There's just no pleasing some people.

Shoals of sockeye salmon are swarming up the Fraser River in abundances none of us have seen in our lifetimes. The fishboats are loaded to the gunwales, all the fish plants are glutted, the poor fishermen can barely give their catch away, and there are still plenty of fish left in the river for First Nations to catch, not to mention bears and eagles and everything else that thrives when the salmon thrive. It's nothing short of glorious. But B.C.'s fishing industry leaders are demanding more fishing openings, screaming bloody murder, and clamouring for the heads of federal fisheries scientists.

Last year, Fisheries and Oceans predicted that 10 million sockeye would head home to their Fraser River spawning grounds, but barely more than a million showed up, so the fishery was called off. Industry leaders screamed bloody murder then, too, just like they'd done when there were no fish to catch the year before that.

But what's particularly galling about the fishing companies' rallying cry this year is that they're raising the old and discredited spectre of "overspawning" to try to get their hands on even more fish.

It may well be that Fisheries and Oceans made mistakes and missed a chance to open the fishery early this year. The department's management biologists were thrown for a loop. The salmon arrived in strange pulses, timing and direction.

But to predict some sort of catastrophic "overspawning" really takes the cake. There's no such thing as "overspawning." It's a 19th-century industrial folk-belief that was first soundly debunked back in the 1950s by the famous fisheries scientist Bill Ricker, and by another study in the 1970's.

It was in 2002 that commercial-fishery leaders were last shouting about overspawning. Adams sockeye would be spawning on top of each other and digging up each other's egg nests, and the run would be ruined.

Well, what ended up happening? The offspring of the 2002 Fraser sockeye spawners returned in relatively healthy numbers in 2006, and it's their Adams-run offspring we're seeing in such staggering abundances this year.

Back in 2002 the federally-appointed Pacific Fisheries Resource Conservation Council investigated the issue. "The belief that excessive returns of salmon to their spawning grounds (over-escapement) will lead to a collapse of salmon production has been shown to be unfounded," the PFRCC declared.

What's most relevant about the PFRCC's findings for this year's astounding return of sockeye was its conclusion that in fact, highly productive sockeye stocks like the Adams run "will not suffer when risk-averse management and other precautionary measures are undertaken to protect weak stocks." That's the real beef behind this season's protests.

Responding to years of public outrage about overfishing and acquiescence to industry demands, Fisheries and Oceans managers are timidly adopting precisely those kinds of "precautionary measures" to protect dozens of weaker Fraser sockeye runs that co-migrate with the Adams run.. Chronic overfishing is a big reason why. The public wants conservation to be the top management priority.

These are disturbing times in the long history of Pacific salmon. Fisheries collapses have become the rule rather than the exception. Something strange is happening in the ocean. Lethally high water temperatures and dangerously low water levels have been taking a deathly toll on fish in freshwater.

But we can't expect government to "manage" ecosystems that range from the Rocky Mountains to the subarctic gyre of the Pacific Ocean. Or expect Fisheries and Oceans bureaucrats to be able to efficiently "manage" an antiquated industrial fishery that's plagued by its own superstitions and refuses to make the transition to more agile, entrepreneurial, in-river, selective and sustainable fisheries.

All that's left to us is plain old humility and common sense.

You don't put all your eggs in one basket, which means you don't gamble everything on one or two big and predictable salmon runs because the small runs matter, too. You don't count your chickens before they hatch, which means you don't unleash hundreds of fish boats to scoop up schools of salmon until you have at least some idea what runs they're from and how many there are in the first place.

But you can count your blessings when good things happen, and the 2010 Fraser sockeye bounty is one of the happiest events in Canada's sorry history of declines and extinctions. It's the kind of thing that keeps our hopes alive, the kind of thing salmon fishermen dream about.

There's just no pleasing some people, but the rest of us can take heart in this year's astounding miracle of salmon.

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