

I want to begin by acknowledging the First Nations people of this area. My hands go up to you and I say thank you – Huy Chew Xa - for the many centuries that you have been stewarding this land so we could all appreciate its bounty.

My name is Celia Brauer and I wish to address the Cohen Commission into the collapse of the Sockeye Salmon Fishery of 2009 from my own perspective.

First I would like to say that my recent ancestral background was not that directly tied to fish, although I believe all of us humans are undoubtedly connected to all life and that includes the creatures that live in the rivers and oceans.

I was born in Montreal. My parents immigrated to Canada from Eastern Europe after the Second World War. My father liked his smoked fish which was traditional in Latvia, his country of birth, which borders the Baltic Sea. My mother prepared some excellent fish dishes – she learned some of her cooking skills growing up in Poland. But it was not until I came out west after graduating with a Fine Arts degree that I learned more about the river and ocean systems of our planet and how important Wild Pacific Salmon are to this coast.

I had a few brief encounters with salmon in the first 15 years living here. But while residing on the shores of False Creek – a seawater inlet in Vancouver I became intensely interested in the history of the area before European settlement. In 2003 I started a love affair with salmon – a fish that had once inhabited over 50 streams in the city. This was not totally surprising. After all I was living in close proximity to the Stat'lew – what we call the Fraser – the greatest Salmon River in the world. My involvement with this fish has not waned – in fact it has strengthened. Some would say it has grown into an obsession. After all here I am on a Monday night at the Cohen Commission telling you this story instead of sitting at home watching television. But I am proud of this connection with salmon. In some ways it has kept me sane.

Over the years I co-founded a non-profit group called the False Creek Watershed Society <http://www.falsecreekwatershed.org> and created and produced a BC Rivers Day event called the Salmon Celebration. This month I organized Seven Lost Streams and History walks in Vancouver for September as Wild Salmon Month – both initiatives were my creation. I, along with the members of the False Creek Watershed Society encouraged Vancouver City Hall to fly a flag with a large salmon on it during the month of September and we will meet at that flag with the Mayor and some Councilors at noon tomorrow to acknowledge this and read the Salmon Month Proclamation. And by the way, everyone here is invited. <http://www.salmonflag.com>.

Why all this energy in a city that does not support more than a few hundred returning salmon in a small number of struggling streams? Why this intense fascination with a fish I hardly ever see in the wild when these activities often interfere with my ability to gain income?

All I can say is that I see the salvation of the Wild Pacific salmon as one of the most pressing issues of our time. Many will think this statement odd. How can I think that other issues are not more important? For example - the economy, poverty, affordable housing. To that I answer, salmon is an indicator species. If they decline, so will we because they are central to the natural life on this coast. Besides, it's almost like I don't have a choice but to follow this fish. I have been drawn to learn about the Wild Pacific Salmon so much that I operate a small list serve and manage other social networking sites for a growing group of like-minded people. Through this work I have learned an amazing amount. Essentially I can now see that if we humans live side-by-side with salmon - supporting their epic voyage from river to ocean and back, living as they do in tandem with the natural cycles of life, not polluting their water systems, making our land a friendly place for millions of salmon to return to – then through this relationship we will gain adequate knowledge to help us face the problems in our human society.

So if I were to imagine an answer for the Cohen Commission to the question of what happened to the 9 million sockeye, I would have to go back in history. Because for someone who lives in the middle of the City of Vancouver, salmon is all about history.

This is what I have discovered. In pre-industrial times in the mid 1700s, it took 40 years to almost eradicate sea otters on the west coast. It took a mere 5 years in the late 1800s for industrial man to almost drive an abundance of Fraser River sturgeon to extinction. The incredible sturgeon is a massive fish that grows up to 12 feet in length, sometimes up to a hundred years that used to feed local First Nations. Also in the late 1800s, the fishery on the Fraser was mostly Spring Salmon. The sockeye were thrown back and there were times when the River right here at New Westminster smelled so bad from the rotting corpses of sockeye salmon that people could not function. And in Vancouver, it took a mere half century for all the trees to be cut down – some over 1000 years old and 400 feet tall and all the streams to be filled in. The Cohen Commission would not have to be here today if this destruction had not taken place.

That was then and this is now. However I have also learned that at present we are continuing to make many mistakes our fore-fathers' made.

I have learned that we still remove too much gravel from the Fraser River for construction and questionable flood control measures.

I have learned that we pollute the Fraser River excessively with runoff from storm sewers and few people understand that water from storm drains go into neighbouring waterways and that cars and roads contribute to great deal of water pollution. I have also learned that things like coffee and medications end up in our water systems because present waste water treatment does filter them out.

I have learned that our local sewage treatment plant at Iona is not adequate for the volume it processes. Why else – in a year when 30 million salmon have returned – do the salmon not head up the North Arm of the Fraser that we believe historically supported 10 million fish.

I have learned that our federal and provincial governments know nothing of building smart for the future because they have sanctioned the construction of the Pacific Gateway Project which is now underway. <http://sites.google.com/site/lastexitforgateway/> Today, the South Fraser Perimeter Road is in the process of eradicating 140 wild salmon streams in Delta. They have promised mitigation, but true to form I have clear evidence from people living in neighbourhoods surrounding the construction that this is not happening. All this after 70% of the rich natural ecosystems of the Lower Fraser Valley have disappeared, the numbers of ships transporting goods has fallen and we are absolutely certain there is a direct relationship between freeway expansion and increased climate change.

I have learned that we have sanctioned, to the astounding detriment of wild fish and their ecosystems - the industrialization of fish production in open-net fish farms. This means feeding smaller fish fit for human consumption to farmed fish, lacing this feed with chemicals and antibiotics and essentially altering and polluting our waterways to produce a far inferior product when we have wild fish we should be positively stewarding.

I have learned that the Department of Fisheries presided over the collapse of the East Coast Cod Fishery which was once monstrous in volume. But that was then and this is now. However, our present Fisheries Minister this year was moved to vote against a Blue-Fin Tuna ban to support a few hundred jobs in her home province of Prince Edward Island. I will certainly not have any further respect for this Minister because I can see where her priorities lie. In my mind she is not a Minister of Fisheries. She is a Minister for Human Employment even if that employment threatens an almost extinct fish. She clearly does not have enough imagination to conceive of a world in which people do not have to continually catch threatened fish species in order to have employment.

I have learned that if there is an ocean or river ecosystem in jeopardy, many times the public do not feel confident to phone the DFO to fix the problem. Not because the DFO doesn't have employees who are competent, because some do try. For some reason many other employees do not get the job done properly and too often they are influenced by an unwritten mandate that says saving ecosystems for fish comes after considering the supposed needs of humans. I know this because in the past few years I have received desperate emails from people asking what they should do in the case of a large fish kill or a construction project that was harming their local ecosystem. Me - a non-profit, engaged community member who has little power. By the way, I received just such an email a few days ago with regard to management of a salmon stream along the construction of the South Fraser Perimeter Road.

I have learned that as far as the forage fishery is concerned on Vancouver beaches, DFO has seen fit to offer a license for a 90 square foot net to any of the public even if they are 5 years old even though the forage fish are in steady decline and they provide food for larger fish such as salmon. After 2 years of lobbying my own City Councilors and DFO Community Advisor, nothing has been done.

I have learned that when it comes to damaging salmon habitat or removing gravel or maintaining fish farms or overfishing – we do this because apparently it is “good for the economy”. In my mind, then, we must be talking about the wrong economy. Because how can an economy be healthy when it engages in such long-term destructive behaviour? Apparently the classical economy we follow does not factor the earth and its natural capital into the balance sheet. For them the work of bees or trees or plankton has no value, when in fact without the work of all these natural systems we would have little life on earth. Is this an Economy we should support, or should we consider instead an Ecological Economy, with Natural Capital at the centre of the system instead of viewing it as an Externality.

I have learned that the fish community relies on excessive science. But it is not science that will offer us the answers. Because with all the data and endless scientific analysis we now have, we should already have answers. Have we outsourced our good sense to too many experts?

So why in my mind is the salmon disappearing? Why were the returns last year so devastating? Why do salmon vanish, year after year, into the “black box”? How will we find the answers? Well, I don’t think we will find them with more scientific analysis because we have enough. I don’t think this depends on more industrialized fish production such as fish farming. It certainly does not depend on creating Genetically Modified Salmon. These activities only divert our attention away from the real problem which is on land and in our human societies.

If we are looking for a real answer we have to look at the present relationship we have as humans with the green and blue earth that feeds us all. With the advent of industrialization our minds have become that black box. They have been clearcut of a direct connection to Mother Earth and our stewardship values have been buried as a result. These connections and these values must be daylighted and allowed to grow and flourish like they were in the days when only the Indigenous People lived in these lands and the salmon were plentiful. Industrial Man’s influence must be reduced – even if that means shutting down fish farms and halting freeway construction, decreasing our population growth and restoring natural ecosystems. We have gone well past the time for mitigation. We have already lost too much of our natural world. The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The next best time is now. Our roots to the land must to be made stronger. Without this reversal of our world view future generations will never be able to see or taste the wild world we live close to on this coast. Is this what we want?

This year we have witnessed the astounding miracle of a healthy salmon return the very year we have the Cohen Commission into the sockeye’s collapse. The answer is right in front of our face. The salmon will continue to return if we welcome him to a healthy land with humans who care enough to keep it that way. This will happen if we rebuild our ecosystems and our societies in partnership with the land. If you think this impossible consider the example of the rebuilding of Europe and Asia after the Second World War. Human beings have an incredible capacity for growth and positive regeneration. Just give us a chance and we will rise to the challenge.

We can continue to have the faith and the strength to recreate our world, back to the way it should be for all of us to live together in health and prosperity. All we have to do is follow the Wild Pacific Salmon with our hearts and our minds. He will tell us what to do.

Celia Brauer