

## Northwest should find hope, encouragement, in a stronger decade of Columbia fish returns

**July 01, 2010**



**The Oregonian Editorial Board**

Over the years it's become bad form in the Northwest to say out loud anything positive about the status of threatened species or dare to find good news in such things as unexpectedly better returns of Columbia River salmon.



A huge return of hatchery coho in Cedar Creek appeared after the rains recently. The fish are running so heavy they are literally jamming the little creek forcing hatchery managers to quickly assemble workers to harvest the surplus fish that will be processed and donated to the Oregon Food Bank.

Thomas Boyd/The Oregonian

Here goes anyway: The past decade of Columbia Basin salmon returns was among the best since Bonneville Dam was completed in 1938. Almost 300,000 adult spring chinook passed Bonneville by the last day of spring, well above the 10-year average of 204,000 and almost five times the annual average of the 1990s, when 12 populations of fish in the Columbia were given protections under the Endangered Species Act.

Yes, we understand all the caveats: Ocean conditions for much of the past decade were near-perfect. It remains far from clear whether natural-origin returns of salmon can be sustained in bad water and poor ocean years such as the 1990s. No one is arguing that the region has done all that is necessary -- all that it must do -- to recover salmon.

But can't we share a little hope and optimism? After all, the salmon runs of 2001, 2002 and now 2010 were remarkable by modern standards. And the strong returns cannot all be attributed to ocean conditions -- salmon stocks from other major Pacific rivers, notably the Sacramento, have not done nearly as well as Columbia fish.

We've spent billions on dam passage, river habitat and overhauling hatcheries. We've better managed salmon harvest and spilled water for migrating fish rather than using it to generate electricity. All this work, all that money, is making a difference.

Look at the sockeye salmon, which originate far upstream in Idaho and Canada. So far this year more than 275,000 adult sockeye have passed Bonneville Dam, and by summer's end the sockeye run could be the strongest in more than five decades. Forgive us, but that seems like good news.