









Productive Ocean Prime Driver in Robust Returns

Remember the saying: “The reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated” by American icon Mark Twain? Despite predictions of northwest salmon and steelhead’s imminent demise by dam removal groups, fish runs this decade are on the upswing with some experiencing record or near-record levels. Much of the answer for these robust returns lies with the ocean.

Recent headlines provide a more accurate picture than doomsday predictions:

-  Wild Steelhead Return Breaks Record
-  Fall Chinook, Steelhead Catches A Record High
-  700 Sockeye Make it All the Way to Redfish Lake
-  For Pinks, It’s a Record Run
-  Fall Chinook Jacks Four Times Previous Record
-  Fall Fish Returns Strong, Catch Rates High
-  Cooler Weather Rallies Near-record Steelhead Run
-  Sport Coho Catch Second Highest on Record

In fact, steelhead and coho runs – counted at Bonneville Dam – were the second largest since 1938. The sockeye run, the most endangered in the Columbia River Basin, surpassed last year’s record numbers. More than 700 sockeye made the climb to their spawning grounds in Idaho. Two years ago, only four made it home.

Endangered Upper Columbia steelhead and Snake River steelhead also broke records. And while chinook runs weren’t great, they weren’t bad either.

No single factor determines the returns, but it’s pretty easy to connect the dots on one of the factors known to play a major role - ocean conditions.

Ocean conditions are the largest single factor in the variability of adult salmon returns to the Columbia River Basin. NOAA’s Science Center has consistently shown survival of salmon and steelhead from smolt to adult is largely dictated by the ocean. For Chinook salmon, the year of ocean entry is the best predictor of how well they will survive to adulthood.

And we’ve been in a period of good ocean conditions. Back in 2008, NOAA said its research vessels were finding positive indicators from Newport, Oregon to the Straits of Juan de Fuca.

The abundant numbers this year indicate researchers are on to something with their ocean models. And a year like 2009 demonstrates there is a lot more going on with salmon survival than dams.

This has been a year to celebrate. And we'll hope for another in 2010 and on and on.

But reality dictates that Columbia and Snake River fish returns will drop again at some point.



John Ferguson of NOAA Fisheries' Science Center noted there were excellent ocean conditions in 2008 – an ocean chockfull of food – that raised expectations for good returns in 2009 and 2010.

Anadromous fish counts at Bonneville Dam have gone up and down, sometimes dramatically so, since 1938 – and this has been with the federal dams in place. It would be nice to think that when the numbers fall, some will not be so quick to blame the hydro system.

We can't do a lot to influence ocean conditions. But, we are doing the right things in the fresh water to have the foundation in place to further boost the runs when ocean conditions are favorable. Hundreds of millions have been spent improving the hydro system and habitat in the last decade with demonstrable benefits seen in fish survivals. (See Current Reflections, [Issue 42 | Salmon Improvements in the River, the Untold Story](#)).

The salmon plan pending before Judge James Redden adds to our freshwater foundation by picking up the pace - and investment - in restoring habitat in the tributaries and the estuary, enacting hatchery reforms, battling predators, and completing hydro system improvements to further benefit fish runs.

Sound science is our mantra at RiverPartners. The ocean research – which doesn't make many headlines – is adding a body of knowledge we need. This vital information from investments in ocean research will pay off when the runs do drop and others once again want to place blame on the dams.



Northwest River Partners is an alliance of farmers, utilities, ports and businesses that promote the economic and environmental benefits of the Columbia and Snake Rivers and salmon recovery policies based on sound science.

For more information, please visit www.nwriverpartners.org.