



Amazing! 200,000 sockeye salmon return from ocean

The positive news of the strong salmon runs on the Columbia and Snake rivers is being lost in the nationwide focus on the fishing collapse on the southern Oregon and California coast. And the reasons for the differences also are being ignored or lost.

In the Columbia and Snake Rivers, sockeye salmon are returning in numbers unseen in more than 50 years, crossing multiple dams to reach their spawning grounds in northeastern Washington, Idaho and British Columbia.

To date, the current run of sockeye salmon is about 210,000 adult fish over Bonneville Dam. This is the *second highest* number of sockeye salmon to return to the Columbia River since fish count records were first collected in 1938. It includes nearly 800 returning to the Snake River, the most since 1968. These Snake River sockeye were the first stocks to be listed under the Endangered Species Act in 1991 and are the most imperiled stock in the Columbia-Snake system.



While the sockeye return is spectacular, our other salmon runs also have been strong this year, including 150,000 spring Chinook, more than double the 2007 numbers. This continues an upward trend for most salmon runs since the large runs seen in 2001.

What does this tell us? The dams these fish traverse have been in place for a long time, and are often cited as the main culprit in salmon declines. River flows in 2006 and 2007 when these young sockeye were migrating downstream were average and below average respectively, based on the last ten years of data. Yet, we see large fluctuations in salmon runs with dramatic good and bad years over time.

Complex differences in ocean conditions may be the primary reason for differences among salmon runs. The poor survival of spring Chinook and Coho runs in the Sacramento River may be the result of unfavorable shifts in ocean temperature and food sources for juvenile salmon along the southern Oregon and California coasts.

By contrast, the salmon returning to the Columbia River spend their ocean years north of Oregon and, in the case of sockeye, migrate much further off shore.

There also is good reason to believe that the large and expensive salmon recovery efforts financed by families and businesses in the Northwest through their electricity bills are having a positive effect.

These investments are paying for habitat improvements helping salmon in the freshwater portion of their life cycle. They also go to operational and structural improvements at federal dams, resulting in vastly improved survival of salmon moving downstream to the ocean.

And, the hatchery and habitat work being done by the Mid-Columbia Public Utility Districts and Indian tribes in the Upper Columbia combined with similar efforts in the Snake River are part of the extensive effort to restore sockeye salmon.

One lesson that can be drawn from the 2008 salmon runs is that, while it may be tempting to seek a “silver bullet” and dams, irrigation diversions and water withdrawals may be easy targets, the situation is far more complex.

It is clear that the billions of dollars being spent by families and businesses in the Northwest are bearing fruit. They are helping to put these fish on the road to recovery. We also need favorable ocean conditions over time to help sustain the positive trend.



Shane Scott submitted this article. He is a fisheries biologist whose clients include Northwest RiverPartners.

Northwest RiverPartners is a partnership of farmers, electric utilities and large and small businesses in the Pacific Northwest, joined together to ensure that the Columbia and Snake rivers remain living, working rivers. It was founded on the belief that these rivers are the Northwest’s greatest natural resource providing residents with clean, affordable and renewable electricity, flood control, irrigation for our farm lands, healthy fish and wildlife, maritime trade, and a multitude of recreational opportunities. For more

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