



Welcome to the first issue of *Current Reflections*, an e-mail publication of Northwest RiverPartners sent to members and others who share an interest in issues affecting the health and vitality of the Columbia and Snake rivers. Each issue will examine a timely topic and will provide resources for an even deeper analysis of the issue.

Sea Lions Making a Meal of the Spring Run

Bonneville Dam – For the last few years, the number of sea lions at Bonneville Dam has been on the rise. Right now, there are at least 25 of the always-hungry animals feasting on the spring Chinook salmon at the dam. Despite the Corps of Engineers' effort to deter them, they are incredibly tenacious. One sea lion nicknamed Cecil, who entered the ladders despite the grates and hazing, has gotten so fat he can no longer get through. Others have been spotted hitching rides on barges to get around the sea lion exclusion devices (SLEDs) that were put into place in February.

While it's hard not to laugh at the antics of these sea lions, they are troublesome for a couple reasons.

First and most obvious is that they continue to consume copious amounts of fish. Sea lion fish kills observed at Bonneville through March 2006 were about half the total run; 36 survived while 34 were killed. Through May 3rd the Corps observed a total of 1,289 salmon and 264 sturgeon killed by sea lions. Biologists estimate that last year, 2,919 salmon and steelhead were consumed. This was 3.4% of the run. And these are the fish that successfully navigated their way all the way back from the ocean, avoiding fishing hooks, nets and killer whales. These fish make up part of the tiny *Smolt to Adult Return* (SAR) ratio that is typically right around one percent. These are the fish that BPA's ratepayers have spent millions of dollars to protect.



Second, the fish seem to be reluctant to head up the ladders to their spawning grounds with a sea lion waiting for them at the end of the buffet line. Corps of Engineers' scientists report that they have seen fish wait for hours below the ladders after humans have left their scents in the water. It seems to be no different with the scents of hungry sea lions. In addition to the efforts made by the Corps, the Northwest RiverPartners is researching the Marine Mammals Protection Act and past legislative attempts made on this issue to determine what opportunities and approaches may exist to help the situation.

Not only are the sea lions getting fat on what may be the world's most expensive fish, but the timing of the run has been delayed, causing a lot of worry. However, fish counters say that the sea lions cannot be the only reason for the late timing of the spring run. And while it becomes less likely every day, they also say it isn't too late for the run of 88,000 adult spring Chinook that was forecast for this year to

materialize. In fact, large numbers of salmon have just begun passing the Bonneville Dam, maybe in response to the spring runoff and warmer river water.

However, all of this hasn't stopped the commercial gill netters from having some success in the Lower River. Though fishing has been put on hold until abundance levels improve, the netters had landed more than 1,030 spring Chinook through the first week of April, according to Washington and Oregon Departments of Fish and Wildlife.

So where the rest of the spring run is continues to be a mystery. Those that have not been consumed by the sea lions or are not tangled in a fisherman's net may still be waiting at the mouth of the Columbia, in response to the cool water conditions we've had in the Northwest this year. Or something unknown and unexpected may have happened in the ocean sometime during the years these fish have lived at sea. Either way, something kept them from coming home early in the season.

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 and affordable electricity, flood control, irrigation for our farm lands, healthy fish and wildlife, maritime trade, and a multitude of recreational opportunities. For more information about Northwest RiverPartners, visit its Web site at www.nwriverpartners.org.

Quick Links

- Learn what the Corps of Engineers is doing to help with the sea lion issue.
http://www.nwd-wc.usace.army.mil/tmt/agendas/2006/0405_SEALS.pdf
- Get an overview of the Endangered Species Act and the Marine Mammal Protection Act at
<http://www.nwr.noaa.gov/>

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