

SEHAB November 2015

Steelhead Society of B.C. Roundtable Report

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Since the May SEHAB meeting, the Steelhead Society has been working hard on behalf of wild steelhead. As always, the focus has been on issues involving wild steelhead and salmon. Generally, the issues are stream specific and not province wide. The following are a few highlights.

Concerned by DFO allowing a chum gill net opening on the Fraser on October 23 and scheduling another chum gill net opening for October 27, the SSBC wrote to Regional Director General Rebecca Reid protesting these openings and requesting that there be no openings in the last week of October. The letter was cc'd elsewhere in DFO, including to Fishery Manager Barbara Mueller. The last week of October is the peak migration time of Thompson steelhead through the Fraser, and SSBC directors feared the harmful effects the chum gill net fishery would have on this depleted run of steelhead. Albion test fishery results indicated the total Thompson steelhead run would be 350, one of the lowest returns on record, and these fish needed every possible protection. While commercial fishermen are not allowed to retain any steelhead caught in their gill nets and must release any steelhead immediately, significant mortality occurs whenever steelhead are released from gill nets. With such a depleted return, Thompson steelhead could not afford that mortality. The SSBC letter was sent late on October 26, and two days later Fishery Notice FN 1212 was issued in the afternoon. This notice said that in order to meet management objectives for Interior steelhead, chum fisheries on the Fraser were closed for the balance of the season. It appears that the SSBC letter, along with letters sent by individuals concerned about Thompson steelhead, had an effect.

However, this success is still an after-the-fact result. While in a perfect world no gill nets (gill nets are a non-selective fishing method) would be used on the Fraser as Thompson steelhead migrate upstream, the commercial fishermen have yet to graduate to selective fishing methods. Therefore, the best bet would be to design any chum gill net fisheries on the Fraser to avoid the last week of October, the peak migration time for Thompson steelhead. Having the chum fisheries earlier in October and in November would satisfy, at least in part, the need to protect Thompson steelhead. During the summer the SSBC also protested chum fisheries in Area 8; these non-selective fisheries for chum impacted Dean River summer steelhead. Again, commercial fishermen had to release any steelhead caught in their nets, but significant mortality occurs during this process.

Eelgrass beds around Lelu Island at the mouth of Skeena River are prime habitat for salmon and steelhead smolts leaving the Skeena. Unfortunately, Petronas has proposed a LNG terminal for this location and the company has already begun drilling

test holes for pilings and, in the process, displacing eelgrass. First Nations who oppose this facility at this location have camped out on Lelu Island, and Skeena Wild is supporting Chief Don Wesley, who has been camping on the island. The SSBC directors voted to donate funds to Skeena Wild to protect salmonid habitat on the lower Skeena.

A short time ago, the SSBC investigated a possible project to increase salmonid usable habitat on Squamish River's Shovelnose Creek. This creek is the only steelhead spawning and rearing habitat on the upper Squamish, and its waters are also used by Chinook and coho. During the course of their investigation, SSBC members found that rewatering the proposed area was infeasible; there was no groundwater in the expected locations. Further investigation of Shovelnose Creek continues.

I always feel that SEHAB members should observe and record what is happening to fish and other creatures in the aquatic environment. The following are some observations I made during my summer salmon fishing at various West Vancouver beaches. I am not drawing any conclusions here, I am just reporting some observations. Since 1961 I have spent a lifetime fishing the West and North Vancouver beaches during the summer and, many years ago, Indian River pinks would first appear in shore angler's catches in early August. About 20 years ago, these pinks started to appear in the last week of July. This year, I had a report of two pinks taken at Stearman Beach on July 6. On July 8, Randy Yen caught a pink at Ambleside Beach (Capilano Mouth). On July 10, Randy took the second and third pinks caught at Ambleside, then I caught the fourth—my earliest pink ever by a week and a half. The pink fishing continued to improve through July and into August and then tapered off into early September (my last fresh pink was caught on September 10). Many of these pinks were bound for Indian River, where a reported 3 million arrived, but some pinks migrated up rivers like Capilano and Seymour and still others spawned in small creeks like West Vancouver's Willow Creek (in late September, I saw two pink redd sites at the top of tidewater on Willow Creek). After several bumps of water in September, Ambleside anglers occasionally observed what they started calling "Zombie pinks"—battered looking fish which had been in the river, done their thing, then dropped back to the sea and, barely alive, slowly swam near the surface. One other comment—this year the pinks were small. I heard of only one 8 pounder, most were 2 1/2 to 3 1/2 pounds, and some reached 4 to 5 pounds. Years ago, pinks under 3 pounds were exceptional, many were 4 to 5 pounds, and pinks over 7 pounds were seen fairly regularly.

While fishing Ambleside Beach in the second half of May and June, I noticed that the area was alive with crabs. Yet in July, August and September, only a few crabs were encountered by wading anglers. Also seen were occasional purple starfish; at least whatever has been killing starfish in local waters had not eliminated them all. For many years, during low tides anglers could see kelp beds along the south side of the islands at the mouth of the Capilano, along Ambleside itself, and at an area about 200 meters east of Cypress Creek mouth. But this summer only a few strands of kelp were seen;

the usual large beds of kelp were gone. On two or three occasions, I noted that while standing waist deep in the water just after low tide, the water was noticeably warm. However, otherwise I did not notice any warming of the water, but I must admit I was not using a thermometer to actually measure ocean temperatures.