

**Team BC – Ministerial Consultations 2005
(BC Liberal Members of Parliament)
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Some considerations regarding the state of our environment

More than one person has opined that the wild salmon is the “canary in the coal mines” of our environment. I believe this to be a valid analogy since the salmon is what is termed a keystone species. That is to say that the salmon is an extremely important component of the food web and conditions that impact on its wellbeing will have a consequent affect on the flora and fauna that rely directly or indirectly upon it. Such conditions can result from our human footprint and include logging, mining, agriculture, urban encroachment, hydroelectric generation, and over fishing to name a few. If we enjoy healthy populations of wild salmon, we may conclude that our environment is in good shape. This is perhaps overly simplistic. However, if returns of salmon to their spawning streams are declining, then we should raise the red flag since we have already determined that the result of falling numbers will have far- reaching consequences. Hopefully such warnings are not ignored and will initiate a process of investigation to determine cause and effect and ultimately result in measures that will mitigate the extent of problems caused by human activities.

This forum does not provide the time to adequately identify problems in this regard nor anything more than some initial recommendations. However, there are some observations which are made and some suggestions that might be considered.

If we accept the premise that wild salmon provide a reliable litmus test for the state of our environment then, as a first step to determining potential problems, we must have as accurate a means as science and funding levels will provide to quantify the status of salmon populations or stocks. This unfortunately is where government has dropped the ball. In an attempt to live within the budget, bureaucrats have reduced the funding to the stock assessment branch to a point where it is increasingly difficult to make valid estimates of the health of salmon stocks. The data that stock assessment biologists collect are analyzed and this enables them to make recommendations to species managers who, in turn, decide whether or not harvest opportunities may exist. Currently decisions are being made with inadequate information. Managers rendering decisions in such an atmosphere is akin to a situation where a wholesaler of “widgets” is going

to make sales decisions, undertake future planning strategies and interact with his clientele without having detailed knowledge of what inventory is taking up space in his warehouse; clearly not a way to run a business.

Technology provides some sophisticated equipment to aid in the gathering and analyses of salmon numbers. However it is expensive and still requires human intervention for installation, monitoring and operation. There remains a requirement to have “rubber boots” in the streams and rivers to count a) adults returning to spawn and b) juveniles leaving freshwater to commence the ocean phase of their life-cycle. This requires money for biologists and technicians.

Funding must be returned to adequate levels as to provide the necessary data upon which stock assessment biologists, other fisheries scientists, and managers can make recommendations and decisions that will best serve the resource and, consequently the environment. I am not in a position to quantify satisfactory funding levels in this regard. However, my area of expertise, namely community involvement, does afford me an opportunity to make suggestions to government regarding the forging of partnerships with community organizations that can assist bureaucrats in achieving mandated goals.

One of the most effective programs the Department of Fisheries and Oceans(DFO) developed is the community involvement component of the Salmonid Enhancement Program initiated in the late 70's as part of an overarching policy to return salmon populations to historic levels. Although the original plan was to have a modest public involvement component performing salmon enhancement, habitat restoration and some education/outreach functions, it has grown to where volunteers province-wide number some 15.000 and are involved with the originally envisaged activities as well as stream keepers, wetland keepers, and shore keepers initiatives and an education program that, since its beginnings, has involved over a million BC and Yukon students in classroom incubation of salmon fry. Public involvement as it has evolved in BC is the envy of other jurisdictions. The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife recognized the potential of such a program developing a parallel and equally successful program in their State. Where that agency went one further was by including a volunteer component in their stock assessment function where it has proven to be a positive initiative. We can learn from their experience and DFO is encouraged to seek opportunities where volunteers can assist stock assessment staff to increase the overall effectiveness of their program. I have personal experiences with such initiatives and I am confident that they work. Furthermore, I know there is agreement among assessment biologists

at the field level. The overriding factor in developing a positive program that brings agency people and volunteers together is to have effective liaison between the two.

The good news is that this liaison function is up and running within DFO. The personnel that perform this duty are called Community Advisors (CAs) and there are 16 of them spread around BC and Yukon. The bad news is that the relationship of the volunteer community with DFO is not well understood by bureaucrats within the Department and consequently these dedicated people (CAs) are forever fighting budget cuts and the mistaken idea that their duties must be redefined and their efforts redirected.

Another feature that has contributed to the success of this program is that, as it evolved, it became obvious that the best results came from client-driven initiatives and so the operating procedure was developed to react to the community's needs rather than one where CAs were to deliver policy and so direct the activities of the volunteers accordingly. The greatest mistake that a government agency can make is to view the community as nothing more than a labour pool and a ready source of funds. In this day and age the level of expertise and knowledge possessed by volunteers can equal and may exceed that of government employees. The day where government was seen to provide all things to all people is past. Citizens at large are playing a much greater role in how their community operates. The effectiveness of government agencies is very much a function of how services are delivered and this can be improved when agency liaison personnel are sensitive to needs of the community. The role of DFO's Community Advisors should be looked at in the context of applicability to other government departments. In the meantime funding for this program should be increased and further positions should be authorized and staffed. The demand from the community will continue to increase as public awareness and expectations for greater environmental protection develop.

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