

A Question:  
How Do We Determine the Vision for a Native Fish Future?  
Bill McMillan's speech at the 2007 Auction

Abundance provides more useful lessons than depletion. To observe and to study only depletion is to perpetuate depletion. When the understanding of natural resources is based on false assumptions skewed toward depletion rather than abundance, the potential to restore those resources becomes improbable due to the faulty vision used as a restoration target.

Having primarily experienced the anadromous fish rivers of Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and southern British Columbia, my reference of vision has often been skewed toward that of fish depletion rather than abundance. My own life history began in the 1940s with the memory of outdoor experiences limited to the mid 1950s onward. I was born a century too late to have a vision of the Pacific Northwest prior to resource depletion.

Nevertheless, I have occasionally traveled to landscapes where resource depletion has not as thoroughly occurred. The resulting revelations have not been unlike that of Pablo Picasso when shown the expressive perfection of animals painted by some primitive Michelangelo 20,000 years ago on the walls of Altamira Cave in Spain. In the flickering torchlight he gazed in awe before finally expressing: "We have learned nothing."

My first such experience of what salmon abundance is occurred when my father and I rented a boat from an Indian at Babine Lake in 1963. We motored 65 miles to the outlet where a counting weir crossed the Babine River. Pink salmon carcasses layered the gravel bars 2-3 deep, the smell so overpowering my head swam for two days before finally adjusting to it. The fishing I have largely forgotten, but the odor of salmon abundance still wafts through my blood – an integral part of me until the day I die.

In 2001 the Skagit River had a pink salmon run estimated to be 1.5 million. Tribal and state managers were touting it as the largest return in a century or more. Indeed, it was an impressive sight with long black ribbons of fish lining both sides of the river for 20 miles during peak passage. But the gravel bars were not subsequently piled 2-3 carcasses high – nor was the subsequent smell overpowering.

Misha Skopets, a Russian biologist from Siberia who specializes in char, visited me that winter in order to photograph Skagit bull trout. The

Skagit is the third largest West Coast river in the Lower 48 – only the Columbia and Sacramento larger. I asked Misha if he knew of a river of comparable size in Kamchatka or Siberia and how its pink salmon run might compare with 1.5 million thought to be near the historic peak for the Skagit. Misha went to my computer, accessed his hundreds of photographs kept online, and clicked on one showing a river with many gulls pecking at stacked layers of pink salmon carcasses. "Beel, this is the Bolshoya River, similar in size to your Skagit. In peak years it has 10-11 million pinks." As suspected, the 2001 return of 1.5 million Skagit pinks was probably little more than 10% of the peak returns that would have occurred in the 19<sup>th</sup> century if runs were then comparable to Siberia.

History can be a vital tool for so-called fishery management. But history can also be selected to begin at any point in the 100-150 years of catch records commonly available. Most often, modern managers chose a period of comparison of about 30 years, not 100-150 years. The result is a skewed comparison that has come to be called the "shifting baseline syndrome" leading to fisheries depletions throughout the world.

The word management itself is rarely, if ever qualified. Management toward what? Is it management for abundance, or is it management for depletion? The 100-150 year record clearly indicates that in the Pacific Northwest, management has almost universally resulted in that of depletion in the Lower 48.

This largely explains why ESA listings now pepper watershed maps of the Northwest. It also explains the necessity of oversight by individuals and groups of independent integrity. It was the bearded Viking figure of Bill Bakke that taught so many of us this can be done. Beginning in the early 1970s, his example demonstrated the way to educate ourselves through the available fishery science – how to use the tools of history and research to make our arguments – how to push fishery agencies to manage for something other than continuing depletion. When Bakke birthed the Native Fish Society in 1995, it was the first organization that I know of whose name undeniably stated the intent of conserving the native fish of our national heritage – no matter what the species ... or what our limited perceptions of their importance might be. The Native Fish Society staked out new conservation territory for species protection.

In a recent assessment of steelhead management and programs by Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife to guide their future actions, it was stated there has been a loss of 83% of the productivity for the 42 populations examined due to habitat degradation. Yet, in over 200 pages there was no chapter on habitat plans. Apparently a continued loss of steelhead productivity is acceptable as steelhead follow

the East Coast pattern that occurred for Atlantic salmon where pervasive habitat degradation led to extinction except for two remaining remnant populations in Maine.

By contrast, ever since 1939, Washington game managers have bought large habitat areas of up to 14,000 acres each to provide continued big game, water fowl, and upland game bird productivity. Available moneys for fisheries, have instead, been almost entirely spent on hatchery programs. Rather than address the solutions to fish losses as identified by the four "Hs" -- habitat, harvest, hydro, and hatcheries -- instead managers have chosen to primarily fund one of the identified problems. This is probably true in Oregon as well.

History provides the necessary baseline for determining the status of fish populations. The older the historic baseline, the more relevant it is for determining how to effectively provide for population stability -- or when to trigger a warning.

For example, native populations of summer steelhead, chum salmon, pink salmon, and both lake and riverine sockeye on the Olympic Peninsula's west coast are in single digit percentages compared to historic catch records sometimes dating to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century -- in fact, most may already be functionally extinct. Yet, the salmon and steelhead populations of the Olympic Peninsula are generally considered the healthiest in Washington by tribal and state managing agencies. The lone exception to this management nonchalance is Lake Ozette where sockeye are ESA listed. Otherwise, there is nary a yellow flag of caution.

The reason for this is that tribal and fish managing agencies choose to limit their history of comparison to the past 30 years rather than the longer historic record. For example, Queets River winter run steelhead -- better off than its summer run -- had a run-size of between 50,000 to 80,000 fish in 1923 as determined from the cannery pack of 25,000. Today's escapement goal for the Queets, as set by tribal and state co-managers, is only 2,500 wild steelhead -- 3%-5% of the historic run size. For 7 of the past 11 years of record, the Queets run size has been less than 6,000 wild steelhead with 3 years of no more than 4,000. In the year 1954, the Queets tribal harvest was 13,000 wild winter steelhead, the sport catch was 1,000, with a total run-size of 28,000 to 47,000 -- about half of 1923. The long-term trend is on a direct line toward extinction that management has accommodated.

Again, I emphasize the operative word, management, as the road to hell. Management is a euphemism used to mask graduated extinction through continued industrial level use of natural resources. Without a single dam on any of these Olympic west coast rivers, many of their native

salmon and steelhead populations are just as depleted as those that are ESA listed in the upper Columbia and Snake Rivers above eight dams. This is despite the fact that the Olympic Coast is the least developed of that anywhere in Washington with 30% to 65% of each watershed pristine in Olympic National Park. The human population along this long tract of coast is less than 5,000 people centered at Forks -- more favorable than some areas of Alaska.

Without dams, and with large habitat areas remaining pristine in Olympic Park, there remain only two of the infamous 4 "Hs" as the primary culprits leading toward native salmon and steelhead population eradications on the Olympic west coast – Harvest and Hatcheries. Both are in the control of tribal and state co-managers – not some exterior source they have no ability to alter. Hatchery salmon and steelhead programs release large numbers of smolts and fry into the Queets, Quinault, and Quileute systems. On the Hoh River, steelhead and coho hatchery programs are presently small, but straying from the neighboring rivers is common and more ambitious hatchery plans are in the works.

I site this example from Washington's Olympic Peninsula as one where habitat alteration, dams, and human population stresses are fishery issues that are minimal compared to other areas of the Northwest Lower 48. Yet, as a best case example, its native fish populations are just as threatened as any other populations in the region – the single greatest threat being the fishery managers theoretically empowered to protect them.

This has not been a comforting revelation.

Each of you here tonight provides the horsepower to provide native fish a voice. Whether that good work is limited to the sputter of a lawn mower engine, or expanded to the big-wheeled power of a Humvee on steroids depends on what comes out of your purses and wallets. Time to open em up folks, and give native fish your best shot.