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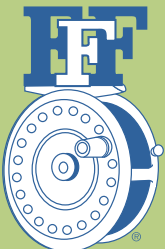
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TROUBLE ON THE SNAKE *Part II*

Dams Threaten
Extinction of River's
Salmon and Steelhead



MAGAZINE OF THE FEDERATION OF FLY FISHERS
Conserving, Restoring & Educating Through Fly Fishing



Snake River Salmon and Steelhead: *Threatened with Extinction*

By Ed Chaney **PART II**

Editor's Note: This is the second of two articles on the threatened extinction of one of the nation's premier fly-fishing resources, the wild salmon and steelhead of the vast Snake River Basin in northeast Oregon, southeast Washington and central Idaho.

The threatened extinction of anadromous salmon and steelhead in the Snake River – largest tributary to the Columbia River – is an ongoing tragedy of epic proportions.

The roots and branches of this issue are described in the companion piece to this article printed in the Winter 2004 *Flyfisher* and posted at www.nwric.org.

In short, in 1961-1975 the Army Corps of Engineers built four large pork barrel dams on the lower Snake River in southeastern Washington. Contrary to the intent of Congress, the Corps negligently failed to design the dams to allow juvenile salmon and steelhead to migrate from the vast Snake River drainage to the Columbia River, thence to the Pacific Ocean.

Consequently, juvenile fish suffered high rates of mortality. By 1997 all Snake River salmon and steelhead – once numbering in millions of adult fish annually – were listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

The Problem

The Columbia River Basin is home to one of the last eastern European-style socialist economies. Billions of taxpayer dollars from the federal treasury subsidize the world's largest coordinated hydroelectric system, massive irrigation

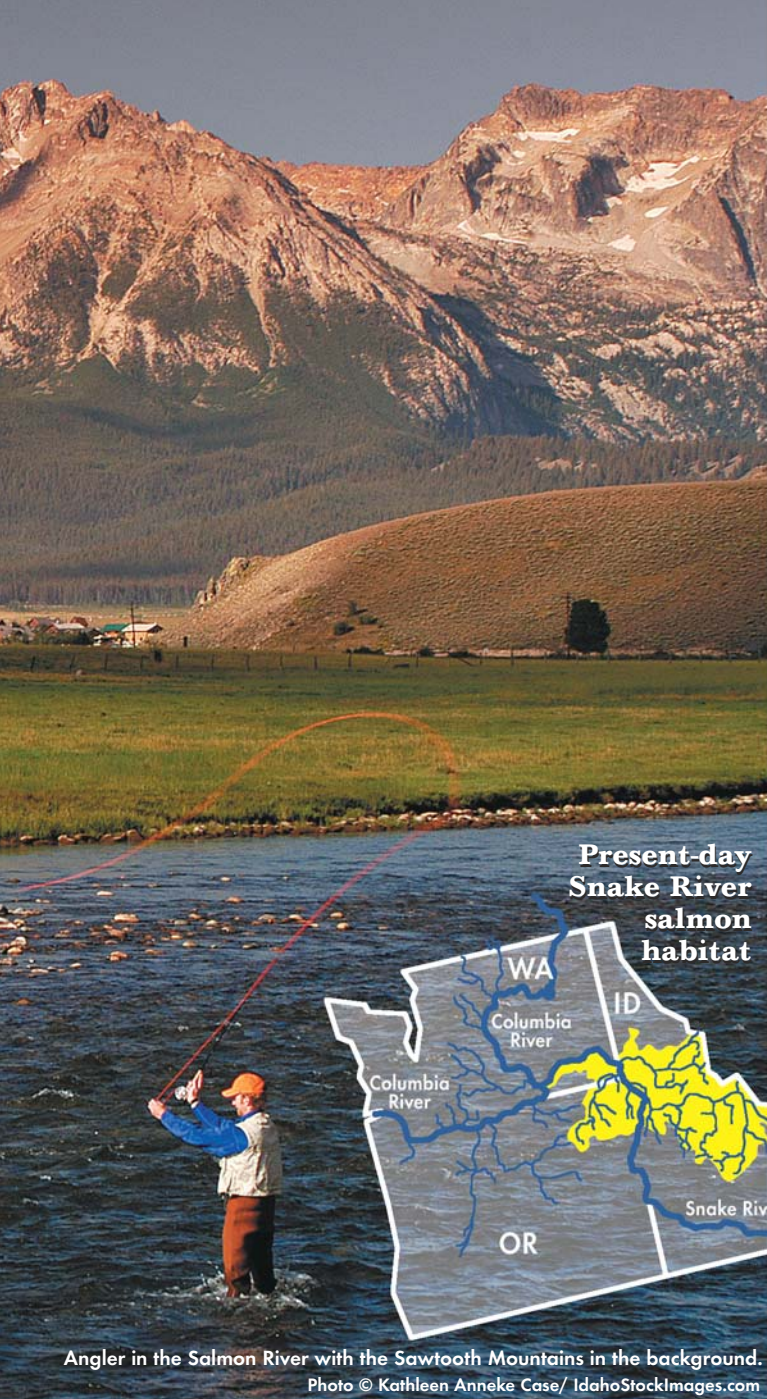
projects, inland waterway transportation and other pork barrel goodies.

These enormous subsidies gave rise to a politically powerful regional clique of bureaucrats, monopolists, crony capitalists and allied political operatives. For decades this “Columbia River Pork Alliance” has thwarted the intent of salmon protection laws and treaties. Salmon runs and dependent economies were devastated throughout the many thousand-mile migratory range of the fish. Treaties guaranteeing Native American Indians’ right to fish were subverted, an outcome foreshadowed by the 1865 comment of General William Sherman, that “Indian reservations are a parcel of land set aside for Indians, surrounded by thieves.”

Listing Snake River salmon and steelhead under the ESA confronted the Pork Alliance with the fruits of its labor. Led by its queen bee, the Bonneville Power Administration – which markets the subsidized electricity produced by the federal dams – the Alliance responded by conspiring to create a plan of mass distraction. First it was the “All-H Strategy/Paper.” Then the “Conceptual Recovery Plan.” Bonneville’s spin doctors finally settled on “The Basinwide Salmon Recovery Strategy.”

It was common knowledge among insiders that the strategy of the “plan” was to divert attention and to stall any effort to deal effectively with the mass destruction of fish at the Army Corps of Engineers’ dams, notably those on the lower Snake River.

The plan had an element of truth. It correctly acknowledged that sustained productivity of salmon and steelhead



**Present-day
Snake River
salmon
habitat**

Angler in the Salmon River with the Sawtooth Mountains in the background.
Photo © Kathleen Anneke Case/ IdahoStockImages.com

proposed a smorgasbord of actions in the other H's, notably unspecified habitat improvements, by unspecified entities, with unspecified funding, to produce unspecified results.

Fish advocates, including the Federation of Fly Fishers, challenged the NMFS BiOp in federal court and won. The judge sent NMFS back to the drawing board. Barring procedural delays, which are common, NMFS will present the court with a revised biological opinion in June.

It would be unrealistic to expect NMFS to substantially change course. The Pork Alliance will not allow that under current regional and national political leadership. Instead, NMFS is expected to add details to its proposed recovery measures.

NMFS could do something similar to what President George W. Bush did in August – use recent years' increased returns of adult fish, resulting largely from cyclical high runoff and improved ocean survival conditions, as pretext to declare victory – “problem solved, the dams no longer jeopardize the fish.” Hopefully NMFS won't be forced to stoop that far. But like the comedienne Lily Tomlin reportedly said, “No matter how cynical you get, it's almost impossible to keep up.”

What's Wrong with This Picture?

Improving Snake River tributary spawning and rearing habitats is the centerpiece of NMFS' proposed fish restoration measures currently being remodeled at court direction.

Part of what's wrong with this picture is the fact that existing Snake River tributary salmon and steelhead spawning and rearing habitats have not been filled to capacity in the 40-odd years since the Corps built the first of the four lower Snake River dams.

Snake River salmon and steelhead spawn in the largest contiguous wilderness and roadless land complex in the lower 48 states. Snake River spring/summer chinook habitat, for example, encompasses about 14 million acres. Roughly half is in federal Wilderness Areas, National Recreation Areas, Wild and Scenic Rivers, and undeveloped National Forest roadless areas.

U.S. Government studies have shown that the Snake River Basin's vast Salmon and Clearwater river drainages have the best quality fish habitat in the entire Columbia River Basin, an area larger than France.

For decades after the dams were built, juvenile spring chinook densities ranged from as low as 1 percent to 20 percent of capacity in Idaho tributary index streams. In 2003, a year of unusually high contemporary adult returns, overall juvenile density was about 25 percent of capacity. Steelhead were somewhat better overall.

Except as a diversionary tactic, there does not appear to be any point in creating more unfilled capacity until first improving pivotal juvenile passage at lower Snake River dams and reservoirs. But clearly there are problems.

The first problem, of course, is that NMFS proposes tributary habitat improvements as a substitute for, not in addition to, treating the real problem, the annual mass destruction of juvenile fish at the Corps' ill-designed lower Snake River dams and reservoirs.

It follows that fish produced in existing, vast pristine habitats will continue to suffer high mortality at the reservoirs and dams and, thereby, continue their trajectory toward extinction.

runs requires action on four fronts: habitat, hatcheries, harvest and hydropower, thus its common appellation as the “4-H Plan.”

However, the plan was designed to obscure the fact that while the other three H's contributed in varying degrees to diminishing listed wild fish populations, only hydropower threatens them with extinction. The plan called for action in all the other H's, reserving any serious action on the lower Snake River dams as a last resort “only to pass the red-face test,” according to a senior federal biologist who worked on the plan. Thus widely earning the plan a fifth H, horseshit.

Using the ESA to Save Dams

National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) is charged with developing a recovery plan for Snake River fish listed under the ESA. In its precursor 2000 Biological Opinion, NMFS said the Corps dams put Snake River salmon and steelhead in jeopardy of extinction. Ordered by the Pork Alliance to protect the dams at any cost, NMFS dutifully

So far, NMFS has not proposed "improving" pristine habitats. But see preceding Tomlin quote.

There is another, more insidious problem. If there aren't anywhere near enough returning adults to seed existing pristine habitats, it follows there won't be enough to seed the less-than-pristine habitats NMFS proposes to improve.

Consequently, it is inevitable there will be enormous political pressure for the infamous "quick fix," i.e., to plant large numbers of juvenile hatchery fish. Even if all those fish were marked (incredibly, not all hatchery fish are marked now, contrary to popular belief), the more hatchery fish in the population, the greater the risk to wild fish, from mixed stock harvest and from dilution of genetic characteristics evolved over thousands of years.

Darwin was on to something. He would weep at the persistence of long-discredited wistful thinking that hatchery ponds can replicate or substitute for the infinite diversity of ecological conditions from 800- to 7,000-foot elevation to which Snake River salmon and steelhead have adapted since the last Ice Age.

The Bottom Line

Whatever NMFS resubmits to the federal court in June will only be the next round in a very long, difficult battle that eventually will determine the fate of Snake River salmon and steelhead.

Importantly, NMFS is not the problem. As an agency of the federal government, it will do what it

is instructed to do by the politicians in power. The dams are not the problem; they can be easily and economically modified or removed. The root problem is the failure of governance; the betrayal of the public trust at the behest of the Columbia River Pork Alliance.

This failure of governance cannot be corrected within the region. It is important to resist the Pork Alliance at local, state and regional levels. But the Alliance is addicted to taxpayer subsidies and to the resulting political power and personal sinecures. This addiction manifests itself in religious zeal to protect the ill-designed Corps dams at any cost – to others, of course.

Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt had it wrong – as far as the Columbia River Basin is concerned – when he said, "Dams are not America's answer to the pyramids of Egypt. We do not build them for religious purposes."

Snake River salmon and steelhead are a precious, unique, irreplaceable national resource. They are threatened by dams financed by national taxpayers and built wrongly by the Army Corps of Engineers, a federal agency. The Bonneville Power Administration is also a federal agency.

The fate of Snake River salmon and steelhead will be determined at the national level. The required changes at the Corps' lower Snake River dams will be imposed from the top down. That is where the Federation of Fly Fishers comes in.

The Federation already is active on this issue at the regional level and is a plaintiff in the fed-

What Fly Fishers Can Do

GET THE FACTS.

The Columbia River Pork Alliance spends millions of dollars to misinform the public and decision makers on the purported adverse economic effects of removing the four lower Snake River dams. Get the real, positive, economic facts at www.nwric.org and www.wildsalmon.org.

SEND THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION A QUICK MESSAGE.

The revised biological opinion NMFS is scheduled to submit to the federal judge in June is being politically dictated from the top down. Write President Bush and urge him to allow NMFS to follow the science – do the right thing and call for removing the ill-designed Corps dams on the lower Snake River.

The national Save Our Wild Salmon coalition and the Federation have a special Web page to make writing this letter easy and effective. Go to www.wildsalmon.org/fishing.

URGE YOUR CONGRESSPERSON TO CO-SPONSOR THE SALMON PLANNING ACT.

Passage of the HR 1097 bill would pave the way for removing the four lower Snake River dams. Go to the Save Our Wild Salmon Web site, www.wildsalmon.org, and click on "Salmon Planning Act" for an explanation of the bill and a list of the current 100-plus congressional sponsors.

eral ESA lawsuit on the NMFS Biological Opinion. There is great need and enormous opportunity for Federation members nationwide to get engaged.

A small number of determined Federation members can make a big contribution to eventually kicking in the rotten door of the Columbia River Pork Alliance.

Saving Snake River salmon and steelhead will not come quickly or easily. Good citizenship, and protecting our nation's native fish heritage for future generations, are lifetime contact sports.

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RECRUIT YOUR MEMBERS OF CONGRESS TO BE ADVOCATES FOR SNAKE RIVER SALMON AND STEELHEAD.

Your congressional representatives don't have to care a whit about Snake River salmon and steelhead. They have a dog in this fight if they care about:

- Wantonly wasting millions of taxpayer dollars on the bottomless pit of failed, destructive pork barrel projects and on smoke screen "habitat improvement" projects.
- Using taxpayer dollars to subsidize Bonneville Power Administration's sweetheart deals with large industrial customers and regional utilities while the rest of the nation pays market prices for power.
- Subverting the salmon and steelhead protection intent of Wilderness Areas, National Recreation Areas and Wild and Scenic Rivers.
- Abrogating the nation's solemn treaty promises to Native American Indian tribes guaranteeing their rights to salmon and steelhead in perpetuity.
- Abrogating salmon-protection treaties with Canada.

- Rewarding with taxpayer dollars the Columbia River Pork Alliance's wholesale betrayal of the public trust.
- Making a mockery of the Endangered Species Act by using it to save destructive pork barrel dams instead of endangered salmon.
- Politically gagging fisheries scientists to prevent them from informing the public and decision makers on what really is required to restore Snake River salmon and steelhead.

If you are ready to spend a few hours of your time, the Save Our Wild Salmon coalition will provide you with profiles of your congressional representatives, will arm you with persuasive information, will arrange a local office visit and/or get you on the Salmon Shuttle to Washington, D.C.

To really get personally engaged, contact Brady Bennon at brady@wildsalmon.org or (503) 230-0421, extension 17.

TAKE THE FIGHT TO THE COLUMBIA RIVER PORK ALLIANCE. SHOW THAT SALMON HAVE TEETH.

To preview the 2004-2005 fight card, go to www.nwric.org.

Afterword

National Marine Fisheries Service is mostly staffed by dedicated public servants, many of whom spend their entire professional lives working hard to protect the public's fish resources. These people, like Snake River salmon and steelhead, are victims of the Columbia River Pork Alliance's egregious betrayal of the public trust. 🐟

Ed Chaney is a natural resource consultant with 35 years professional experience with Columbia/Snake River salmon and steelhead. He is president of Chinook Northwest – a natural resource consulting firm – and director of the nonprofit Northwest Resource Information Center. He lives in Eagle, Idaho.



Photo courtesy ISSU

Steve Bruce of Idaho Salmon & Steelhead Unlimited caught this 20-pound chinook on the Little Salmon River, May 2003. Spring chinook generally enter the Snake River in May and June after spending two to three years in the ocean. They average 14 to 15 pounds with fish frequently reaching 30-plus pounds.

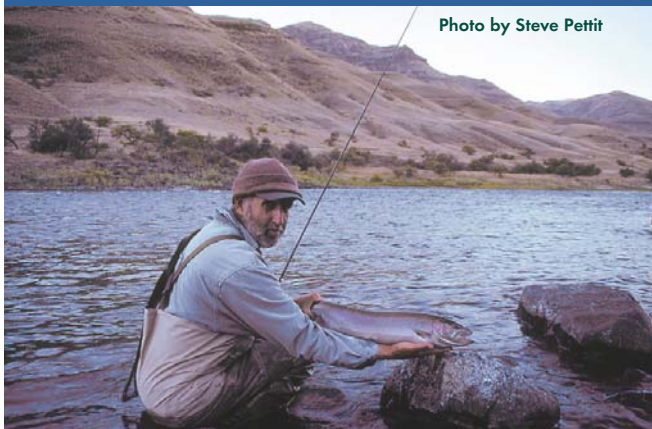


Photo by Steve Pettit

Steve Mate caught this steelhead on the Salmon River. Steelhead are the principal target of Snake River Basin fly fishers. The fish come in two distinct flavors.

Group A fish generally enter the Snake in late August to early September. These fish have spent roughly one year in the ocean and average 5 to 6 pounds. They disperse widely throughout the basin and are mostly caught in the lower reaches of the Snake, Salmon and Clearwater rivers and high up in their tributaries.

Group B steelhead spend roughly two years in the ocean and average 14 to 15 pounds with some fish reaching 20-plus pounds. The majority is destined for the Clearwater and the Middle and South Forks of the Salmon River. Fishing skated dry flies for both A's and B's generally runs from late August through mid-October. Casting to fish with wets produces large numbers of fish in headwaters that warm up late in February through early April.

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