

The Recovery of the Salmon

By Scott Laird

Last month we talked about the yearly return of native salmon to our regional waters. We focused on the life cycle of salmon, particularly here in the Nehalem River Watershed. This month we continue our discussion with Upper Nehalem Watershed Council Director Maggie Peyton and talk about the recovery of salmon here in the Upper Nehalem Valley.

Maggie Peyton has been working for the Upper Nehalem Watershed Council (UNWC) for eleven years. She is well respected in her field and has had great success in attaining funding for assessment, monitoring and restoration of local watershed streams and rivers. One important piece in watershed restoration is Salmon Recovery which has become a large focus of Oregon governmental agencies.

In 1995 Oregon began developing what would later be known as the Oregon Plan for Salmon and Watersheds or the Oregon Plan for short. The mission of the Oregon Plan is to restore Oregon watersheds and to recover fish and wildlife populations to levels that provide environmental, cultural and economic benefits. The Oregon Plan does this through four elements:

- Coordinated state, federal, and tribal actions that support restoration efforts, implement regulatory programs, manage public lands, and promote public education and awareness,
- Voluntary restoration actions by private landowners,
- Monitoring of watershed health to determine the effectiveness of programs, and
- Strong scientific oversight.

After twelve years the results appear to be mixed.

"The populations are still depressed, they're barely holding their own, and the returns remain well below historical levels," said Maggie Peyton. "It's not the same ecosystem it was 150 years ago. It can't support the same numbers."

"Even though there have been some signs of recovery, there are many new concerns," continued Peyton. "We have disrupted and altered the habitat over the last 100-150 years. We are impacting the oceans through over fishing, pollution, and now with global climate change. Salmon have been basically stolen by Japanese and Russian fishermen. And we have stripped the riparian zone of trees and allowed sediments into the streams."

"But there have also been a lot of improvements made recently, a lot of positive changes. The whole attitude of the local stakeholders has changed, especially with incentives that have been added. The Forest Practices Act has led to voluntary measures. There have been road improvements and culverts installed that allow better fish passage. There has been a large investment in ecosystem improvements. We can see a level of raised consciousness, a change in the mindset and an ability to understand and adjust to the situation. And we've been able to find ways of doing it without impacting the economy. Oregon is on the verge of making great strides," said Peyton.

When asked specifically about the Nehalem Watershed, Peyton responded, "The biggest problems here are water quality with elevated temperature and sediment loading; water quantity where summer low flows and winter high flows have become more extreme; and the condition of the aquatic habitat has become simplified over the years through land-use practices and policies. It's too warm for the Coho.

The Nehalem River has problems every summer with rising stream temperatures exacerbated by low flow conditions; every winter with sediment loading originating from landslides, road failures and eroding stream banks; and year round with depleted habitat conditions that limit salmon spawning, rearing and refuge opportunities."

"We have had great success with locally initiated programs that involve local landowners who cooperate with the Watershed Council and state and county agencies to repair riparian areas on their properties," continued Peyton. "We go in and plant trees to provide shade and stream bank stabilization, work to remove invasive species and improve wildlife habitat. We are working to re-create more and better habitat so as the numbers of salmon increase, there will be good habitat for them, and, in return, survival rates will increase. The people in this community and surrounding areas are making a great effort to be good stewards of the watershed."

While discussing the salmon's amazing ability to find their way back to their home waters, Peyton shared an interesting story which speaks to the salmon's ability to recover here in Oregon. "Up at Fishhawk Lake there was a culvert that was blocking fish passage. No salmon had been able to pass through it for twenty-five years, so no salmon's life cycle had started there for years and years. When they took out that culvert and made it passable again, no one expected any salmon to return without them being re-introduced. But you know what, salmon started coming back that first year, even though they were not born there. It was amazing!"

With the help of dedicated professionals like Maggie Peyton, volunteers who help with watershed projects, cooperative landowners, industry and business owners who are willing to adjust their practices, and good oversight, monitoring, and education from state and local government agencies, things are looking up for Oregon's salmon populations. "We can and do make a measurable difference."

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A Spirited Old-Fashioned Christmas

It's never too early to start planning for Christmas, and we want you to know what is being planned for your enjoyment in Vernonia. It's 'A Spirited Old-Fashioned Christmas!' What does that entail, you ask?

Vernonia Pride will be decorating the downtown area with that theme in mind. We encourage everyone to follow suit. After the Christmas Bazaar on Saturday December 1st, a Santa Claus-led parade will start on California Avenue next to the Washington Grade School. The parade will continue down Bridge Street to City Hall for the official Christmas tree lighting ceremony. Prizes will be awarded in different categories, including "Best Decorated Log Truck." Everyone is invited to participate. Decorate your rig, car, baby stroller... Kids light-up and decorate your bikes and your wagons. No ATV's please. Let's make this the best Christmas parade yet! There will be music provided by the High School band and choir, and refreshments served in the old-fashioned flavor.

We encourage everyone to get into the spirit. The shops downtown will be open to start off the Christmas season. Remember your "Holiday Bucks" card to get stamped. You may be the lucky winner! 'A Spirited Old-Fashioned Christmas' is the time to visit with friends, sing praise for all the blessings we have and remember our neighbors who are less fortunate. Mark your calendar and join your friends and neighbors on Dec. 1st, be in the parade or stand and cheer, visit Santa Claus, listen to the music and enjoy some refreshments. 'Tis' the season to be jolly!!