



## A FISHERMAN'S LAMENT

by Sam Devereaux

There is an old saying, "if you can't dazzle 'em with facts, baffle 'em with bullshit." In the case of the fishcrats versus salmon trollers it is a little different in that the 'crats have dazzled and baffled with facts that are bullshit. I attempt to read all the literature they have pumped out in the last ten years and the only conclusion I can draw is that if they put as much energy into raising salmon as has been put into published "facts," there would be no salmon shortage and I would still be a happy troller instead of a disgruntled, near bankrupted ex-troller.

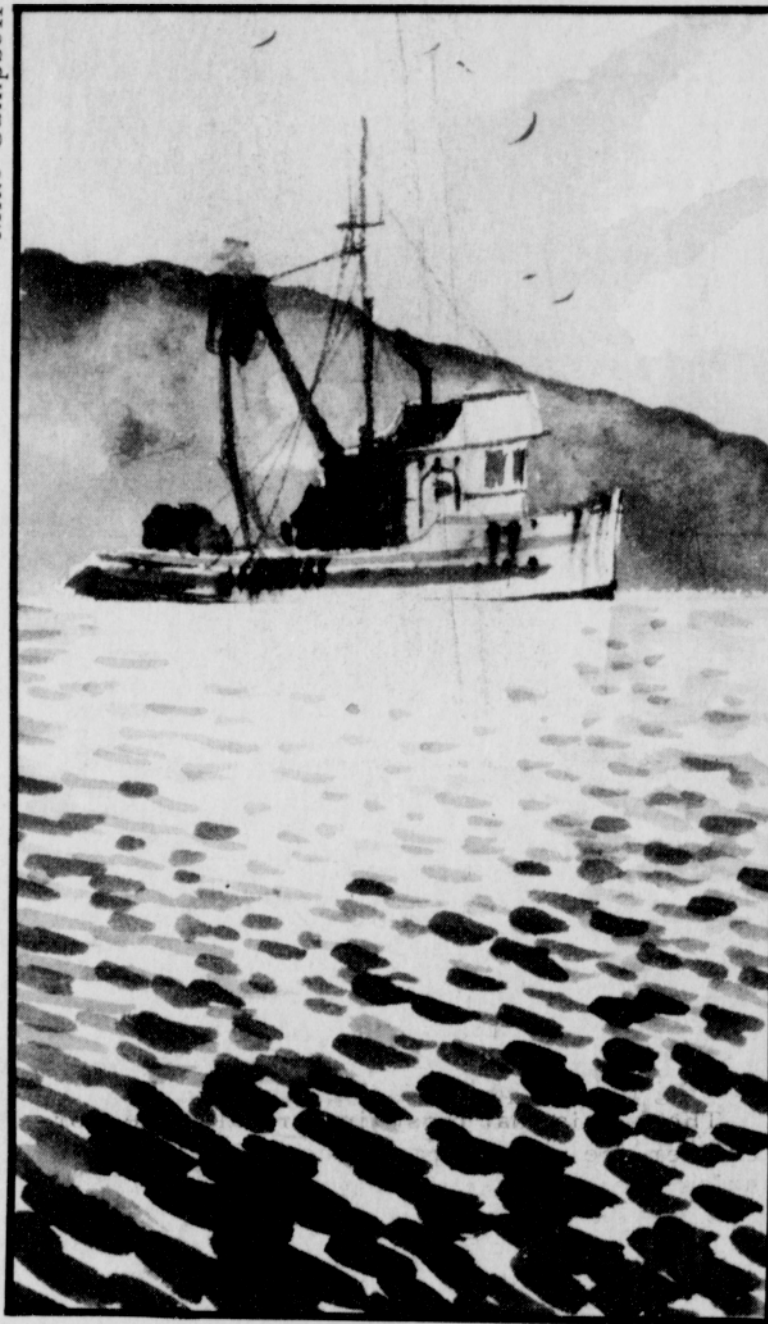
Michael asked me to do an article on my perspective of the recent history of salmon trolling in the Pacific Northwest. On reelection I decided it best to express some basic philosophical tenets with regards to small private business, large corporate business, and government business in America, and quickly line out the different directions they are taking. As Northwest salmon trolling is only one of many victims of these directions, it is generally useful to understand what is going on. Who knows? You may be next.

The largest difference between government business, corporate big business and small business is the degree of direct responsibility and consequence suffered in the wake of decisions. As a small businessman, if I make a major decision that is poor there is a good chance it will cripple or ruin my business and I will suffer direct consequences. At the other end of the scale, when a faux pas is committed in governmental employ and to a somewhat lesser degree in corporate business, those responsible (unless proven criminal) seldom if ever suffer consequences larger than personal embarrassment, if that. A prime example of this is Don Hodel, in charge of the Bonneville Power Administration through the years it guided us from cheap electricity to public (without a vote) underwriting of excess — the expensive, defective, incomplete and bankrupt WPPSS nuclear power plants. Imagine making a wrong decision of that magnitude in your private finances. His punishment for such gross misreading and downright incompetence? Secretary of Interior, USA. Incredible? From the viewpoint of this small businessman, incredible indeed.

I am not going to spell out statistics about this and that as they can generally be used to prove anything you want them to prove. I will say that in my opinion a large group of non-productive, overeducated (in the sense of overreaching their abilities) fishcrats have done a fine job of wiping out one of the last bastions of wild individual freedom. How do I put into words the feeling of being forced off the ocean by some pedigreed idiots who are incompetent to do anything beyond collect their government paychecks? It feels good just to write that down, even though, unlike their statistics, it proves nothing.

Here is a statistic: From 1954 to 1971 (seventeen years), the Washington Department of Fisheries (WDF) did a study on their hatchery salmon written by Frank Haw and Peter Bergman that, among other things, illustrated that the run of Toutle class coho salmon was the backbone of the Washington troll fishery. Interesting, wouldn't you say? Even more interesting when you know that the very next year WDF stopped producing Toutle class coho and went to what is called Cowlitz class coho and the decline in troll production can be traced to that decision. Almost needless to say, the two above-mentioned fishcrats

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responsible not only for the study but also the decision to change hatchery stocks just kept moving up the ladder in WDF, eventually being put in charge in all but the title as the "Director" of the department is appointed by the governor.

In Oregon another whiz brain was busily at work by the name of Jack Donaldson, who is not only Director of the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) in title but also in fact. He is also known as the "Father of Aquaculture" (referring to salmon aquaculture) but goes to great lengths to deny that he was put in the position he holds to insure the smooth transition from ocean troll harvesting of salmon to aquaculture. Recent history flies in the face of his denials, although I am certain that between him and his ODFW wonderboys all kinds of facts and figures can be marshalled to refute my claim. As my good friend Bonnie McKnight recently told the Pacific Fisheries Management Council (another management "tool" comprised mainly of fishcrats), "I don't believe you or your figures."

Why have Oregon and Washington gone to such great lengths to run the troller out of business? It is really not that mysterious when you consider the economics involved. Once again I will not use solid statistics but I am confident that I will be close enough to supply an adequate illustration.

A prime twelve to fifteen pound dressed (ready to cook) troll-caught king salmon will bring the fisherman close to three dollars a pound, so each fish has a value between, say, twenty-five to sixty dollars, depending on size. I have made many trips where my kings average in excess of twenty pounds each, but for the sake of my illustration, let's keep the twelve to fifteen pound average so that I can't be accused of exaggerating. So, with a thirty to thirty-five dollar average to the fisherman per fish, the fishbuyer gets another markup, which makes it hard to imagine a fish getting off the coast for less than forty to forty-five dollars apiece. Raising these fish might cost as much as seven dollars each, although if done properly that is unlikely, but let's use ten dollars a fish so that the office crew gets paid as well as the hatchery crews feeding the fish and cleaning the pens. This leaves a thirty dollar profit per fish, or to put it another

way, a three hundred percent return on costs. What corporation would not like these returns?

What is the problem, you ask?

Those damned trollers!

They are out there not only catching your fish (assuming for the purpose of this illustration that you are an aquaculture owner, and nevermind that the trollers were there first), but competing in your market. The problem, actually, is that you, the aquaculture owner, must remove the trollers and take over their markets. Which is pretty slick. Over the years trollers have established marketing niches with regards to price structures, distribution, buyer awareness and quality, and all aquaculture has to do is remove the trollers and all that groundwork is theirs gratis.

You may think that I am paranoid; but remember, I was in fact (as opposed to theory) run out of business by the forces behind all this, not by an inability to produce fish when fishing.

Here is another corporate score: One of the major concerns of aquaculture is that fish returning to the streams do not usually have that prime red meat look of a troll-caught salmon. No problem. When the state hatcheries (set up to mitigate fish losses due to the effects of dams and logging practices) changed their stocks from proven successful ones, they embarked on intensive genetic research to get redmeated salmon back to the hatcheries. You might even say that once again your tax dollar (assuming that you are not an aquaculture owner) is at work for the big boys helping them figure out how to make more money.

In case any of you reading this actually think there is a problem with not enough salmon off the Oregon and Washington coasts, let me put your minds at rest. The shortages in the last few years have been for the most part contrived by WDF and ODFW to help set up this scenario of scarcity to use as a tool to restrict fishing time for the troller. A successful troll season is made over a large area of ocean in a long period of time (six months), getting a good bite here and there and a lot of grinding inbetween the good bites. Take away from that time and area and it is hard to be a genuine troller because you don't have the time and places to make the money to do the whole thing. There are still many licenses in Oregon and Washington but most of them are owned by part timers, people who actually make their living doing something else and like to fish and get tax breaks because it is a business for them. There are very few real trollers left, and every year a few more have to do something else.

To use myself as an example, I am getting back on my feet after being run out of business. One of the attributes that most serious trollers have is the ability to survive and be versatile: even in the good years it is necessary. But I no longer troll, which is what I really enjoyed doing. How many people are lucky enough to really enjoy their work? I just wonder if we fired all the fishcrats tomorrow how many of them would be able to survive without another government job?

I probably sound bitter. I am bitter. I have been displaced from what I consider ideal work in a dishonest and underhanded manner by big business that uses government agencies as a front for its grab of economic resources. I guess that I should not be so disillusioned and be grateful that I was able to utilize a natural resource as a small businessman for as long as I did before the ever hungry multinational corporation/government conglomerates moved in on it. After all, what natural resource is not virtually controlled by big business and/or government anymore?

One less, that's for sure.

Sam Devereaux lives in Brownsmead. He is married and is the father of four children. He has commercial fished for sixteen years, and operated his own troller for fourteen of them. He currently operates a drag boat for someone else. Artist Mike Campbell lives in Seaside.

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