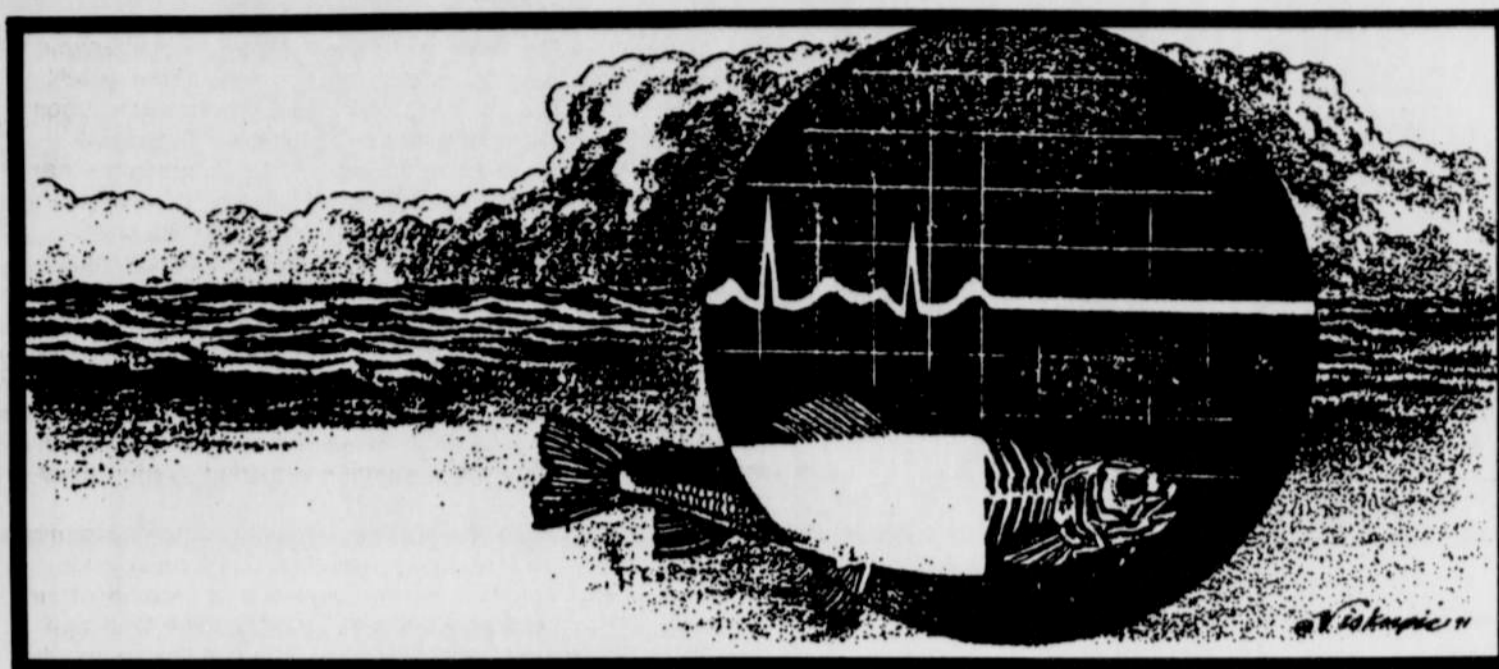


KILL DAMS TO SAVE SALMON?



GARY VISKUPIC

BY SOLVEIG TROVIK

The people responsible for restoring wild salmon runs in the Columbia River are talking about the hitherto unthinkable: breaching four dams on the lower Snake River to let fish pass.

That would drop the water level 100 feet and return that portion of the river to natural free flowing condition, as scientists have urged.

And that would mean no more electricity would be produced for the Bonneville Power Administration at those dams — a loss of nearly enough power to serve Seattle.

It would mean the end of Lewiston as a water-based port because barging goods would become impossible. And it would leave agricultural irrigators' pipes high and dry.

Just as astonishing, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which will decide in two years whether to proceed with channeling around the Snake dams, also has asked Congress for funds to study a permanent deep draw-down of some 30 or 40 feet of John Day Dam on the Columbia River for the same purpose.

A deep draw-down would end navigation at John Day, too, unless its locks were rebuilt to accommodate the barges. And it would pose compelling and timely questions in this high-water year about flood control for the city of Portland. The Corps also is studying whether it would mean the end of power generation at that dam as well.

The Northwest Power Planning Council at its meeting in Spokane March 12 went one step further and asked the Corps to include in its studies a "modest" fiddling with flows at McNary Dam, which would affect water levels at the Tri Cities.

If all the changes were carried out and John Day's locks were not modified, Columbia River barge traffic would end at The Dalles rather than Lewiston.

Could it be that these people are getting serious about saving salmon?

Well, yes and no. What has happened as the result of interminable nail biting and reported scientific studies is that the decision makers — the Power Council, the Corps, the BPA, the National Marine Fisheries and members of Congress— are being left with fewer places to hide. They're having to face inescapable fact: harmless tinkering will not save the fish.

Yet the Endangered Species Act requires that we save them.

Meanwhile, a recent U.S. Supreme Court ruling came as manna from heaven for the barge operators, irrigators and electric utilities that oppose dam modifications. The court said those who are economically affected by enforcement of the ESA can sue claiming that too much is being done to save a species. So the Columbia River Alliance filed notice of intent to sue to halt the effort to change the dams.

If they succeed, they will get credit for killing the wild salmon runs.

Many key actors in Congress, such as Senator Slate Gordon (R-Wash) also take a dim view of efforts to restore genetically important wild fish runs. But even politicians are capable of surprises. Take Idaho's governor Phil Batt:

Faced with potentially painful consequences for Idaho irrigators of a listing of the Snake River steelhead as threatened, Batt recently dropped a little bombshell. He signaled that his mind is not closed to kissing goodbye to the water behind four lower Snake dams — Lower Monumental, Little Goose, Ice Harbor and Lower Granite. Those dams, which are partially of earthen construction, impound water over a 140 mile stretch between Lewiston and Pasco.

Batt has been careful never to say outright that he supports breaching the dams; he has said only it should be studied. But in the hypersensitive atmosphere of salmon recovery politics, his proposal telegraphed a message that seemed to say: Let science rule. That scared some people, delighted others and surprised almost everybody.

Batt proposes that studies be conducted on whether it would work to leave the steelhead in the river to migrate rather than barging them around dams as now is often done, and to study returning to a 'normative' run of the river, commonly understood as breaching the dams in some fashion. That is exactly what scientists say should be done.

Cynics, who unfortunately surface even in such high-minded enterprises as this one, have postulated that Batt may be willing to flush Lewiston in order to save what water he can for his upriver political base irrigators. And since Idaho is in tough negotiations with the Nez Perce tribe, which has filed a troublesome claim on practically 100% of the Snake River's water, Batt's in a tough spot, and there is speculation he may need something to trade.

In total, the four Snake dams produce about 5% of the electricity in BPA's system. Only one of them, Ice Harbor, serves irrigators, and only 14 irrigators at that, according to power council sources. Their irrigation pipes could be extended to reach the river. The dams serve little purpose, according to the Corps.

The Port of Lewiston is the stickler. If it is to continue as a shipping center after the dams are gone it would have to be by rail or truck, not barges.

Even though Batt has suggested the breaching study, he apparently is not keen on living with the consequences if it concludes breaching is best. The Port of Lewiston is a "non-negotiable item" according to his spokesman, Frank Lockwood.

If the four Snake dams are breached, it may be possible for Idaho to hang on to more of its water in the Dworshak Dam on the north fork of the Clearwater River above Lewiston rather than be required to flush into the Snake/Columbia system to move fish. That dam's primary functions are power generation, flood control and recreation.

Lockwood says Batt is willing to study everything from a more normal river flow to draw-down of the John Day Dam, but he wants to know what the price tag is, who will pay and whether society is willing to bear the costs of salmon recovery.

Mike Field, Idaho's representative on the Power Council, says it is Idaho's position that there is not enough water in the system to save all the fish the feds want to save.

Studies already are on track to determine the fate of the four Snake dams. But without \$4.5 million from this Congress to pursue separate studies of deep John Day draw-down and the more moderate draw-down of McNary Dam, those two solutions will not materialize. Congress should fund these studies so the region can get a clear understanding of its workable options.

"We don't know enough to say whether we'd get more benefit for salmon from a minimal pool lowering at McNary, which could increase spawning habitat upriver in the Hanford than from a deeper draw-down at John Day Dam," says Power Council Chairman John Etchart of Montana. (Unlike deep draw-down at minimum pool operation, barges could get enough water pressure to turn and produce some electricity.)

A group of independent scientists asked by the stake holders to recommend what is needed to save the fish made it clear that natural free-running river habitat is the most important improvement they need. That should end the debate.

But ending the squabbling about what wild salmon need to survive also means the options for saving them are narrowing to hard ones that will require dramatic fish-friendly fixes.

Solveig Trovik is an editorial writer and a member of the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* editorial board. His article is reprinted from the Spring 1997 *Columbia River Gillnetter*.

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SALMON PASSAGE

BY JIM OYALA

You remember the scene, the old Indian chief sitting in the tipi and Dustin Hoffman crawls through the opening.

"Grandfather!" he yells.

The wise, old wrinkled man can hardly see or hear. But he knows. "Ah, Grandson. The sight of you makes my heart soar like an eagle."

So I was on this towboat at Lower Granite Dam on the Snake River. We were changing our routine a bit — no grain barges, no log rafts, no container or chip barges this trip. We were to cart 50,000 salmon smolt through the dams on a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers barge. I should have been home three days earlier but dispatch, as usual, had kept us in a quandary. Always, they change orders.

The crew was bitching at each other, the oil needed changing in the main engines, and the weather report said the coast was having great weather. But at Lower Granite it was overcast and misting.

The first person I met at Lower Granite Dam was Snake River John. He had three teeth on his lower gum, one atop. He had a three-day beard on his 62 year old face. In his earlier days he probably stood 6 feet, 6 inches, but age had slowly curled him over. He had an old mongrel dog as a sidekick, Trixie. They walked alike.

John was in charge of the fish trapping station at night. It was his only job and it lasted 12 weeks during the spring. The rest of the year he and Trixie holed up in his trailer and recycled aluminum cans and tended his six acre farm — which he rarely left. He said he always wanted to have a family, but Trixie was it.

As we watched the fingerlings singularly pass from over a small weir he pointed out from which hatchery each was produced. They were his little lost cousins.

Occasionally an adult steelhead would be trapped in the weir on its return to the hatchery and his dog would raise a hell of a fit. John said once she had jumped in after one and he had to pull her out.

His eyes sparkled when he talked about the fish, about the old days when there were no dams, when he fished the river as a boy. But the swing shift was over and lunch pail in hand he and Trixie headed home.

The other Corps employees were busy tagging fish. The operation was very complex and a little suspect.

First the fish were intoxicated in a mild alcohol solution. Then they were sorted onto carrying tubes marked hatchery salmon, hatchery steelhead, wild salmon, and wild steelhead. A fin was snipped off for future identification. Their noses were poked into a tube where a piece of metal was clipped permanently — this for electric surveillance of the fish. To further embarrass these mutants they were branded with the letter 'F' which would grow on their sides like a 20th century reminder.

All sorted, packaged and displayed, the fish were pumped into our barge. We were to discharge them below Bonneville Dam.

Twenty hours later, on a beautiful warm, clear day we arrived at John Day Dam for a downstream lockage. The skipper had to call the office for further orders. I took a brief hiatus at the fish viewing station. It had been many years since I had watched salmon travel through a fish ladder conglomerate.

Signs led me to a viewing area but the public was only allowed to peek through a window at the fish ladders over the counting station. Had to be something better than this. I walked outside the area to find a door titled "Authorized Personnel Only." Must be it.

I walked down a winding metal stairway into a cozy little room with a plate glass window framing one side of the fish ladder. An old coffee pot was brewing on a small table. Numerous books and magazines were spread on a shelf.

The fish counter had been an ocean troller who had retired in the area. I expected to see an old black cat sitting on his lap but there was none. He liked to watch the fish, said he loved to catch them in his earlier days. He did not talk much, just smiled.

About five minutes went by. All we saw were a couple of steelhead. One, in its beginning phase of the spawn cycle, looked worn, frazzled, discolored and mutilated. It could barely kick against the current.

Anticipation. Wait. After five or six minutes the first salmon came into view. Then a second right behind. Both about 25 pounds each. I have seen a lot of salmon. Chinook. Silver. Humpy. Sockeye. Dog. All of them. But none with quite the stark beauty of these passing the counting station.

They were not captured, packaged or canned. They had a wild purposeful look. Their journey had been five years of migration through dams, river and ocean. They had experienced metamorphoses through fresh water to saltwater back to fresh water. They had made it despite water quality depletion, hydroelectric dams, fishing efforts, high sea predators and political mismanagement.

God, what strong, silent, marvelous creatures. As they swam by with determined kicks I found myself yelling with excitement. Neil Armstrong's first step on the moon. Portland winning the NBA title. The first dogwoods blooming in spring.

They had made it. And my heart soared like an eagle.

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COLUMBIA RIVER MARITIME MUSEUM

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REMOVE THE DAMS

We all know what the main cause is, but the Power Planning Council doesn't want to act because of the tremendous political pressure put upon them. Dams are the problem. Period. The Columbia River Alliance, which represents irrigators, bargers and other river users, is fighting tooth and nail to keep anything from changing.

The U.S. Supreme Court decision in March '97 allows industry groups to challenge the Endangered Species Act in court. The Columbia River Alliance has filed notice in federal court that it intends to sue the government to get a say in how dams are operated to save the salmon from extinction. The Alliance's 60-day notice names the National Marine Fisheries Service, U.S. Corps of Army Engineers, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and Bonneville Power Administration as targets.

The special interests of the aluminum companies, the power companies and agriculture industries have driven the Columbia hydro system for decades. Their interest has been the prevailing interest over the interest of saving the salmon for far too long.

Salmon restoration efforts have focused on hydroelectric dams which have turned the Columbia and Snake Rivers into a series of lakes. These lakes, like a hot tub, heat up in the summer months to temperatures that the fish cannot survive.

In my opinion, Bruce Lovelin, executive director, is not interested in saving the salmon, but rather he is interested in stalling until there are no more salmon.

Let's cut the red tape and work on dam removal. That is the only solution, and it better be done fast — while there is still time left to act.

—DON RISWICK

Don Riswick is editor of the *Columbia River Gillnetter*.