



FISHING GUIDE BOB REES NETS
A CHINOOK SALMON NEAR THE
ASTORIA-MEGLER BRIDGE

PHOTO BY MICHAEL O'LEARY

To Catch a Salmon

Columbia River salmon face dams, predators and coal trains BY CAMILLA MORTENSEN

It's dawn at Buoy 10 on the Columbia River, and some of an estimated 1.5 million fall Chinook salmon are swimming through the mouth of the river heading home to their spawning grounds. The silvery speckled fish, like their fellow coho, steelhead and sockeye, face a gauntlet of challenges as they swim upriver to spawn and die — if they are not caught and eaten first by humans or other predators.

The first fish hooked on fishing guide Bob Rees' boat on this August morning is an unclipped coho salmon. Brad Halverson of the Sandy River Chapter of the Northwest Steelheaders reels it in quickly after an hour or so of trolling through the rolling waters. Salmon fishing is long periods of quiet interrupted by a fury of reeling and netting that's over in minutes.

Rees unhooks the fish without pulling it out of the water. "It's fun to catch, but you can't barbecue a memory," he says, putting another herring on the hook and sending it back to the bottom to lure a fish that can be kept and eaten.

Rees, who is also the executive director of the Association of Northwest Steelheaders, says he expects to be out on the water every day between this mid-August morning and mid-September. Based on estimates from last year's run, this season is predicted to be an epic run of Chinook on the Columbia, and 600,000 coho are also supposed to return — 2 million salmon in all.

Guides like Rees depend on salmon for their livelihood, and thousands of people spend their workweek dreaming

of hitting the water with rod and reel in hand. But this year's big salmon run pales in comparison to the 10 million to 16 million salmon that once returned to the Columbia. The fish numbers shot down drastically after dams on the Columbia and Snake rivers were built creating a minefield of turbines and predators.

Dams aren't the only power-generating strongholds that salmon are up against on the Columbia: Coal trains not only threaten the salmon habitat, they threaten the economics of the fishing industry.

JOBS VERSUS JOBS?

Just offshore from Astoria, Halverson looks around the waters of Buoy 10 and jokes that in a week or two, as the fishing season gets under way, he'd be able to walk from Oregon to Washington by stepping from fishing boat to fishing boat. The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife says there were 1,590 boats from Oregon alone fishing for salmon at Buoy 10 on Aug. 16. Buoy 10 encompasses the area from buoy number 10 at the mouth of the lower Columbia upstream 16 miles to Tongue Point, east of Astoria.

According to the American Sportfishing Association, Oregon ranks seventh among destinations for non-resident anglers, and "recreational fishing accounts for \$2.7 billion a year to the Washington and Oregon economies." Boat-building companies such as Alumaweld in White City and Koffler Boats in Eugene flourish in Oregon.

According to the coal industry-backed Alliance for Northwest Jobs and Exports (ANJE), coal exports by

out-of-state companies to Asia through Oregon and Washington could also inject millions into those states' economies. The proposals call for mining coal in the Powder River Basin of Montana and Wyoming and putting the fossil fuel in open-topped cars on trains to ship to Northwest export terminals.

The train tracks run along the Columbia River, through the scenic Columbia Gorge, home to people, wildlife and, of course, salmon.

Columbia Riverkeeper has filed a Clean Water Act lawsuit in federal court against BNSF Railway Company for discharging a pollutant (coal dust) into a waterway. ANJE argues that spraying the cars with a "thick coating" reduces dust "by a minimum of 85 percent."

The recent denial of Ambre Energy's permit for building a dock for coal export at the Morrow Pacific Terminal "hurts all trade related industries and workers in our region," according to ANJE. The group's spokesperson Kathryn Stenger says ports are "the few bright spots in Oregon's economy today." The alliance called the decision by the Oregon Department of State Lands "political."

For Rees and the Northwest Steelheaders, Oregon already has an economic and environmental bright spot in its rural areas — fishing. People who come to fish will spend \$145-\$200 for a guided trip. They also buy fishing licenses, eat meals in coastal towns and spend money on hotels, Rees points out.

Northwest Steelheaders recently teamed up with the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) to do a study on the effects of coal export on salmon fishing and the threats range from ocean acidification to increased river traffic.

Michael O'Leary, who works with both organizations on coal export issues, says he doesn't mind if the permit denial is indeed political. He says it's time Gov. John Kitzhaber came through on promises to halt coal export in Oregon. "Having this permit rejected is a sea change in momentum," O'Leary says. "We've gone from Dr. Hope to some real positive bedside manner."