

OPINION



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OUR VIEW

A dismal year for salmon

Diving into annual salmon numbers tells us a lot about these iconic Pacific Northwest fish while raising complex and troubling questions.

Too often, when dealing with situations facing salmon — everything from impassible culverts and predator overpopulation to hazardous chemicals and habitat loss behind outmoded dikes — we overlook that salmon spend the vast majority of their lives in the ocean. It's in the open ocean where salmon face many of their greatest obstacles.

Its name is a mouthful, but the North Pacific Anadromous Fish Commission offers one of the best assessments of fishing pressure on salmon, as well as hatchery production, which remains a main tool for improving salmon numbers. The commission's report on 2020 — released a month ago — contains much that will be news even in these salmon-crazy communities around the mouth of the Columbia River.

The headline: Salmon abundance in the North Pacific during 2020 was the lowest recorded in nearly four decades. This was not a one-year anomaly; overall catches have been in decline since 2011.

Population trends

The preliminary combined commercial catch by vessels based in Canada, Japan, South Korea, Russia and the United States came to around 669,000 tons and 322.5 million fish. The sheer size of this dismal catch will take many by surprise in this region where fishing seasons open and close on the basis of a few hundred salmon one way or the other. In other words, even in a bad year there are many millions of salmon netted in the ocean.

Russian boats caught nearly half this total, the U.S. 41%, Japan 10%, Canada 1% and South Korea less than 1%. More than 98% of the U.S. total was netted in Alaska.

Although pink and chum salmon are hardly part of the conversation on our part of the coast, in 2020 pinks comprised nearly half of the North Pacific total, followed by chum at 27%. Restoration efforts are making some headway for chum returning to the Columbia and Willapa Bay.

Sockeye were 23% of the 2020 catch total. Known as bluebacks on the Columbia, there rarely are enough sockeye for any sort of season here in our time. Chinook, steelhead and east Asian cherry salmon were each less than 1% of the 2020 catch.

Overall, pinks crashed in 2020 to only about a third what they were in 2018. Chum were caught



Oregon State University

Efforts like the Oregon-based Cooperative Institute for Marine Resources Studies will be key to ensuring ocean health. The institute's director, Francis Chan, right, is pictured at Otter Rock Marine Reserve, with an ocean sensor on the rocks.

at about 61% of the 10-year average, with particularly steep declines for Japan and Russia.

Honing in on our side of the Pacific, North America's total 2020 catch was the lowest since 1977. Dismal chum and sockeye catches in 2020 were the lowest on record in the commission's database for Washington state, Oregon and California combined. Overall, including Alaska and British Columbia, the chum harvest was 30% of 2017's total and sockeye were caught at 80% of the five-year average. The West Coast commercial catch of coho and Chinook was too small to warrant a mention by the commission in its executive summary.

Although some might think that fewer salmon being netted means more are being left to live out natural lives, totals as bad as these are more likely to signal there are fewer salmon in the ocean to be caught. It's impossible to say this with any certainty, considering the enormous disruptions the pandemic imposed on ordinary economic activities in 2020, including fishing. But at best, it's very worrisome to see such low harvest numbers.

The decadelong pattern of decline is despite relatively constant hatchery releases of around 5 billion a year since 1993. In 2020, U.S. hatcheries released more than 2 billion fish (39% of the total). Japan released 1.6 billion (31%); Russia 1.3 billion (25%); Canada 209 million (4%); and

Korea 8 million (less than 1%).

Perhaps surprisingly, chum comprised nearly two-thirds of hatchery production and pinks were one-quarter of the total. The most prized Pacific Northwest salmon were produced in much smaller numbers: Chinook (224 million, 4%); sockeye (187 million, 4%); coho salmon (82 million, 2%); and steelhead (19 million, 1%).

Observations

Salmon are proverbial canaries in the coal mine when it comes to environmental conditions. A 10-year decline culminating in 2020's truly abysmal harvest is a brightly flashing warning signal about conditions out of sight in the Pacific Ocean. By soaking up human-generated gases and chemicals, the planet's biggest ocean gives us some breathing room to put the brakes on climate change. But plunging salmon abundance suggests that even the vast Pacific is reaching its limits.

Although they're looked down on by salmon snobs, pinks and chum are much prized as high-quality nutrition by people all around the northern Pacific Rim, in addition to ending up in pet-food cans. The steepening drop in abundance of these species will drive up fishing pressure on nonsalmon species and increase the price of food for working families.

While hatcheries remain important, pumping out billions of little salmon won't achieve bigger harvests if they just hit the ocean and promptly die. American hatchery science has come a long way in the past 30 years, but the Pacific nations all need to work together to better optimize releases for success. For example, this may mean keeping salmon smolts until they are larger, making certain they have consistently high-quality habitat on their way to the ocean, and controlling unnatural levels of predation.

Monitoring of ocean conditions must continue to improve, along with vigorous enforcement of fishing rules in international waters. Efforts like the Newport-based Cooperative Institute for Marine Resources Studies are on the front line of trying to get a handle on how "to sustain a productive ocean ecosystem in the face of climate change," according to its director. The University of Washington also leads crucial oceanographic work, and merits strong regional and national support.

Trouble beneath the ocean's waves impacts humanity in fundamental ways. Space exploration generates far more attention, but Earth's own watery realm is infinitely more central to our survival and future prosperity, or lack thereof.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Grandma's a la mode

There must be at least a couple of hundred Grandma restaurants in America, but at the Grandma's Corner Restaurant in Gearhart, off U.S. Highway 101, the booths are cushioned, the service swift and the owners know the names of all of their regular customers.

It's a place where you can put away your gadgets and exchange ideas; a kind of social center where people come not just for the food, but for the atmosphere and, of course, to enjoy the food.

It's almost impossible to exaggerate the quality of Grandma's cuisine. Eggs on the sunny side come out picture perfect, plus fluffy pancakes, oven fresh biscuits, crisp hash browns and oatmeal for the fit.

The senior menu is longer than the regular menu. It's difficult to find places where you get more for your money. This is one of them.

BOB DIETSHE
Manzanita

Property tax abatement

Three words to help ease the housing shortage and lower rents: Property tax abatement. Make month-to-month home rentals more lucrative than short-stay rentals by abolishing property taxes on homes, or portions thereof, rented by the month.

I would rent my house in a heartbeat, and live a life free of care, supported by my monthly rental income. No more yard work. No more costly home maintenance. No more backyard squabbles. No more burden of ownership and related monthly expenses. I could even hire out the headaches to a ruthless property manager and join the ranks of the absentee owners.

Why, I could take vagrancy to a new level. A newly-minted vagabond. Another career, perhaps, as a lifestyle consultant. I could bor-

row your watch, and tell you the time.

I could become a couch surfer, or even better, a full-time tourist, toiling in the industry where work is play, and productivity is measured in idle fantasy and meaningless consumption.

Even now, I am at work. All things worth doing well are well worth undoing.
GARY DURHEIM
Seaside

Consider bees

As a local in-town beekeeper, I am reaching out to everyone in Astoria to please look at the chemicals they spray in their yards before they use them.

I understand that controlling pests and weeds is important, but I ask that you please consider bees and other pollinators. This week we lost a queen bee, putting an entire hive at serious risk, while another hive suffered a serious loss in numbers.

The dead and dying bees on our porch, in our apiary and around our property tell a story. There are alternatives, from commercial herbicides to home alternatives (vinegar). To watch a colony of bees go from thriving to struggling, almost overnight, is heartbreaking, to say the least.

We give our honey away. We are not doing this to profit. Our motives are simple — we want the bees to thrive so our community and its gardens do, as well.

We need your help. Please, look at what you are using before you spray.
THOMAS ANK
Astoria

Take a moment

We went to Seattle to visit friends after COVID-19, and were pleasantly surprised that most businesses allowed fully vaccinated people to enter



"I miss the lockdown."

maskless.

Most took advantage of this but many, including employees, had masks. Being fully vaccinated with a high efficacy helped us feel comfortable not wearing masks.

However, having coffee with friends, one asked, "How do you know people without masks are vaccinated?" It then dawned on me, who cares?

We trust the vaccine will keep us safe from the virulent versions of the virus. People who choose not to get the vaccine do not really impact those of us who did.

COVID-19 variants are now much more infectious and deadly, and many who refuse vaccines have children as part of their life. She then asked, "Are these people forcing their opinion on family as well?"

She then said, "many anti-vaccine

advocates also promote anti pro-choice opinions. What a dichotomy, not getting vaccinated impacts those who cannot get the vaccine yet" (children and the immune deficient).

She went on to say, "by catching COVID-19 and/or preventing children and family members from getting vaccinated, seems tantamount to practicing retroactive abortion, and seems patently hypocritical."

So, we now no longer care if an anti-vaccine person waives vaccination. It does not impact the health of most vaccinated people.

However, we hope more people, hesitant to be vaccinated, will take a moment to realize what impact their decision has on loved ones, or those who cannot be vaccinated. Please stay safe out there.

THOMAS SMITH
Warrenton