

Their Health is an Indicator for the Entire Watershed



Courtesy of CRITFC

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~ Kelly Doerksen

gulls. Even the decomposing bodies of spawned out adults were favorites of white sturgeon.

Links have been made then, in the decline of lamprey with the demise of salmonids. As predators have noticed an absence of their easy meals, they have turned their attention on the next logical alternative, salmon, young and old. No wonder that the geographic distribution of Pacific Lamprey, from California to Alaska, has often matched that of salmon.

With that said and done, we arrive once again at the issue of Willamette Falls, and the permits.

Reviewing what information existed, ODFW concluded that "The Willamette River lamprey is the last substantial run of lampreys in the Columbia River basin," announced at the same time as its decision to issue restrictive permits for those wishing to gather lamprey at Willamette Falls.

Of course, harvesting of lamprey hasn't exactly been a goldmine as of late. The economic value of the fish goes roughly one dollar to the pound. Natives make up a significant portion of the collectors, with the rest being commercial fishermen, who usually sell the creatures as bait or biological specimens (for dissection in classes). Rumors exist that some are shipped out to Asia and France and Portugal, where they are considered a delicacy.

Kelly Doerksen and Kathleen Feehan, environmental specialists in the Tribe's Natural Resources department, were actually on hand for the opening of this year's lamprey season on June 16 at the falls.

Though a clear lamprey presence was visible, the legendary "armloads of them" from the era of Vivette was non-existent. Doerksen and Feehan were both alarmed by the number of lamprey carcasses they saw floating around, and the fish were, as reputed, fairly easy to catch.

Doerksen offers one theory for lamprey decline, which he concluded after the venture to Willamette Falls.

"Fish ladders," he said. "They help the salmon and the trout, but not the lamprey."

The reason, obviously, is the physiology of the lamprey. While salmon and trout are famous for their ingenuity for clearing falls and other obstacles, lampreys are much less gifted. Using their sucker mouths, they inch their way around barriers, when they actually can.

Not surprisingly, the same physical attributes that limit lampreys in adulthood also curb survey efforts for biologists. As adults found in freshwater are generally spawning, counting the larvae can give a much better idea of the population. And counting the larvae is perhaps the most difficult aspect of all.

"If you find an ammocoete in a stream, you're lucky," said Feehan.

As Feehan and Doerksen explained it, since the larvae burrow into the streambed sediment, developing a comprehensive survey will be a difficult task. Difficult may be a weak word, actually.

"We are starting from ground zero," said Doerksen. "And there isn't much money for the research. It's not a high priority, really," he said. "Because only Indians eat them."

Doerksen is not the first to make that observation. Tribal members and others who express concern for the lamprey might be relieved to know that in that opinion, they've an ally.

Bill Bakke, who acts as Director of the Native Fish Society, believes Natives and only Natives, should have the right to harvest lamprey

at Willamette Falls, or for that matter anywhere in the Columbia Basin. He even sent a letter to ODFW when announcement for permits was made. The letter urged them to not allow any commercial harvest at all.

"Historically, this species has always been important to Native Americans," he said. "In fact, they are the only people who it is important to."

Bakke dislikes the idea of lampreys ending up on dissecting tables or the plates of French and Portuguese gourmards. He calls the ODFW's decision to issue permits "inadequate," hinting that the decline of lampreys could be seriously underestimated.

"If someone were to actually petition the lamprey," he said. "I think, yes, it could possibly qualify as an Endangered Species."

Instead, it lingers on ODFW's list of "Sensitive Species," which for Bakke might as well be limbo. Bakke does however, agree with the department and with many others, that before jumping to conclusions, the biggest issue confronting those who would save the lamprey is information, or lack thereof.

"It's a serious problem, I think," he continued. "But still, we need data."

Endangered or not, Tribal Cultural Specialist June Olson agreed with Bakke that regarding the lamprey, the sooner the better.

"Historically, only camas and salmon were more important staples in our diets," she said.

Like Bakke, Olson also feels the plight of the lamprey has been largely ignored and taken too lightly by ODFW.

"The outside world doesn't give much credence to the lamprey," she said. "And that's because it's not a big sport fish."

That aside though, she hopes Tribal members will learn to appreciate the maligned fish, whether they ever decide to eat one or not.

"We may be the only ones who can save it," she claimed. "The lamprey is us, a facet of our history."

"It kept us alive when other sources of food were scarce."

Perhaps Hubert Mercier summed it up best.

"If you ever get some, let me know," he said. "I'd sure like to try some again."

"If," of course, is the operative word. ■

hatching by drifting downstream to stable pools, where they burrow into the river bottoms.

The larvae subsist mainly on food particles that come their way in the form of algae and diatoms, which they filter. Following their metamorphosis into adulthood, the new lamprey make their way to the sea, often by drifting. Once in the ocean, the adult lamprey enjoy their existence as parasites, attaching to other fish, often salmon, with their infamous oral cavities and basically feed off the blood. Ocean life will generally last around three years before they feel the urge to spawn, and so the process repeats itself. Much like salmon, they seldom eat during spawning, and shrink noticeably.

Lamprey have never been high up on the food chain, but evidence suggests that their role in that particular hierarchy has been severely underestimated. One study in the mid 1980's found that Pacific Lamprey were in fact "the most abundant dietary item" for seals and sea lions. Similarly, in egg and larval stage, they were staples for scores of marine predators, including among them catfish, crawfish, minnows, rainbow trout, terns and



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