

Study finds lamprey decline continuing

By Mark Floyd

Oregon State University

CORVALLIS—A new study aimed at understanding habitat needs for Pacific lamprey in western Oregon, an important traditional food for many of the state’s Native Americans, found the once-abundant fish that is both ecologically and culturally significant prefers side channels and other lower water velocity habitats in streams.

However, because of the legacy of historic land uses in the Northwest – including human settlement and activities – these habitats are much less common than they were in the past. And that may explain why populations of lamprey have declined over the past several decades – not only in western Oregon, but throughout the Pacific Northwest.

Results of the study were recently published in the Ecology of Fresh-

water Fish.

“The lamprey declines have probably been going on for the past half century, but it wasn’t until the last 15 to 20 years that they have been recognized by many in the scientific community,” said Luke Schultz, a research assistant in Oregon State University’s Department of Fisheries and Wildlife and lead author of the study. “Today lamprey populations are about 5 percent to 10 percent of the 1960s totals at Bonneville Dam, and the story is much the same elsewhere.

“The Willamette River basin is one of the few places that still appears to have decent numbers of lamprey because of its system of sloughs and side channels. But they are facing new threats, such as introduced fish species that prey on them – especially bass – so we’ll likely be hearing more about this emerging threat in

the next few years.”

Schultz is project leader of Oregon Cooperative Fish Research Unit’s Pacific lamprey project, a joint effort between Oregon State University and the U.S. Geological Survey that is seeking to learn more about the fish and restore its habitat. Although this latest article focuses on the Willamette Basin, Schultz and his colleagues at Oregon State, the Geological Survey, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have looked at lamprey populations and habitat from the Columbia River in northeastern Oregon to southern Oregon’s Umpqua River.

The causes of Pacific lamprey decline are myriad, researchers say. Restoring their numbers will require mitigation in the form of restoring habitat to include complex channels and deep pools, and the removal of barriers that block access to spawning grounds for adult lampreys, the authors note.

“Removal or mitigation will allow lampreys to recolonize those areas,” Schultz said.

Some factors affecting the lamprey decline may be out of the researchers’ control, Schultz said, specifically ocean conditions. Lamprey require an abundance of food; ocean conditions that are favorable to salmon are usually beneficial for lampreys, as well. Rather than swimming freely, lamprey may attach themselves to large fish, or even whales, sea lions or other marine animals – and the abundant ocean prey lets them grow large.

“Pacific lamprey may spend one or two years in the ocean,” Schultz said. “They will weigh less than an ounce when they go there as juveniles, and they may grow to 30 inches in length and up to 2 pounds before they return.”

Although Pacific lampreys are anadromous, another species, the brook lamprey, only grows to a length of 6 to 7 inches and stays in fresh water for its entire lifespan of four to eight years.

It is the Pacific lamprey that researchers are focusing on because of

their one-time abundance, larger size and more prominent ecological role.

“These are really interesting animals that have historic importance in the Pacific Northwest,” Schultz said. “They can live up to about 10 years or so – about three times longer than the Coho salmon life cycle – and they are roughly six times as energy-dense as salmon, making them important prey. Because of that, I like to call them swimming sticks of butter.”

When lampreys are abundant, they reduce predation by a variety of species, especially sea lions, but also sturgeon, birds, bass and wall-eye, on juvenile salmon and steelhead. It may not be an accident that salmonid numbers have declined at the same time lamprey populations have diminished.

The research in the study has led to some habitat restoration work supported by the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission. Helping lamprey populations recover has important social significance as well as ecological importance, Schultz said.

“Lampreys were an incredibly important resource for many Northwest Tribes because they provided a source of protein in the summer months when salmon weren’t readily available,” Schultz said. “Now the only place where there is even a limited Tribal harvest is at Willamette Falls.”

“We have worked with Luke Schultz and he has been a real asset to the Tribe,” said Kelly Dirksen, Grand Ronde Fish and Wildlife Program manager. “He has trained our staff to identify lamprey redds – the nest in the gravel where lamprey deposit their eggs. Luke and his crew have also assisted us in our lamprey translocation program. He has a critical role in assessing the distribution and extent of Pacific lamprey in the Willamette Basin.

“Our project goal is to expand where lamprey can go. The translocation project has resulted in Pacific lamprey spawning in waters they have not accessed in almost 50 years. Luke and our staff were the ones to find the first lamprey redd in Fall Creek last season.” ■

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES ORDINANCE OPEN FOR COMMENT

The Tribal Council, in consultation with the Tribal Attorney’s Office, is considering amendments to the Children and Families Ordinance. The proposed amendments were given a First Reading at the Feb. 11, 2015, Tribal Council meeting. The primary purpose of the proposed amendments is to ensure grandparents are given notice of hearings in dependency cases.

The Tribal Council invites comment on the proposed amendments to the Children and Families Ordinance. For a copy of the proposed amendments, please contact the Tribal Attorney’s Office at 503-879-4664. Please send your comments to the Tribal Attorney’s Office, 9615 Grand Ronde Road, Grand Ronde, Oregon 97347, or by e-mail to legal@grandronde.org. Comments must be received by March 31, 2015. ■

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 Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____
 DOB: _____ Gender: Male / Female (circle) CTGR Tribal: Y / N (circle) If Tribal, roll# _____
 DOE _____ Place of Entry _____
 DOS: _____ Place of Separation _____
 Rank: _____ Branch: _____ Honorable: Y / N (circle)
 Deceased: Y / N (circle) DOD: _____ Place of Burial _____

*All applicants must submit a copy of their DD214. If applicant is deceased, a family member or spouse can submit a copy of their DD214. If you are a CTGR Tribal member please attach a copy of your Tribal ID. If you are non-Tribal please attach a copy of a bill/record with your name and address showing you had lived or now reside in Grand Ronde, Willamina or Sheridan. Please send application and all documents to: Grand Ronde Veterans SEB, 9615

Grand Ronde Road, Grand Ronde, OR, 97347. If you have any questions, please call Steve Bobb at 503-876-3118.

Deadline is April 30

Any applications received after April 30, 2015, will be kept on file for inclusion to the Memorial in 2016.