



STEELHEAD SOCIETY OF BC SUMMER 2019 NEWSLETTER

Hi SSBC members. Hope you're having a great summer and getting in some quality fishing time!

It has been a busy start to 2019. Highlights included congratulations to the newest Cal Woods award winner, a successful fundraiser, and a call-to-action upon Canada's House of Commons Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans.

SSBC Annual General Meeting, January 26, 2019

Member of Parliament Fin Donnelly (Port Moody-Coquitlam) was introduced as the 2019 winner of the Cal Woods Memorial Award in recognition of outstanding work in conservation efforts pertaining to wild fish and wild rivers. Fin is retiring from service as an MP, but we expect he'll continue as champion for salmonids through his work with the Rivershed Society of BC.

AGM highlight speakers included Adrian Tuohy, biologist with the Wild Fish Conservancy, and Dave Moore, General Manager of the Harrison Fisheries Authority.

Adrian Tuohy gave a thought-provoking presentation on the WFC's science-driven evaluation of pound nets (fish traps) as stock-selective fishing tools in the lower Columbia River. The traps are highly effective at capturing and sorting fish for harvest or release — and the Conservancy's data shows that survival rates on released fish are very high, with almost no mortalities. SSBC directors believe selective fishing methods could facilitate higher escapement of endangered Interior Fraser (Thompson and Chilcotin) Steelhead during their co-migration with targeted salmonids through the lower Fraser River during net fishery openings.

On a similar theme, Dave Moore provided a deep dive into several decades' worth of Thompson River steelhead data which he has accumulated over several decades of research — first for the Province of BC and most recently as GM for the Harrison Fisheries Authority. The Steelhead Society has been working with Moore and the Authority with the objective of test-piloting a fish trap research project in partnership with the Indigenous fishing communities Moore represents.

2019 SSBC Fundraiser

Thanks to our members and other generous supporters who donated items and services for our auction and raffles, the 2019 Pub Night Fundraiser was a huge success. Almost \$22,000 was raised to support SSBC programs going forward. Attendance was slightly less than previous years when the fundraiser ran in November, but many attendees said they appreciated having a bit more room to move around, inspect the auction items, and socialize. A special thanks once again to our favourite auctioneer, Brian Babcock.

Spey Clave 2019

Michael & Young Fly Shop's annual Spey Day at Cultus Lake (April 6, 2019) gives anglers a chance to test-cast a wide assortment of two-handed fly rods and lines as well as pick up some casting tips. It's also one of SSBC's cornerstone fundraisers. This year's Spey Day raffle netted almost \$3,000 for the Steelhead Society. SSBC directors want to offer a sincere thank you to M&Y's Dave O'Brien and Ryan Heitz for their generous and unflagging support for the Society over many years.

Thompson River

The federal government's decision not to formally list Interior Fraser (Thompson and Chilcotin) Steelhead as endangered species under the Species At Risk Act (SARA) was a tremendous disappointment to the Society and to generations of steelhead anglers from British Columbia and around the world. Let there be no doubt these fish are in crisis, particularly after precipitous decline in recent years. We are somewhat encouraged by a federal-provincial 'Steelhead Action Plan' which was announced July 11, 2019. The plan includes some fishing closures in both fresh and saltwater, and investments in habitat protection and restoration.

Earlier this year, the Society offered to provide seed funding for a research project led by the Harrison Fisheries Authority — an experimental pound trap in the Harrison River vicinity of the lower Fraser River system. (See Annual General Meeting item, above, for more details). The Authority submitted a proposal for government funding in support of this research through the Salmon Restoration and Innovation Fund. However, the project it was not accepted for the first round of funding announced in July. The Society remains committed to working with Harrison Fisheries Authority on research in support of Interior Fraser Steelhead and the development of a pound trap or other sustainable fishing methods.

The obstruction on the Bonaparte River at the fishway still remains a problem for migrating steelhead. About eight Steelhead were captured and transported above the fishway to Hat Creek. Department of Fisheries and Oceans will be attempting to capture Chinook salmon to move above as well. The debris in the fishway was observed earlier but attempts to fix the problem were not successful and high water made the task difficult.

Northern Branch Update

The SSBC Northern Branch made headlines recently in the Terrace Standard for its ongoing efforts to save fish and amphibians that annually become trapped in a man-made borrow pit adjacent to the Exstew River.

The borrow pit has been a chronic death trap for aquatic and streamside species since the area was excavated 40 years ago to provide fill for a BC government highway project. Fish took refuge there to escape spring freshet and became trapped when the river level fell. They were eventually picked off by predators or expired when water temperatures became too high and the pit dried up in late summer.

In recent years, Northern Branch volunteers have been working with the Department of Fisheries and Oceans on rescue missions to net and transfer the fish back to the Exstew — annually saving as many as 2,000 smolts and fry. This year was a bit of an anomaly. Spring freshet was too low to trap fish — but about 1,000 salamanders and frogs were recovered and removed prior to a long-awaited action by BC to address the problem. SSBC Northern Branch Chair Troy Peters reported that the BC Highways Ministry financed a project in August to fill in the pit and that the threat no longer exists.

Members of Parliament urged to provide SARA listing to Interior Fraser Steelhead

SSBC was asked to make a submission on June 5, 2019 to select Members of Parliament in respect of the collapse of Interior Fraser River (Thompson and Chilcotin Rivers) steelhead populations. Here's what long-time Society Director Poul Bech told the all-party committee:

Steelhead Society of BC Submission to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans, June 5, 2019

The crash of Interior Fraser Steelhead is one of the biggest fisheries stories of this century. Thompson River steelhead are, or were, among the largest, strongest, most iconic, and most famous steelhead on the planet. Anglers came from around the world to try to catch one. The Thompson River was like the Olympics of steelhead fishing.

And now it's gone, closed as it should be, and the river and the communities that depend on it are like ghost towns. Don't minimize how much of a blow to Canada's reputation this is. The world is watching our efforts, or lack of effort, to recover these endangered fish.

So how did it happen?

Two reasons: over-fishing and greatly reduced marine survival of steelhead:

(a) By-catch mortality of steelhead in chum salmon net fisheries was roughly 80% in the 1980s. In recent years by-catch was only 15 or 20%. This should be a success story but it's not.

(b) In the 1980s smolt-to-adult survival of steelhead was as high as 20%. That survival rate is now 2% or less.

At these low ocean survival rates, steelhead populations cannot endure by-catch mortality of 20% or even 10%. We're managing to extinction.

What is required NOW:

- (1) Reduce by-catch mortality to near zero. That can be done by closing chum fisheries, or preferably, by fishing with truly selective, low mortality fishing methods like pound traps instead of gill nets; and
- (2) Fund directed, solutions-oriented research to determine why steelhead ocean survival is so low. Those who argue that we already know everything infer that we're driving fish to extinction on purpose.

Management agencies face conflicted priorities and resist change. (I wish our climate was as resistant to change as government agencies).

But we have to change. These days you can't schedule a gill net opening without incidentally impacting one or more threatened salmon stocks. The increasing number of weak stocks itself is evidence that status-quo management has failed. But DFO continues to protect the status quo.

Remember the headline in the Vancouver Sun on Feb 25th of this year? *"DFO buried scientists' concerns about endangered steelhead, BC deputy minister says."* The story goes on: *"Fisheries and Oceans Canada suppressed elements of a scientific assessment that could have led to stronger protections for a*

steelhead population on the brink of extinction, according to a letter written by BC deputy minister of the environment Mark Zacharias. DFO unilaterally changed the conclusions to “support status-quo commercial salmon harvesting...”

The only way to change the status quo is SARA listing.

Many focus on the economic costs of listing but fail to consider the economic benefits of recovery. Here's how listing helps:

- (1) It motivates fishers to use proven, truly selective fishing techniques such as pound traps, which could almost eliminate by-catch mortality of steelhead, sturgeon, and weak salmon stocks. Overall total allowable salmon catch could increase, and trapped salmon could command a higher price per fish given their exceptional condition, with virtually no lactic acid build up. So more fish and more money per fish.
- (2) Selective fishing is key to the recovery of not only Thompson and Chilcotin steelhead, but also to sturgeon, weak salmon stocks, and Southern Resident Killer Whales. The recovery of these stocks would have huge economic benefit.
- (3) Net fisheries are difficult to monitor, and catch data is often suspect. Traps are easy to monitor and could facilitate accurate stock assessments and new research.
- (4) Traps could become tourist attractions and give consumers a new opportunity to purchase truly fresh Fraser River salmon,
- (5) Any economic costs directly related to listing are short-term and are low relative to the costs of not listing and thereby forgoing recovery options.
- (6) Some impediments to recovery are political. Listing would depoliticize steelhead recovery.
- (7) Not least, recovery would benefit upriver First Nations who have stopped fishing for steelhead, and perhaps return the recreational fishery to something approaching former glory.

We actually can have our cake and eat it too. But we have to embrace change.

Of course, all these things could theoretically happen without listing. But they won't.

I'd like to close with a quote from a letter to then Minister Romeo LeBlanc from William Shatner of Star Trek fame:

“In every lifetime, a person of influence and power, if they are fortunate, has the opportunity to do something great, to truly make a difference in the world, and create a lasting legacy. What will be yours? Previous Ministers have missed their chance; yours lies before you. Take decisive action now to ensure the survival of endangered Thompson steelhead. The world is waiting.”

I'm waiting too. Thanks for listening.

Poul Bech
Director

Steelhead Society of BC