

Bureaucracy's bad decisions share guilt for depleting wild salmon

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VANCOUVER -- Too many wild salmon have been killed for far too long in British Columbia.

The impacts of resource development, urban growth, agricultural practices and changing ocean conditions all play a part in the devastating decline of salmon stocks.

But the simple truth is, salmon runs have been driven to the point of extinction mostly by hooks, lines, nets - and chronic mismanagement.

What is shocking is that this overharvest has continued in the face of growing evidence that Pacific salmon are getting wiped out in many rivers on the west coast of North America.

This year salmon fisheries have largely been banned in California, Oregon and Washington, and in B.C. there are widespread restrictions.

There are so few salmon expected to return to B.C. rivers this summer and fall that aboriginal bands have been asked to ration their traditional catches.

But still the overfishing of stocks continues, driven by political and economic forces that strive for a maximum harvest. That was made clear last week in a report by an independent science panel that was struck to look at how the magnificent salmon fishery on the Skeena River is being managed.

The study was needed because in a rush to catch large runs of sockeye, the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans was allowing commercial On the Skeena, two artificial spawning channels have created a sockeye run of around three million fish. But in harvesting that prolific run of sockeye, commercial nets have been killing off smaller populations of coho, chinook, pink salmon and steelhead.

The panel said ocean harvests of salmon on the north coast have to be

cut by 50 per cent if the Skeena's diverse wild stocks are to be saved.

Don't expect that to happen any time soon, however, because if there is one thing DFO is reluctant to do, it's reduce the catch of wild salmon.

As early as 1960, DFO managers were worried that too many commercial boats were chasing too few fish on the West Coast. In 1970, a series of commercial-license buybacks began, with Ottawa eventually forking over \$288-million to retire 2,668 boats. That cut the fleet by 43 per cent - and it should have gone a long way to reducing the number of fish killed.

But it didn't.

It turns out that even while it was buying out commercial boats, the federal government was allowing more nets to be put into the water - by shifting the commercial catch to native fishermen. The buyback was not a conservation plan then, but a strategy to facilitate treaty settlements.

A fisheries working group was struck in the early 90s to look at how the government could shift the commercial catch to natives, using the Nisga'a treaty, which included a salmon allocation agreement, as a model.

The report, stamped "Confidential," has only recently come to light. It states that to replicate the Nisga'a deal provincewide, the government would have to buy out 1,490 commercial fishing licences, which would allow it to shift 35 per cent of the commercial catch to aboriginal fishermen.

In 1996 the government bought out nearly 800 commercial licences. In 1998-2000 more than 1,400 more were purchased. During the same period aboriginal fisheries have been expanded.

The buyback should have led to a substantial decline in the catch. But it didn't, because the non-native, ocean-based fishery was in effect being shifted into the native river fishery, and because the remaining commercial boats became increasingly efficient.

So the capacity of the fleet to catch salmon in the ocean didn't drop, even while the native fisheries in rivers grew stronger.

More than 3,000 jobs were lost in fish processing as the fleet downsized, families that had fished for generations were forced out of business, and coastal towns withered. There was also a lot of social turmoil caused in the conflict between native and non-native fishermen.

Lost in all this was the sad fact that conservation targets weren't being met.

And that brings us to today - where there are still too many nets being set for too few fish. The overharvest of wild salmon continues even as stocks plummet. The government is continuing to buy back licences and appears to be shifting an even larger share of the catch to natives. The Tsawwassen are getting a per-person allocation of salmon six times higher than the Nisga'a got. If all the Fraser River bands get a similar deal, there won't be any fish for the commercial fleet.

The important question, however, isn't whether the shift in allocation is fair to the fishermen. The question is, is it fair to the fish?

The obvious answer, given the sad state of stocks, is no.