

Salmon runs, global warming as clear as mud

Fish farms can no longer be linked to sockeye's demise

BY JON FERRY, THE PROVINCE SEPTEMBER 8, 2010



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Yesterday's closure of the Fraser River sockeye fishery -- along with accusations that it's premature and that too many salmon have been spared -- is a tad ironic, to say the least.

For years, we've been led to believe by wild-eyed environmentalists and their media cheerleaders that the science is clear, that wild salmon on our coast are on the verge of extinction and that sea lice and disease from fish farms are to blame.

Last November, when Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced an inquiry into the apparent decline in

B.C. sockeye stocks, high-profile activist Alexandra Morton was quoted as saying "our sockeye are at the moment of no return."

The sockeye, however, have returned. In full force.

This year's Fraser River run, numbering a projected 34 million fish, is being hailed as the largest since 1913.

Bargain-hunters have been scooping up freezers-full of fish from off the Steveston dock. And grizzled commercial fishermen have been complaining there are scads of sockeye still to be netted.

So perhaps it's time the Harper-ordered inquiry, now being conducted by Justice Bruce Cohen, changed its mandate from one of investigating the decline in B.C. salmon stocks to probing the increase in them, instead.

Myself, I think we know very little about the reasons for the puzzling yearly changes in salmon returns. In fact, I think we -- and that includes virtually every organization from the federal fisheries department to the David Suzuki Foundation -- know almost as little about them as we do about global warming.

Dr. Carl Walters of the UBC Fisheries Centre, who's spent more than 40 years studying coastal salmon populations, told me Tuesday he thinks the public has been fed a whole bunch of

misinformation about the state of sockeye and pink stocks.

"Actually, our best evidence is that they're very close to their historical peak levels and have been for over a decade," he said.

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Certainly, Walters doesn't think those much-hated B.C. fish farms have anything to do with the ups and downs in wild salmon returns.

My view is that it's largely emotion driving the predictions of the doom-and-gloom zealots -- at least when it's not the ready availability of grants from wealthy U.S. foundations.

Former fish-farm consultant Vivian Krause noted Tuesday that this year's bumper sockeye run disproves claims that sea lice from fish farms are destroying B.C.'s wild salmon.

"I think we need to hit the reset button on the salmon-farming controversy," she said. "We need to reboot."

Yes, we need to address this controversy with far less self-righteous conviction, far greater humility . . . and a far more open mind. The Cohen commission, which holds a public forum next Monday in Steveston (at 6:30 p.m. at Steveston-London Secondary School), gives us a perfect chance to do this.

For too long, we seem to have been fed a bunch of lies, or at least half-truths, about the salmon-farming issue.

The science surrounding it is not settled, not by a long way. Pretending it is won't make it so.

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