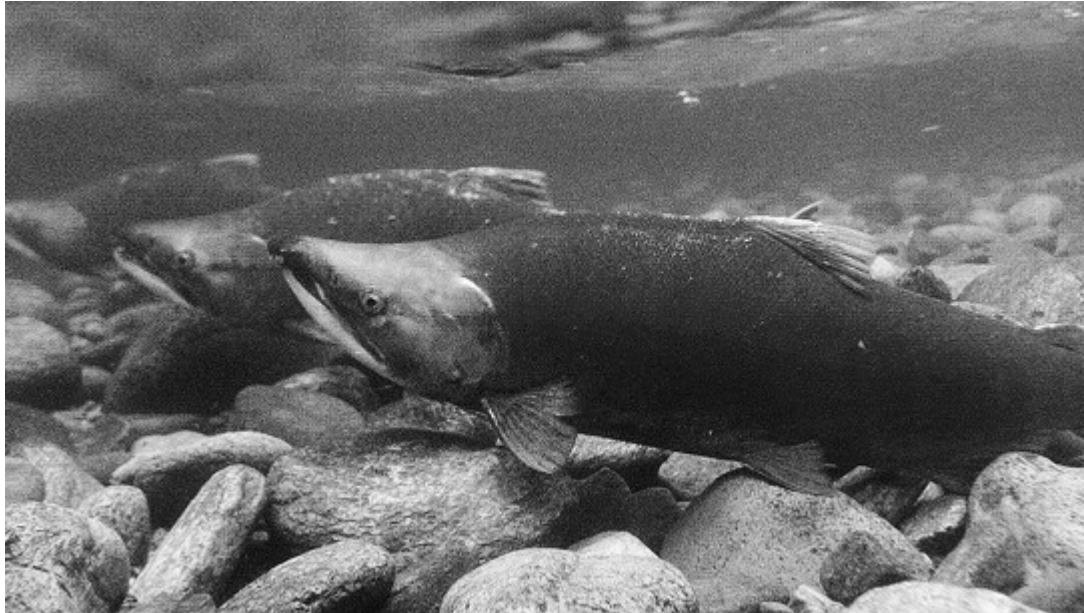


The Taku is an opportunity to conserve wild salmon

By Mark Angelo and Guido Rahr, Special to the Sun March 31, 2010



Spawning sockeye: Their needs are integral to the Taku's economic, ecological and cultural health.

Photograph by: Ian Smith, Vancouver Sun, Special to the Sun

Wild salmon need wild rivers to thrive. That's a simple idea, but it has become a lot more complicated in modern times because so much salmon habitat in so many Pacific coast watersheds has been forsaken for industrial development, hydro power, mining, logging, agriculture, and other activities. From California's Sacramento River north to the Klamath, from the Columbia and Snake River system to British Columbia's mighty Fraser, wild salmon -- once in storied numbers -- are in decline because the watersheds that give them life are less wild.

Less wild usually means less cold, clear flowing water and fewer of the meandering channels and floodplain wetlands essential for fish spawning and rearing. It means more disturbances including dams, pollution and silt; quite the opposite of what salmon need.

Salmon can be impacted in other ways as well; through commercial harvest pressures and conflicts with fish farming. But if critical freshwater habitat is lost, other management issues become irrelevant.

Canadians and Americans love wild salmon. They are an iconic resource virtually defining our shared Pacific domains and heritage, and our governments have invested heavily to prevent salmon runs from disappearing.

Consequently, salmon conservation strategies in both the U.S. and Canada often focus on long-term efforts, at public expense, aimed at rehabilitating streams, removing some of our older dams (or at least helping fish get around them) and reducing pollution and siltation.

However, with financial resources for such undertakings already strained in today's economy, combined with a sober recognition that even the most successful restoration outcomes may return only a small part of the salmon bounty we squandered, saving the best of what's left is also imperative.

For northwest British Columbia and southeast Alaska, the Taku is the best international watershed left for salmon, hosting robust populations of the five Pacific salmon species. A multimillion-dollar commercial and sport fishing industry depends on the Taku, as does a less quantifiable but equally significant First Nations and native American cultural connection of countless generations.

And just as salmon are dependent on the Taku's life-giving waters, so too is the watershed's extraordinary biodiversity -- grizzly bears, bald eagles, sea lions and forest primeval-- dependent on salmon as a food and nutrient source. Research has demonstrated that the marine-derived nutrients salmon deliver far into the Interior via natal watersheds benefit nearly 200 plant and animal species, ranging from the smallest of invertebrates to the largest old-growth trees.

Encompassing almost 19,000 square kilometres, the Taku watershed remains wild; fully intact, without roads and other development.

It is, in short, a quintessential wild salmon stronghold with an ecological value matched only by its spectacular grandeur. The question, now, is will it stay that way?

As international attention drifts from the Winter Olympics in southern British Columbia, it is focusing farther north in the province. The majority of the Taku watershed lies within B.C., and the provincial government is engaged with the Taku River Tlingit First Nation in developing a land-use plan that will dictate the future of the watershed. The process seeks a tenuous balance between those seeking protection of the Taku's life-giving waterways and pressures to open the region to roads, mining and other development.

Wild salmon advocates from both sides of the border are urging government planners to be visionary and adopt a precautionary approach to Taku land use.

The needs of wild salmon, so integral to the region's ecological, economic and cultural health, must be considered foremost, and safeguarded.

The alternative would be to, once again, witness habitat loss coupled with a declining fishery and the expenditure of millions of dollars toward elusive solutions to bring back a vestige of what we gave away.

With the Taku, we still have a chance to get it right. No expenditures are needed and no work is required to capitalize on one of North America's best salmon conservation opportunities.

All that is needed is the foresight and wisdom to recognize that in keeping the Taku healthy and wild, we are saving wild salmon.

Mark Angelo is chairman of the Pacific Fisheries Resource Conservation Council in Vancouver and of the Rivers Institute at the B.C. Institute of Technology. Guido Rahr is executive director of the Wild Salmon Center in Portland, Ore.

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