

Salmon's bittersweet return



B.C.'s fishery has been so devastated by low returns and accompanying moratoria that even record years are bittersweet.

Kevin Libin

National Post · Saturday, Aug. 28, 2010

The Fraser River is brimming with sockeye as it hasn't in a century. Estimates are that 30 million salmon are scrambling their way to the place from whence they once came, the largest return since 1913. B.C.'s fishermen might be delighted, you would expect. Many are not.

The fishing is good. In a 32-hour frenzy near Vancouver this week, nets bulged with fat sockeye. But the industry is scarcely equipped to handle it anymore: There were shortages of ice, totes and freezer space while processing plants turned away boatloads of salmon for lack of processing capacity and available workers.

Prices are swooning. B.C.'s fishery has been so devastated by low returns and accompanying moratoria in the past decade that even record years are bittersweet. And the blame, say many, lies not with global warming, sea lice or any other oft-suspected abstruse scientific phenomena. Rather, it is mismanagement by, and conflicting political interests -- clashing agendas involving First Nations policies, environmentalists and industry -- within none other than the same Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) that oversaw the disastrous collapse of the East Coast's northern cod fisheries.

"We have fought them tooth and nail. We have fought them politically, we have fought them in the courts, and we have lost every single battle," says Phil Eidsvik, a Vancouver-area fisherman and executive director of the B.C. Fisheries Survival Coalition.

"DFO got their way on everything in the past 20 years and what did we get? We have a fishery that's closed three out of four years."

The department of Fisheries and Oceans Canada did not see this return coming. It knew only that there was a 50-50 chance the salmon run would be higher than seven to 10 million. Last year, it gave the same odds the return would be under 10 million. Just 1.5

million turned up, raising alarms that the stocks were ruined and opening the door for activists, most prominently the David Suzuki Foundation, to blame fish farms for allegedly diseasing the waters, and the rest of us for warming the climate. At the very least, the department has demonstrated that it has far from a solid understanding of factors influencing salmon returns.

This is what the Cohen Commission was ostensibly intended to find out. The federal inquiry into the Fraser salmon runs, headed by B.C. justice Bruce Cohen, was launched by the Conservative government in the wake of last year's sorry return, but it was something Tory MP John Cummins, a commercial fisherman himself, had been pressing for, for years, having watched the commercial fishery dwindle: Before this run, four years of the past decade were essentially shut off to commercial salmon fishermen.

The commission has only just begun its work, but already Mr. Cummins has lost faith in it, believing the investigation is compromised.

Mr. Cohen has structured his commission to investigate "scientific" questions pertaining to the health of sockeye stocks -- climate change, parasites, pollution and the like. What the commission should focus on, insists Mr. Cummins, is the way the DFO has managed the fishery. This is impossible now, he says, because so many of the experts the commission will rely on have direct professional links to the department itself. It's the reason, he believes, that a judicial commission is devoting so much effort to scientific questions it can never hope to solve.

"This inquiry is not [supposed to be] about science, it's about management ... It's not like you're going to do the science report to end all science reports," he says. "Their only interest is to cover one another's ass. They have no interest in a positive outcome of this and they never did."

Besides, claims blaming spreading industrialization for the years of low returns are awfully hard to square with the fact there are more salmon at this moment pushing their way up the Fraser River than at any time since the days of the Model T, Mr. Eidsvik notes.

Still, environmentalists are doing their best to defend their theories. Jeffrey Young, an aquatic biologist at the David Suzuki Foundation, this week wrote to the Vancouver Sun to insist "one good day for the stock market doesn't mean the end of a recession," and that "Fishing, habitat loss, warmer waters due to climate change and parasite and disease impacts from open net-pen salmon farms are still major threats." Alexandra Morton, the prominent B.C. environmentalist and anti-fish-farm activist, wrote on her

website "the Fraser sockeye have erased 100 years of abuse, greed and negligence and are offering us a second chance."

Yet, if anything unites environmentalists, capitalists and scientists, it's an increasing distrust of the way the DFO has managed the salmon stocks and the commercial

fishery. Commercial fishermen blame the department for indulging aboriginals, refusing to enforce rules against poaching for fear of the political headaches that might bring.

Even Carl Walters, a professor at the University of British Columbia's Fisheries Centre and a prominent researcher generally credited with being behind much of the ministry's scientific methods, says he believes the DFO is unduly influenced by environmentalist groups.

Dennis Brown, author of *Salmon Wars*, a former fishery advisor to the B.C. government and former officer of the United Fishermen and Allied Workers' Union, thinks the instability of salmon returns is actually the department's fault. Government fish planners, he says, have for years been pursuing what's known as a "weak stock strategy": essentially curtailing commercial hauls to protect a few subgroups of sockeye that aren't showing up in large numbers in certain lakes (Cultus Lake is one main area of concern). He says the result has backfired: The DFO has spared too many fish, and healthy lakes are being choked beyond their carrying capacity leading to weaker spawns.

"It's the fisherman's mantra: Don't rebuild the stocks by just shutting down commercial fisheries; rebuild the stocks by targeted enhancement programs where your weak stocks are, and stay more or less with a normal harvest on the healthy stocks," he says. "But the politics of everything in recent years is all tangled up where we went from, on average, 70% to 80% harvest rate to where in the past decade we've been down below 30% on average."

Barry Rosenberger, area director for the fisheries department, in B.C., points out that this overloading theory was tested by the DFO's independent advisory body just a few years ago, and it found no evidence to back it up. Overall, he says, the department's done a good job managing the salmon stocks: since the international salmon treaty handed responsibility for B.C. salmon from a joint U.S.-Canadian body to Ottawa in 1985, he says, the fish have seen better returns than in the '50s, '60s and '70s.

But the DFO's priority is ensuring the sustainability of the fish stocks above all. And there are, he allows, countless variables -- from ocean temperatures to predator movements-- that occur during the salmon's four-year cycle about whose effects the department still knows very little about.

This week, fisheries minister Gail Shea said that, if anything, the record salmon run proves "Mother Nature is still in charge."

Whoever's in charge, B.C.'s commercial fishery seems as unhealthy as ever. Where once 6,000 commercial fishing boats plied B.C.'s coastal waters there are now just roughly a third of that, while years of bounty, like this one, only expose how weak the industry is. Scientists may have no shortage of outstanding and interesting questions to pursue about the lives of salmon. As they wait, however, the lives of B.C.'s commercial fishermen grow increasingly unsustainable.

klibin@nationalpost.com

Read more: <http://www.nationalpost.com/todays-paper/Salmon+bittersweet+return/3453731/story.html#ixzz0yIDyjDMr>