



Salmon reminder

August 29, 2013

By [Les Palmer](#)

We Alaskans occasionally need to be reminded of how fortunate we are to live where salmon still have a place to come home to.

In Washington, where I was born and raised, salmon abundance has declined dramatically over the past several decades. When people finally realized what had happened, lots of them blamed “overfishing.” They were probably partly right, but they should’ve been looking in the mirror. In the name of “progress,” they had ruined much of the state’s salmon habitat.

It didn’t happen overnight. Dams, farming, logging, road construction and urban development slowly made the environment unfriendly to fish. An estimated one-third of the wetlands in Oregon and Washington have been lost. According to studies, some 80 to 90 percent of the historic riparian habitat required by Pacific salmon no longer exists in the western states. Places where salmon once bred and reared no longer provide what they need to survive, let alone thrive.

Young people in the today’s Northwest can’t possibly feel the same way about salmon that Alaskans feel. The presence of salmon in Alaskan waters is why many of us came here and chose to live here. Salmon symbolize Alaska far more better than any bear, dog sled or northern lights.

Comparing the difference in how Alaskans and Washingtonians perceive pink salmon is telling. Nothing against eating a pink, but I can’t remember the last time I did. By the time pinks are available, my freezer is full of sockeyes, and the silver run is starting. What’s more, when pinks are biting, it’s hard to get through them to catch silvers. Who needs pinks?

I’m far from alone in my attitude. According to statewide harvest numbers for 2011, the latest year for which the count is available, anglers in Alaska harvested about 575,000 silvers, 535,000 sockeyes and 128,000 kings. Though pinks are by far the most numerous Pacific salmon, anglers chose to take home only 95,000 of them.

It’s an entirely different deal in Washington. In odd-numbered years, such as 2013, pink salmon return in large numbers to spawn, and people turn out in droves to catch them. Earlier this month, some Fred Meyer stores in Washington were running an ad that shouted, “SAVE now on Humpy gear at Freddys!” Families were sunning themselves on the banks of the Skagit River in Mount Vernon while hoping for a humpy to bite. In 2009, the latest year for which numbers are available, anglers in Washington harvested about 349,000 silvers, 8,000 sockeyes, 124,000 kings and 558,000 pinks.

In other words, people in Washington don't catch and release pink salmon, as many Alaskans do. They eat them. The sport-fishing pink harvest in Washington is usually three to five times greater than it is in Alaska. This isn't because there are more anglers, but because pinks are so often the most exciting game in town.

Consider silvers and sockeyes. In 2009, while anglers in Alaska were harvesting 665,000 silver salmon — and releasing thousands more — anglers in Washington harvested only 349,000. Anglers in Alaska harvested 465,000 sockeyes, while in Washington, they took only 8,000.

If we Alaskans truly want to continue to have strong salmon runs, we'll have to make compromises that people in Washington chose not to make. We'll have to forego some logging and mining opportunities. We'll have to pay more for electric power. We shouldn't be able to farm or manufacture where it's necessary to take water from spawning and rearing streams. We'll have to pay more to develop land and to build roads in ways that don't spoil fish habitat. And we'll need to stay constantly vigilant about anything that threatens fish habitat.

Consider yourself reminded.

Les Palmer can be reached at les.palmer@rocketmail.com.