

COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE

Wild salmon are Alaska's real heritage so we need to start saving them

By Virgil Umphenour, Chief Karma Ulvi, and Gale K. Vick

Tough times require tough conversations. We need to talk about saving Alaska's wild salmon heritage. Bycatch, intercept, climate change are all taking a toll — and so are hatcheries.

Wild salmon are Alaska's legacy; hatchery salmon are not. This distinction creates confusion in management, marketing and harvesting because we don't universally acknowledge the difference. A recent op-ed (Anchorage Daily News, Jan. 25, 2024) illustrates that point.

Hatchery-bred salmon are genetically distinct from wild salmon. The State recognizes the need for separation but this is an almost impossible task.

Hatchery salmon, released into the ocean, compete with wild salmon for time, space and food in the marine environment. Hatchery salmon

straying into inter-tidal areas and wild streams threaten the genetic diversity of wild stocks. Alaska's PNP (private nonprofit) hatchery salmon system was created to augment wild salmon for commercial reasons. Separate from sports hatcheries, PNPs depend on enhancement taxes, cost recovery and loans for the immense cost of operations.

When the Alaska Hatchery Act was passed in 1974, we had Territorial history but we did not have the ecological knowledge of more recent decades telling us that adding more fish into the ocean may be exacerbating wild salmon declines.

Mixed stock fishing of wild and hatchery salmon may sustain thousands of Alaskans and non-Alaskans, but that's no comfort to the thousands of Alaskans who have lost their traditional access to wild salmon. Their pain is searing and unconscionable and it has a downward trajectory. Chinook have been in a statewide decline that

has closed or reduced fishing opportunity everywhere. In the AYK (Arctic-Yukon-Kuskokwim), wild chum and coho have lost abundance to the point where virtually all fishing has stopped. Sockeye are getting smaller.

This deeply threatens the food security and cultural well-being of thousands of Native and non-Native residents from the headwaters of the Yukon River in Canada to the Bering Sea and in the Gulf of Alaska, indeed all creatures who are salmon dependent.

We must provide for Alaskans first before we feed the world. Our state constitution is clear that we are to manage our natural resources for the residents of Alaska. We have a rigorous Sustainable Salmon Policy (SSP) that defines the principles we should use to guide management but are too often ignored. The burden should be on proving that our management practices, including hatcheries, do no harm to our wild salmon populations.

If we don't address roots causes in wild salmon declines, we could all be eating hatchery pinks because wild stocks will be extirpated. We can't just blame climate. We can't "grow" our way back to wild salmon abundance. And we can't ignore the growing evidence of negative hatchery impacts.

Salmon runs have fluctuated over millennia but in the last 150 years we have been in a regime of human impact that has resulted in the extinction of entire wild salmon runs in both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. There are many decline factors, including fragmented management systems and our unwillingness to systemically examine our commitment to protecting wild stocks.

Reducing the excessive number of hatchery pinks is a start. Board of Fish proposals offer incremental changes but we cannot fully address these differences in sound bites. We need a sustained robust dialogue with stakeholders and scientists

from Alaska, Canada and the Pacific Northwest.

Are we going to protect wild salmon stocks or depend on hatcheries for the future? This has not worked well for the Pacific Northwest. We cannot make the same mistakes that have compromised or wiped out wild salmon elsewhere. We hold the options for making the difficult decisions about protecting our true wild salmon heritage.

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Forever: Our Ways of Life" is a bit of an homage to those home-

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