

Efforts under way to remove derelict fishing gear from Nooksack River

KIE RELYEA - THE BELLINGHAM HERALD
June 11, 2010

Tribal and wildlife crews have removed at least two dozen lost and abandoned gillnets from the Nooksack River, after members of a conservation and recreational fishing group documented the locations of 62 "derelict" gear.

The effort involves the Lummi and Nooksack tribes as well as the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.

The state agency started the project after receiving a letter in March from the state chapter of the Coastal Conservation Association, which also provided GPS coordinates for the nets and expressed concern that the left-behind gear could continue catching fish when they shouldn't.

"The number of derelict nets and the length of time they spent in the water really tells us we need to focus on solutions to ensure this doesn't occur again in any of our rivers," said Marcus Schumacher, president of the North Sound Chapter of CCA in Bellingham.

"Whether there were one or 62 derelict nets, the concern is that derelict gear and any fishing out of season indiscriminately poses a threat to wild fish and other marine mammals."

Fish and wildlife officials also contacted the Lummi and Nooksack tribes, who fish on the river.

"Both of the tribes are taking the issue very seriously. Like us, they realize it's in everybody's best interest to remove this derelict gear," said Capt. Bill Hebner, who oversees enforcement for northern Puget Sound for fish and wildlife.

CCA members said they wanted to bring the same kind of attention to derelict fishing gear in rivers that has been given to lost and abandoned gear in the waters off Whatcom County and the Puget Sound. Since 2002, divers working under contract with the Northwest Straits Initiative have recovered thousands of fishing nets and crab pots left behind by commercial and recreational fishers because of bad weather, mistakes or mechanical failures. The gear had snared and killed marine life in the Puget Sound, some for decades.

The removal effort by the Northwest Straits Initiative got a big boost last June with \$4.6 million from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

In the Nooksack River, North Sound CCA members and other recreational anglers in Whatcom County first noticed the nets during a river float in November. In February, they again floated the Nooksack - covering 40 miles - to gather GPS coordinates for the 62 derelict nets, "which is way more than I ever thought would be in a river that size," said Bryan Irwin, executive director for the state CCA.

The river is home to spring stock of chinook salmon, steelhead and bull trout, all of which are listed as threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act. Sturgeon also are found in the Nooksack and while they're not listed under the ESA, they are listed under the Canadian Species At Risk Act. Sturgeon from the Nooksack have been found in the Fraser River in British Columbia.

Hebner said crews have not been able to find all 62 nets. They

may have been washed away during storms or hidden under rising water levels in the Nooksack. He said that of the nets recovered so far, three were able to catch fish and two of those nets had been set illegally.

The Lummi and Nooksacks have treaty fishing rights under the 1974 Boldt decision, and they are the only ones legally allowed to have nets, specifically gillnets, in the river. A representative of Lummi Nation said the tribe regularly patrols the river to look at the nets. "We take out gear every year. We are dealing with it," said Merle Jefferson, who oversees natural resources for Lummi Nation. A Nooksack tribe representative could not be reached for comment.

Jefferson and Hebner said it shouldn't be assumed that all the abandoned nets belong to tribal members; they may have been illegally set in the Nooksack by non-Indians. Still, Hebner said most of the untended nets found so far are from lawful tribal fishery - and the gear may have been lost, stolen or otherwise abandoned. That was the view shared by Philip Anderson, director of the state Department of Fish and Wildlife, who responded to Irwin in an April 5 letter.

Anderson also noted that such gear wasn't an issue in the Nooksack alone. "The observations of the derelict gear your members observed on the Nooksack River is not unique, it plagues many of our Western Washington rivers," he wrote. "We need not only a system for reporting, but we also need funding to facilitate the work associated with removal of the gear."

Hebner is working to set up such a system for reporting and removing left-behind nets from the Nooksack River. Launching that project would involve the co-managers of the river - the Lummi and Nooksacks - and could involve a host of other stakeholders such as the CCA, state Department of

Ecology and the Nooksack Salmon Enhancement Association. "I think we can do a better job. I'll say that right from the get-go," Hebner said.

TO LEARN MORE

Report abandoned fishing gear in the Nooksack River by going online to derelictgear.org or calling (360) 428-1084.

The website has been set up for efforts, led by the Northwest Straits Initiative, to remove old and abandoned fishing gear in the marine waters of Puget Sound, including offshore in Whatcom County. But initiative representatives said the database now can be used to mark the location of derelict fishing gear in fresh water.

Read more: <http://www.bellinghamherald.com/2010/06/10/1473462/efforts-under-way-to-remove-derelict.html#ixzz0qYUkJwdC>