

Gillnets in rivers could pose major damage to resources

The effort to remove derelict fishing gear in Puget Sound has improved with recent federal funding, but there is just as much concern about abandoned nets in river systems too.

By Mark Yuasa

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Derelict nets found in the Nooksack River. outdoor notebook Credit to Coastal Conservation Association (CCA).

The effort to remove derelict fishing gear in Puget Sound has improved with recent federal funding, but there is just as much concern about abandoned nets in river systems too.

"It is a well publicized problem with derelict nets in Puget Sound, but the situation in rivers like the Nooksack was an eye opener," said Bryan Irwin, Executive Director of the Coastal Conservation Association (CCA) Pacific Northwest Chapter.

These "ghost nets" that often go unnoticed on the water's surface are known to kill hundreds of thousands fish, shellfish, marine mammals and other wildlife.

In November of 2009 and this past February, members of the CCA's North Sound Chapter and other recreational anglers in Whatcom County documented about 62 derelict gillnets in the Nooksack River. In turn the organization contacted state Fish and Wildlife, which was aware of the situation happening in local rivers.

"They (state Fish and Wildlife) knew about the problem, but haven't been able to find a funding source like the one in Puget Sound with the Northwest Straits Commission Initiative (which is funded by a \$4.6 million grant through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act),"

Irwin said.

Irwin points out the difference between the nets in Puget Sound, and those in the rivers are they're in a more confined area and could pose a lot more damage to the resources.

Two tribes the Nooksack and Lummi Nation who fish the Nooksack River were notified of the situation.

"The reason why we got involved is the CCA reported to us that nets were in the river," said Jeff June, vice president/treasurer of the Natural Resources Consultants, a group contracted by the commission to remove nets in Puget Sound marine areas.

"We have an Internet reporting system and it showed up in our database," June said. "We can't address nets in the rivers (because) we don't have any (funded) money to pull that gear out of the water with our divers."

"They (Nooksack Tribe) drifted their section of the river, and told us which nets were taken out so we removed them from our database," June said. "They did a good job of getting the nets out."

Capt. Bill Hebner, the head of state Fish and Wildlife enforcement's North Puget Sound division was in contact with the Lummi Tribe to work with them to remove nets in their river section.

Full-time dive boats hired by the Northwest Straits Initiative have cleared more than 1,200 nets in Puget Sound and other marine areas since 2002. The funding will allow them to remove about 3,000 lost nets in local marine areas.

Wildlife experts believe these abandoned nets and more than 14,000 crab pots have killed or trapped more than 30,000 sea creatures.

"A lot of folks in fish advocacy know the challenges they face, but it is the general public that didn't notice or understand the damages these nets had caused until it was publicized recently in the media," Irwin said.

"Now that they understand we need to get the message across that it is

also happening in the rivers as well."