

Columbia River Smelt: Vital link in food chain threatened

Each spring, for thousands of years, bountiful runs of smelt -- a small herring-like fish extremely rich in oil -- migrated from the ocean back to the lower Columbia basin to spawn. During this long history, smelt runs to the Cowlitz, Grays, Kalama, Lewis and Sandy rivers were vital to the survival of lower Columbia River tribes, providing food and a valuable source of fat for trade. Over the last century commercial harvests have grown to millions of pounds annually. This valuable fish is also a crucial link in the food chain for dozens of marine species including salmon, birds, seals, sea lions and various whale species. Ironically, vast schools of Columbia smelt likely provided food for the seals and sea lions that now travel far up river to feast on salmon and sturgeon instead.

The 1930's saw the start of large scale smelt harvests and by 1992 this abundant resource yielded a commercial harvest of 3.7 million pounds. Recreational and tribal smelt dippers likely took a similar catch that year. Surprisingly, just one year later, the commercial catch plunged to a meager 500,000 pounds. Continuing the trend, the annual catch plummeted to around 10,000 pounds for the last five years. While these startling figures suggest a sudden uncontrollable cause, they conceal a more obvious and important factor: harvest management. During years of strong runs, harvest was curtailed only by market saturation and depressed prices. During years of low return --- when the population was most vulnerable and the danger of over fishing was highest --- demand greatly exceeded supply, causing the price to soar and fueling the tendency to overharvest.

When harvest management fails to account for such market factors and protect a resource when it is most vulnerable, concerned citizens must resort to the Endangered Species Act to trigger the alarm. On March 16, NOAA acted to stop this catastrophic decline of Columbia River smelt by accepting the 2007 ESA petition of the Cowlitz Indian Tribe. The agency listed all smelt populations from northern California to the Canadian border as threatened and also declared a closely related population in B.C.'s Fraser River as severely depressed.

While stated causes for the population decline are conjectural, they appear to be related to "unfavorable ocean conditions" -- giving the impression that recovery is beyond our immediate control. What we can and should do immediately is end all harvest of smelt. Yet managers continue to set the seasons -- even this year -- citing their value for gaining information on the population. Any data gathered during this period of low abundance is clearly outweighed by the risks to a species on the brink of extinction. We know that significant numbers of smelt also die as bycatch in coastal shrimp trawls. Managers should be monitoring these and other relevant off shore fisheries carefully and demand that every reasonable step is taken to protect and recover this vital species.

Columbia River Smelt now joins our 13 species of wild salmon and steelhead listed as threatened or endangered under the ESA. Let's hope it is not too late.