

Salmon making remarkable comeback in South Okanagan

Sockeye and chinook are swimming in Skaha Lake for first time in 60 years

By DON PLANT

The Okanagan Saturday

A little help from humans and Mother Nature has produced the Okanagan's best salmon fishery in decades.

The salmon run has rebounded to the point that sockeye and chinook are swimming in Skaha Lake for the first time in 60 years. Managers estimate 3,000 sockeye entered the lake this year by jumping past the Okanagan Falls outlet dam.

"They've made their own way," said Howie Wright, fisheries manager for the Okanagan Nation Alliance. "We'll be out on the spawning grounds in October to get an estimate of how many made it above and spawned successfully."

A smaller number of chinook made it past the dam this year. They were spawning in Shingle Creek east of Penticton early this month and in late August. Two carcasses and fewer than 20 spawners have been spotted in the

creek, Wright said.

The last record of salmon making it this far up the Okanagan lake system was in the 1950s. Sockeye have always populated Osoyoos Lake at the U.S. border, but it's been a long time since their numbers were this high.

Wright estimates up to 130,000 sockeye made it over Wells Dam on the Columbia River in Northern Washington. He predicts as many as 100,000 of them will spawn in the river channel above Oliver this fall.

The fishery is so healthy, the Okanagan Nation Alliance (representing eight Indian bands in the Okanagan, Similkameen and Washington) started selling Valley sockeye last year. Members have harvested 700 salmon for commercial sale this summer and plan to catch another 250 for smoked products in the coming weeks.

The abundance has allowed the alliance and Fisheries and Oceans Canada to open a small recreational fishery on Osoyoos Lake to non-native anglers.

"It's been very good to see that people from the Okanagan Nation Alliance have been able to harvest for food and share salmon through the commercial

and recreational (fisheries). It's been a positive step," Wright said in Kelowna on Friday.

Experts attribute the healthier stocks to the late-spring freshet and increased flows, which attracted more migrating sockeye. Management techniques have improved the survival of eggs and fry in Osoyoos Lake so more of them head to the ocean as smolts.

The alliance releases a million sockeye fry annually into the Okanagan River. Most of them swim downstream into the Columbia River system and enter the Pacific Ocean just north of Portland, Ore. They spend most of their lives near Haida Gwaii off the Northern B.C. coast.

When they're mature enough to spawn, the fish return to their beginnings — in this case, the Okanagan River. The 9,000-kilometre journey is one of the most remarkable in the natural world.

The alliance is working with Choice's Market and Raudz Restaurant in Kelowna, the Burrowing Owl winery, Spirit Ridge Vineyard and Inkmeep winery to promote Okanagan sockeye.

Wright was speaking at Okanagan Basin Water Board's annual general meeting in Kelowna.