

Sockeye salmon coming back to the Okanagan

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When nine hydro-electric dams were built on the Columbia River in the last century, no consideration was given to the impact that would have on native people in the Okanagan Valley who depended on the annual sockeye salmon run for their livelihood.

After all, the run held no commercial importance to Canada, even though it played a major role in the traditions and culture of the Okanagan Nations.

Since 2004, the Okanagan Nation Alliance fisheries department has been working with governments, utilities and other agencies on both sides of the international boundary to restore fish passage for salmon up the Columbia system into the Okanagan, past McIntyre Dam and Okanagan Falls and ultimately into Okanagan Lake.

Howie Wright, fisheries biologist and project manager, reported to the annual general meeting of the Okanagan Basin Water Board Friday that last year was the first year a recreational fishery for sockeye salmon was opened in Osoyoos Lake, where a record run returned to spawn in the system. Instead of the 100,000 forecast, 300,000 sockeye returned to the trans-bound-



Howie Wright

ary lake. Last year was also the first time that sockeye returned almost all the way to Skaha Lake, but the dam at Okanagan Falls barred their way.

This year, 3,000 sockeye salmon made it over the dam at Okanagan Falls, because the water in the Okanagan River was still so high this year when they returned.

Wright expects they will spawn in the Okanagan River channel at Penticton, and he expects they will find their way into Okanagan Lake as well.

"It's pretty exciting," he admits. After all the years the ONA and government ministries have worked to eliminate the barriers to fish passage, overwintered eggs and released fry into Skaha Lake, it's gratifying to see the stocks begin to come back.

"We had to be persistent and we had to use science," he says.

"We're balancing indigenous and Western science to manage, protect

and restore fisheries resources and habitat," he says.

Now that a recreational fishery for sockeye salmon in the Okanagan has returned, he says the benefits from fishing license fees should go back into salmon restoration work.

"We need a process to reconcile the revenue-sharing," he said.

For the sockeye salmon, it's a 1,000-kilometre journey back into the Okanagan Valley from the Pacific Ocean up the Columbia River system, but the fish remain in very good shape, he notes.

That's likely in part because it's an elevation gain of only about 300 metres over the journey.

The ONA now have a licence to harvest and sell sockeye salmon from this system, and they're marketing them through select restaurants and retail stores, partly as an awareness campaign to share the story about the return of the sockeye.

Wright says many people are surprised to be able to access fresh, local sockeye salmon, and the products are OceanWise certified by the Vancouver Aquarium program which ensures the fish are caught using a sustainable method of fishing and stock management.

"Consumers will know where their fish came from," said Wright.

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