

News

Water protection benefits returning sockeye

GWEN BRIDGE

Special to The Morning Star

The return of sockeye to the Okanagan River system this year is something for everyone to celebrate. Not since the 1950s have we seen this type of return, and the future looks even better. However, it's also a reminder that we must all do our part to keep the waters clean and plentiful enough

for the fish.

Before there were Okanagan people here, there were salmon – chinook, coho, chum, steelhead and sockeye. Today, they are either completely gone or found in very low numbers. The annual return of Okanagan adult sockeye has been as low as 2,048 (recorded in 1998). This is mostly the result of

human activities in and around water – as homes and docks built up along the banks of the Okanagan, with the channeling of Okanagan River in response to flooding, and the construction of dams on the Columbia River (the Okanagan River flows into the Columbia).

All of these changes have made it hard for

the salmon to return from their passage to the ocean.

However, since 2000, the Okanagan Nation Alliance fisheries department (ONAFD) has been working hard to bring the salmon back. In the past two years, the ONAFD has recorded between 80,000 and 120,000 spawners (2010). Projects that

have contributed to this success include: the reintroduction of sockeye into Skaha Lake, the alteration of the gates at McInyre Dam to make salmon passage possible, and the Okanagan River Restoration Initiative (returning parts of the Okanagan River to its natural state, making salmon migration easier).

While there is much to celebrate with this year's amazing sockeye run, it is important to remember that clean water is absolutely necessary for healthy fish, especially baby salmon. It is important we all make an effort to keep our water clean and healthy.

Here are a few tips to keep our water clean and plentiful for fish:

- Conserve water in your home and outdoors. Low water levels in spawning channels create warmer water which stresses the fish.
- Remember that water that enters storm drains flows directly into creeks, rivers and lakes, carrying with it chemicals from our yards, driveways, streets, and parking lots. This damages the health of these waters and the creatures that call them home.
- If you need to wash your vehicle,



ONA FISHERIES DEPARTMENT

Staff with Okanagan Nation Alliance's fisheries department collect mature salmon from Okanagan River for breeding.

take it to a car wash that recycles its water and treats it before it's returned to the environment.

■ If you must give the car a quick wash at home, use a trigger nozzle to prevent water from being wasted, and wash the car over grass. The lawn will act as a natural filter that removes many of the chemicals before the water makes its way back to our lakes and

streams. ■ Medications and chemicals should not be flushed down the toilet or washed down the drain. Instead, take unused medications to any pharmacy, and take paints and other chemicals to appropriate disposal locations. Check out the waste reduction department of your regional district for more information on hazardous waste disposal in your area. ■ When enjoying the outdoors, stick to maintained trails. The same goes for your pets! Off-road activities near water sources can kick up sediments, creating murky water that harms aquatic life. Grease and oil from bikes, and pet waste can also contaminate the water. ■ Choose biodegradable products where possible.

For more on Okanagan WaterWise, visit www.okwaterwise.ca. Okanagan WaterWise is an initiative of the Okanagan Basin Water Board. Gwen Bridge is natural resources manager with the Okanagan nation Alliance and an OBWB director.

Burkhard Heimann



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