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FRASER CHINOOK AND MARKED SELECTIVE FISHING:

By now, just about everybody has digested and reacted to this year's spring and summer Chinook fishing opportunities around South Vancouver Island. Most anglers who enjoy getting out on the salt chuck for a spot of salmon fishing and the chance to bring home a decent size Chinook for the table, have a bad case of heartburn thanks to our federal government. Of late, fisheries management of the Public Salmon Fishery in Southern British Columbia has been, in a word, deplorable.

Prior to 2008 the fishing limits were two Chinook per day, wild or hatchery, with no upper size limits and open year-round. Today, with a second straight year of "catch-and-release" Chinook fishing from April to July in Georgia, Haro and Juan de Fuca Straits, our valuable Public Fishery has been brought to its knees, metaphorically speaking. Our once vibrant year-round fishery has had its key spring and early summer months ruined. A dramatic and damaging change in just over a decade. And now we have an August, the prime fishing time of the year, where anglers can only retain one Chinook per day no greater than 80cm in length, which is a tiddler in respect to most adult Chinook.

Why is "catch-and-release" fishing an issue? It's all fine and dandy for river or lake bass and trout anglers, but the ocean fishery is where the public go to catch and bring home a fish for the family table. Whether it is salmon or halibut, lingcod or Dungeness crabs, anglers like to savor the fruits of their saltwater angling adventures. This is an ingrained aspect of the Public Fishery and has been for hundreds of years. To those who say "but you can still go fishing, you just let all the fish go to protect the wild ones", the correct response is "why can't I keep the hatchery marked fish that are there if I am fishing, they do not need any protection. Frankly, if I catch my limit of hatchery fish, I would return to the dock sooner likely helping the wild fish even more!"

Right now, our Public Chinook Fishery plus all the small businesses who supply anglers their goods and services around the South Island are on the brink, especially with the added predicament of the Corona Virus pandemic. It is now plausible to ponder the unthinkable that unless DFO moves rapidly with viable solutions, we may not have a sustainable public fishery in a few short years. How tragic that would be, if it happened. And worse of all, it was and still is totally avoidable.

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Of course, everyone understands there is a major conservation concern with certain Fraser River Chinook stocks; Mid and Upper Fraser stream-type Chinook to be specific. Unquestionably, we do have to assist the struggling wild stocks, that's obvious! However, we do not need to kill Southern BC's Public Fishery in the bargain. Using fishing restrictions and increased regulations as a recovery plan is a fool's game that doesn't work, yet government repeatedly fall back on this option time and time again, year after year, because it is easy and cheap. Also, unelected bureaucrats can boast "look what we are doing to save the wild fish", with zero consequence to their careers for dismal failure and ongoing stock declines.

In truth, increasing fishing regulations alone is not the answer and history shows fishing restrictions or closures do not make a recovery plan. The Interior Fraser Coho collapse of the mid-1990s is a classic and sorry example of just that; twenty years on and the stocks are still in the tank. Unfortunately, up until now that has been DFO's go to strategy for the past decade with Fraser Chinook management too.

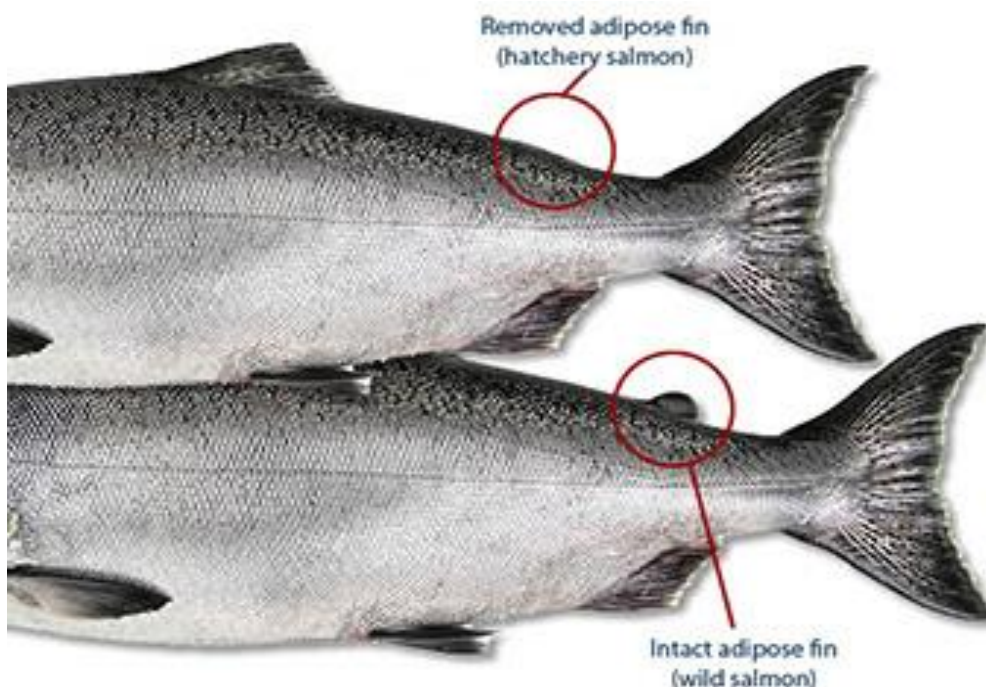
What is needed to save Southern BC's saltwater salmon fishery in a desperate hurry is for DFO to implement a comprehensive Fraser Chinook recovery plan and put into effect Selective Marked Fishing (SMF) for Chinook as soon as possible. How to do that requires very little in comparison to the significant loss both socially and economically, that would occur if the Public Fishery went bust and Fraser stream-type Chinook became extinct. And looking down from 20,000 feet, both of the aforementioned are not ridiculous considerations.

An interesting fact not many members of the public know is Washington State's annual hatchery production ranges between 70,000,000 and 100,000,000 juvenile Chinook salmon. These fish are for fisheries and must have their adipose fins clipped before release. Conversely, DFO in BC produces approximately 5,000,000 in the southern waters and only 10% of those are clipped. That's 70,000,000 marked fish in the WA State, USA and 500,000 in the southern waters of BC. That is a shocking difference and clearly shows that the American federal, state and local governments recognize the value of fisheries to the people who live there and their impact on the economy.

In Washington, to our south, they get it. Their governments, both state and federal, have worked together with the First Nations and the public and have actually done something about the problem. In 2019 they marked the twentieth anniversary of the Washington State Salmon Recovery Act. Simply put, back in 1999 our neighbors to the south faced collapsing salmon and

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steelhead stocks similar to Canada, but instead of piddling around for years, they listed decimated salmonid populations as endangered. This required the immediate implementation of a comprehensive recovery plan with serious funding support attached; they did that too! So, what about the fishing? Surely, as the fish stocks were in trouble, they would have shut down the fishing completely; they did NOT do that! In fact, and apparently different to Canada's approach back then, the USA deemed all three harvest sectors (First Nations, Public and Commercial) to be very important, both socially and economically, and as a result worthy of protecting too.



How to identify Hatchery and Wild Chinook Salmon

Maintaining the fisheries at the same time as launching a massive complex recovery plan was achieved by implementing a marked selective fishery for salmon. New community-based and First Nations hatcheries were built and existing facilities were upgraded with major government support. The purpose of this was to ramp up production of salmon for fisheries, it's as simple as that. The USA Endangered Species Act "endangered listing" for salmon necessitated all hatchery produced fish be *marked* (adipose fin clipped), so as to permit identification should an angler

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encounter them while salmon fishing. The outcome was more identifiable hatchery marked fish to support fisheries and almost complete elimination of pressure on wild stocks of concern.

The second piece was to implement the complex recovery plan and the USA did that by focusing on the protection and restoration of vital salmon habitat. They achieved this by selecting key locations where human intervention was most needed. An overarching steering committee received proposals from local areas where the residents and experts understood the issues. Funding for projects was administered on a priority basis and each region had a strategy in place for their specific needs. Another key factor was the investment of billions of dollars by state and federal agencies into making it possible to achieve a fifteen-year plan.



This 30lb hatchery Chinook was caught on August 11, 2020 in Puget Sound off Seattle, unlike Canada, right now the US anglers can keep these big beauties

The result is more salmon in the ocean, fish that can be identified as wild or hatchery and an opportunity to fulfill two management objectives at once. The regulations were set to permit retention of marked fish. Of greater importance, if and when encountered, the careful release

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of any unmarked wild fish was and still is mandatory as well. Ironically, for two decades many of those USA hatchery Chinook have bolstered the Public Salmon Fishery in the Canadian waters around South Vancouver Island, a fact for which many Victoria and Sooke area resident anglers are extremely grateful.



Surprisingly, Canada only marks 10% of their hatchery reared Chinook. Why, because the DFO coded wire tag system to assess the salmon stocks is set up that way. Coded wire tagged hatchery Chinook are the only ones clipped. DFO has bureaucrats within their stock assessment division that hold strongly to maintaining the current system at all cost, lest it confuses their assessment data and computer modelling. How can anyone differentiate between a hatchery and a wild fish if 90% of your 25,000,000 coast-wide Chinook production isn't marked? The outcome is 22,500,000 instant *quasi* wild Chinook put into the system. And impossible to control hatchery fish from co-mingling with wild fish on the spawning beds. Seriously, if Canada were to mark 100% of its existing hatchery Chinook, there would be new opportunities for marked selective fishing in BC on Canadian origin fish, and that's without producing any extra fish. With a 100% mark-rate ramping up production needn't be so substantial either. Additionally, new and

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established techniques to improve juvenile to adult survival of hatchery fish, such as temporary sea pen projects will further reduce the need for huge production increases.

Here in BC, we have to get government to steer us all out of this downward spiraling box we are stuck in. Chinook salmon are the most important species to the Public Fishery. It is well past time to move on from all the myriad of scientific studies, the endless multi-sectoral consultations, the hollow political photo-op events and yes, no more "...let's wait until next season to discuss it". Inevitably, that all ends up going nowhere and achieving nothing. And, constantly cutting the Pacific DFO budget year after year is a disaster for wild Pacific salmon. For heaven's sake, please please Mr. Prime Minister, Fisheries Minister Jordan, and all at DFO ... just do it! The wild fish (although they can't talk) will thank you; the endangered Southern Resident Killer Whales (who sing beautifully) will also thank you; Indigenous people, who need to catch their full food, social and ceremonial allocation, will thank you too; and, guess what, the Canadian public, especially those who fish, will thank you as well (except perhaps for a few enviro-loons that is).

It seems so simple to a rational person how to get out of this disastrous box we are in. Yet government has an inexplicable knack of making things absurdly complicated, buried in red tape, horridly slow and highly expensive, while basically pleasing no one. Southern BC's precious wild Chinook deserve better and desperately need a comprehensive recovery plan put into action as soon as possible and Canadians want selective marked fisheries implemented immediately, while the struggling wild stocks rebuild. Please stop the dithering and get on with it!

So, in a few weeks' time (September 1), anglers will be able to venture out on their boats and catch and keep a Chinook or two (wild or hatchery) in the mid to upper 20lbs range; bigger too, if lucky to get one on the line. Normal regulations and full bag limits will be in place. Sadly, that opportunity won't last long as most of the adult spawning Chinook will more than likely be off limits as they stage in estuaries or head up the rivers by mid-month. It is very sad it has come down to this, just a couple weeks of conventional fishing at the end of the summer. For those of us who have enjoyed fishing for Chinook off South Vancouver Island during "the good ol' years", we can now only hope and pray the federal government recognizes the importance of this moment for BC and its people; the powers that be need to make the right decision.