

Prof: Overescapement doesn't help salmon, hurts industry



Fishing hard is good: It might not be what a lot of environmentalists and your average fish-hugger want to hear, but a prominent fisheries biologist maintains that in the long run, fishing hard for salmon is actually good for stocks.

Speaking on Dec. 6 at the annual convention of the United Fishermen and Allied Workers' Union-Unifor, University of British Columbia professor emeritus Carl Walters said the Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) policy of severely restricting salmon fishing to put more spawners on the grounds did not produce more fish and only cost fishermen money.

What is surprising is that Walters was once a firm advocate of "precautionary management," severely controlling fishing effort to plug the spawning grounds with fish. He's changed his tune.

Walters cited research he did on sockeye escapements into the Fraser River from 1996 to 2011, in which he calculated the lost economic value of excess fish that were allowed to spawn without any benefit to the future.

When you add up the value of that, it is almost half a billion dollars in lost value to fishermen and processors and wholesalers," Walters said. "Overescapement generally does not cause stock collapse, rather loss of harvest. Our biggest returns in 1958 and 2010 were both produced by moderate numbers of spawners."

"When you get low spawner numbers you get less, but when you get intermediate spawners you get the most back," he said. Walters pointed out that adding more spawners above an intermediate level does not create more fish.

"Mostly you just stop getting any more returns. These extra spawners are not producing anything," he said. "Adding more spawners isn't adding more value to anybody."

Walter said scientists have 40 to 50 years of data to indicate what the optimum spawners are in every system.

He explained that in 1995 DFO cut the harvest rate in the Fraser River in half, primarily in an attempt to rebuild small sockeye stocks in places like Sackinaw and Cultus lakes.

Walters argues that those stocks have been declining for years, mostly due to impacts other than commercial fishing, and attempts to rebuild them are futile anyway.

"What trend lines show is that these started going down in the '60s," he said. "That one-half billion loss didn't result in any gain. The stocks were going down anyway. There you cannot grow the number of fish in Cultus Lake like you can in Shuswap. Those stocks are not growing. It plain isn't working."

The environmentalist argument that dead fish contribute to the ecosystem is overstated, as eagles and bears already have more spawners than they can eat, Walters said.

Some claim that excess salmon carcasses contribute to fertilizing lakes. But the argument that increases in lake fertilization benefit

the sockeye is false, Walters said. In fact, he said, consistently putting too many spawners into a system is bad for the fish.

"Actually, lower productivity results from increased fertilization because that produces more insects, which in turn produces more rainbow trout that hammer the juvenile sockeye," he said.

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Charity herring sale: The fourth annual Fishermen Helping Kids with Cancer (FHKWC) herring sale was held on Dec. 6 in Richmond and Victoria. The event sold 70 tons of

herring and raised \$70,000 in sales receipts and donations to BC Children's Hospital in Vancouver.

The F/V Viking Fisher (Neil Jensen and crew), the F/V Queens Reach (John Legate and crew), and the F/V Pachena No. 1 (Mitch Ponac and crew) caught the herring.

"More than 100 industry volunteers were involved, including the fish-bagging crew that packed 5,000 20-pound bags of herring in about eight hours - a tremendous effort," said FHKWC board member Phil Eidsvik.



Busy volunteers pack fish for customers at the fourth annual Fishermen Helping Kids with Cancer herring sale. The Dec. 6 event raised \$70,000. *Juliane Drouin photo*

The sole purpose of FHKWC is to help kids with cancer. The core founding principle is that 100 percent of the money is for the kids.

Nobody gets paid for the event - every participant is a volunteer. Sponsors pay for every event cost - from the boat, to the fuel, to the bags for the fish, to the coffee for the volunteers. When someone buys a bag of herring for \$10, exactly \$10 goes to help kids with cancer. The same goes for donations. There are no fundraising or administrative costs - bank charges are donated by the credit union, G&F Financial Group.

The spark for FHKWC was the daughter of a British Columbia commercial fisherman. Moved by her steadfast three-year battle with cancer, a fellow fisherman came up with the idea of the commercial fishing industry holding a herring sale to help all kids with cancer. Though the daughter helped in the planning, she passed on at the age of 17, just a few days before the inaugural herring sale in 2011.

The current charity herring sale has revived a tradition that had existed in the province for 56 years until canceled in 2007.

The CKNW Orphans' Fund herring sale ran from 1951 until 2007, when DFO refused to issue a special charity permit, citing a 2006 federal court ruling.

The ruling, in a complex case involving crab fishermen in New Brunswick, found it was illegal for DFO to pay for scientific research and other programs by selling the fish or crabs taken during those programs. DFO in British Columbia then interpreted that ruling as a reason to refuse a charity permit for the herring sale.

Michel Drouin has been covering the fishing industry since 1990.