
SNAKE RIVER B-RUN STEELHEAD MANAGED FOR EXTINCTION

Bill M. Bakke

Tribal nets have been harvesting staggering numbers of Idaho steelhead in the lower Columbia River even as these federally protected fish continue to dwindle. Fish managers are helpless, and the U.S. government is politically and legally challenged when dealing with tribes. While ESA protection is curtailing hatchery operations throughout the Northwest, tribes are proposing new "modern" hatcheries. "They'll get the money. They always get their money," says one Oregon Fish and Wildlife source sarcastically.

The Osprey supports tribal rights to Columbia River salmon, but not to the extent that they damage threatened steelhead. Bill Bakke has devoted his life's energy to fish advocacy through his Native Fish Society in Portland, Oregon. He knows these steelhead first hand, and here offers a clear picture of the situation facing Idaho steelhead in the Columbia.

The Clearwater River is big, deep and beautiful. I learned about it from Steve Pettit, a biologist with Idaho Fish and Game. He put me into water that seemed too big to fish. One place, the Island Run, is like fishing a bonefish flat. My first fish took the fly lightly and then pulled off into the current with such weight and strength I could do nothing but hold on until I had no more line left and it broke off. One evening at Coyote Fish Net, Pettit rose a strong fish that ran through the long run and kept going around the bend. Steve followed and cursed, knowing he had the big one on. It was too dark for a picture when he landed it. He

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released a 46-inch male that took a number 2 Red Ant. The Clearwater is a river of bigness, its water and fish are taxing and every day one spends on its pellucid flow creates a memory. This is a B-run river.

The B-run is a strain of summer steelhead found only in Idaho's Clearwater and Salmon Rivers. These steelhead are as big as chinook and they are in trouble. They have been listed along with their smaller cousins, the A-run steelhead, as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Both strains of steelhead are rapidly declining and their future may not have many years left in it; years when one can fish with expectation at Pine Creek with its lone golden cottonwood standing tall in the black rocks, yellow autumn grass and crimson sumac.

Eight Dams Later

Idaho steelhead migrate through the Columbia System passing eight dams twice—once downriver as juveniles and again upriver as adults. The dams take their toll, along with the additional pressure of a ten-year drought,

a less productive ocean environment since 1976 and harvest. The combination of these factors has caused Snake River steelhead to decline steadily since 1973.

The Experts Agree

In 1997 the fish managers and tribes published a report called the *All Species Review (ASR)*. This report documents accomplishments under the U.S. v Oregon court ordered negotiations among the fish agencies and tribes called the Columbia River Fish Management Plan (CRFMP). According to this report, the B-run steelhead rebuilding goal is not being achieved, and the continuing decline is of "serious concern and disturbing."

A National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) report on Columbia steelhead states, "The count of natural wild steelhead at Bonneville Dam provides the basis for management of mainstem fisheries. Natural/wild (n/w) steelhead are defined to include naturally produced steelhead regardless of origin of their parents (so some fish of hatchery origin are counted as wild fish). The interim management goal under the CRFMP is for 75,500 n/w steelhead at Bonneville, including 62,200 Group A and 13,300 Group B steelhead. The goal is expected to produce 30,000 n/w steelhead above Lower Granite Dam (LGD). The ASR subdivides this further into 20,000 A-run and 10,000 B-run steelhead."

Idaho biologists claim there is enough habitat for B-run steelhead (approximately 3,100 miles of spawning habitat in the