

TALKING ABOUT SAVING THOMPSON STEELHEAD

By Ken Wilson, Stock Management Coordinator

The BC Wildlife Federation (BCWF) organized a meeting in Spence's Bridge on September 18 to discuss the status of Thompson Steelhead, the challenges facing these fish, their importance to us all, and the prospects and process for recovery. Thompson Steelhead are certainly unique, and they are certainly in decline. Cook's Ferry chief Dave Walkem, in his opening remarks, made it clear that Thompson Steelhead were an important fishery for his people, and it was a fishery they intended to keep. He also expressed his concern that First Nations were not closely involved in the planning of the meeting. Not a great start to collaboration. As expected, the meeting was well attended by sports harvesters from both Canada and the US, along with a strong contingent from the Provincial Government (Water, Land & Air Protection).

The last meeting, in the same building, six years ago was organized by the NWSFA (Nicola Watershed Stewardship and Fisheries Authority). It was also well attended, and people spoke eloquently about the importance of the fish and the fisheries, and the need to work together to allow these fish to thrive for our mutual benefit. Now, six years later, there are fewer steelhead.

The basic argument is a good one. Why not get ahead of COSEWIC (Council on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada) and SARA (Species at Risk Act) and try to fix this problem before it becomes a Federal offence to catch a Thompson steelhead? If the stock is headed for COSEWIC in the next few years and is likely to be listed under SARA, why not simply begin the formal recovery process in advance of the SARA listing as DFO has done for Upper Fraser coho, and Sakinaw and Cultus sockeye.

It is hard to argue with the idea that we should fix our fisheries management and habitat problems before the law intervenes and forces a plan of action on us. However, I don't agree that trying desperately to avoid a legal listing of Thompson steelhead does much if anything at all to promote the recovery of these fish. I'm sure that those of us at the meeting all hope that we are capable of developing and implementing the kind of recovery plan and action plans that might lead to substantial rebuilding of Thompson steelhead.

In talking about the recovery of any species the typical starting point is to identify what went wrong and what the solutions to the problem might be. A big step towards species recovery occurs when we can point the finger at something and say, "If we fix this, things will improve significantly." Unfortunately between limited stock assessment and lack of political will there are few clear

problems and fewer clear solutions. Nevertheless, we talked about all the usual suspects; the commercial fishery, First Nations fisheries, sports fisheries, ocean survival, fresh water habitat loss. We talked about the usual solutions; fishing restrictions, water use planning, or a hatchery to replace lost freshwater habitat. We even talked about how the Provincial Government needs to pay for the work. And perhaps they will.

I wish the BCWF every success in organizing a recovery process for Thompson Steelhead. I bought a tee shirt, and I believe the BCWF will do their very best, but will be unable to achieve consensus on the sort of broadly based and widely supported comprehensive recovery program that will rebuild Thompson Steelhead. COSEWIC will ultimately review the status of Thompson Steelhead, and they will most likely be listed. This will be followed by several years of discussion about impacts and costs and benefits of legal listing under SARA, at which point Thompson steelhead will be even less abundant than they are now. There will eventually be a recovery plan, and an action plan, and more meetings. I hope Thompson steelhead can recover, but the US has been at this process for a lot longer than Canada has, and to the best of my knowledge there has never been a successful recovery plan that leads to a fish species being removed from the endangered species list. *For more information contact Ken Wilson at wilsonkh@telus.net or by phone at (604) 301-0418.*

EDITOR'S NOTE

At this point, it appears that this will be my final issue of Watershed Talk (my interim contract concludes very shortly). It's been fun, and hopefully I'll be able to contribute articles at some time in the future. Thank you all for your comments and information. Keep reading this publication! *For more information contact Pete Nicklin at (250) 392-5888 or by email at indiseant@shaw.ca.*

WEB LINKS

Go to the Pacific Salmon Commission's website at www.psc.org for the most up to date technical information. Download the Excel file titled PSC_ESC.xls for a complete breakdown of the sockeye escapements.

Current Opening/Closing Times and the Harvest Information for Lower and Upper Fraser is posted on the FRAFS website at www.frafs.ca.

UPCOMING MEETINGS

October 6, 2004: Fraser Tier One Meeting; meeting located is the Musqueam Community Hall, 51st and Salish Drive. *For further information on this meeting, contact Marcel at (250) 612-7393.*