Is anyone paying attention?

As we approach another steelhead season on the once renowned waters of the Skeena River system, I keep looking for evidence of recognition of signals pointing to low returns and thinking they ought to be manifested in some management option outputs from the people we pay to manage that resource. More on those signals below but first a bit of context.

In the world of the present we're inundated with demands for more and better science to justify altering the status quo. Proponents of opposing positions merely cherry pick the science (or lack of it) to support their self-interest. The long-standing Department of Fisheries and Oceans' (DFO) steelhead stock strength estimates derived from its test fishery operation on the lower Skeena River just upstream from the commercial fishing boundary is a prime example. When the estimates are on the high side, all is sweetness and light. When they're not the critics are loud in their condemnation, claiming the same methodology that is perfectly acceptable when the numbers are favorable is seriously flawed. That position has been sufficient to preclude conservation measures sufficient to alter the disturbing trend in steelhead abundance in recent years.

The voices proclaiming the uncertainty of test fishery results has been at least a partial catalyst to warrant government financing a partnership between a First Nation business development group and a Washington based conservation organization. That arrangement calls for Canadian taxpayers to provide $2.21M to construct and operate a fish trap on the lower Skeena. Its

proponents claim a major objective is to judge the efficacy and outputs of the DFO test fishery. No one questions the fact that the project description calls for trap operation from mid-September until Halloween when the test fishery typically ends on or about September 25. Termination at that time is based on negligible historic catches of steelhead (and every other species) and the inordinate, unsupportable cost involved. Nonetheless, we're going to spend all that money to compare trap results with test fishery results that don't and won't exist???

Debate about test fishery results isn't the only example of the do-nothing approach justified on the basis of less than complete or definitive science. Consider a recent report on the status of steelhead management in British Columbia. It was the result of a two-year undertaking by the Pacific Salmon Foundation (PSF), now the largest non-government fisheries related organization in BC. It concluded with a long list of recommendations for investment in more and better stock assessment. Here's a quote:

"Out of the 36 steelhead CUs examined in this project, we were able to quantify the current biological status for only seven CUs, or 19% of BC steelhead CUs. For the remaining 29 CUs, we found insufficient data to evaluate their current biological status and they were classified as "data deficient". The minimum data required to assess biological status at a CU scale is at least 20 years of data on the number of steelhead returning to spawn in the CU, including data for the most recent generation (i.e. in the last five years)."

Shortly after receiving the report I sent a message to its PSF distributor pointing out several data sources not referenced.

More importantly, I offered that Rome was burning while all the talk about imperfections in the science base were being promoted as demanding investment of unprecedented resources before the flames could be addressed. My unanswered questions remain. If every recommendation could be pursued, how much would it cost, how long would it take, what would you do with the results if/when you got them and what happens in the meantime? There is supposed to be something known as the precautionary principle isn't there?

Abundance revisited

The best available science on Skeena steelhead abundance comes from the DFO test fishery at Tyee on the lower Skeena River (Figure 1). I remind its critics it has been the foundation of decades of interaction with DFO to deal with steelhead conservation. There wouldn't have been a fraction of the effort directed toward steelhead conservation initiated in the 1990s had it not been for the dismal steelhead escapement figures detected by the test fishery in 1991, 92 and 93. No one, not a single guide, a local business operator, an angler, not even DFO was disputing the validity of the figures then. Fast forward a few steelhead generations and the picture is dramatically different. Any hint that the same numbers today are cause for concern is rejected immediately. Stated simply, business trumps conservation.

Regardless of how steelhead numbers are perceived, the reality is we've experienced five successive years of low steelhead returns. The test fishery numbers are only part of that story, however. Never recognized is how many fish are removed

before they get to the test fishery. Failure to account for what is referred to as the reconstructed run means interannual comparisons of test fishery figures is apples and oranges.

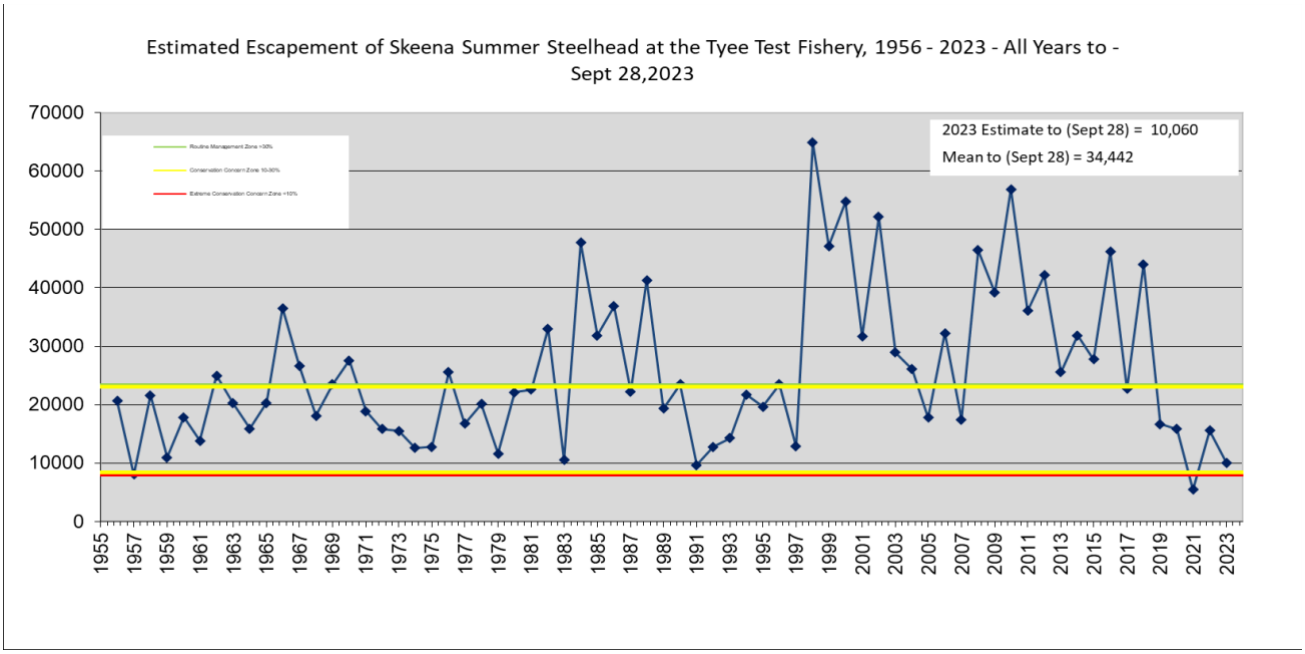

Figure 1. The provincially provided summary of the annual DFO test fishery estimates of the number of steelhead entering the lower Skeena River over the period of record (1956 – 2023).

For example, the estimated steelhead abundance at the DFO test fishery in years such as the early 1990s in Figure 1 implies abundance similar to the most recent five years. No one ever acknowledges that in three of those five years there was no domestic commercial fishery. In the other two there was very significantly less than occurred historically. The record low return in 2021 is precisely that. It reflects a total return to the Skeena that was well less than half of what the reconstructed runs of 1991, 92 and 93 were. What more does it take to

emphasizes the seriousness of the recent declines in steelhead abundance? How is inaction on the strength of claims the science is less than perfect going to help fish or fishers?

There is mischief in portraying the aggregate steelhead abundance estimate at the test fishery as the spawning population. From whatever emerges at the test fishery we must deduct fish removed upstream by the combination of in-river First Nations fishing, recreational fishery catch-and-release mortality, poaching, predation, disease and sub-lethal effects of one or a combination of these influences that results in failure of fish to reach their intended spawning destination and/or less than expected reproductive performance. The test fishery estimate should be reduced by at least one-third to account for these upstream losses.

The test fishery estimates do not reflect stream specific spawner targets, nor do they account for sex ratios that may be far off desired levels. In years past there was recognition of these issues and the stock sizes necessary to accommodate them. The adjustment was referred to as the distributional effect. It meant there needed to be roughly 33% more steelhead passing the test fishing site than a bare minimum target that assumed an optimal distribution of steelhead spawners and perfect sex ratio between and within every Skeena tributary. Those allowances were eliminated in 2021 when the 8,000 critical spawner population threshold appeared. Ten retired provincial fisheries biologists, half of them with extensive experience with Skeena steelhead, prepared a letter to the reigning Provincial Ministers requesting a formal rationale for the 8,000 as well as an independent review

of whatever rationale was provided. There was never a response to that letter.

The progeny of five successive years of low returns have already or will be experiencing less than favorable freshwater rearing conditions as climate change impacts water supplies and temperatures. Most of the juvenile steelhead originating from the first two of those five years of low spawner abundance will have reached smolt age and emigrated to the surface ocean zone they occupy throughout their marine residence. That zone has been thoroughly documented to have endured temperatures well above optimum for steelhead in recent years. What are the odds on those fish doing anything more than replace themselves? What science is there to support such a position?

The allocation picture

As noted already, our own domestic fisheries that once had major influence on annual Skeena steelhead returns are a pale shadow of their former status. They are not exempt from crosshairs but the gillnet fleet that once numbered a thousand vessels at peak periods is down to 10-15% of that force today, the number of days fished is half or less than longer term averages and the season is terminated significantly earlier. Remember, there was no commercial fishing in the immediate Skeena approaches in three of the past five years of seriously depressed Skeena steelhead abundance.

Reduced commercial fishing opportunity of late has been focused on wild sockeye conservation (i.e. not the 90-95% of

the aggregate Skeena sockeye population arising from the artificial spawning channels at Babine Lake). Steelhead have received honorable mention in the past two years but the history of DFO has never produced an incidence of a commercial or First Nations fishery being closed solely on the basis of steelhead conservation. Look to Thompson steelhead for support of this claim.

The airwaves have been well worked about "Alaska's dirty secret" in recent months. That story has it that 45% of Skeena bound steelhead were harvested by southeast Alaska's 2023 commercial fisheries targeting Skeena bound sockeye. Broadcasters of that figure have yet to produce reasonable documentation of its derivation. Similarly lacking is a case for the Alaskan scenario having changed so dramatically in the past five years that it has been the dominant force responsible for the serious reductions in Skeena steelhead supply.

I applaud the campaign of Skeena Wild Conservation Trust and Watershed Watch to bring pressure to bear on Alaska. Elimination of the Marine Stewardship Council's sustainable fishery label of the seafood products involved and/or adjusting the terms of the international treaty governing Alaskan fisheries before its expiry in 2028 are obviously desirable. Realistically, however, the likelihood of either happening soon enough or having significant impact on the Skeena steelhead scenario shaping up today is not a good bet. Besides, what is the likelihood that any reduction in harvest of Skeena origin sockeye in Alaska won't be replaced by harvest in Canadian waters, along with all the usual mixed stock interception issues for steelhead?

The other two groups central to the steelhead allocation circumstances are First Nations and recreational fishers. The impact of the former has never been addressed to any credible extent. There is no verifiable data on how many steelhead are harvested by FNs under the guise of food, social and ceremonial fisheries in either marine or freshwater environments. All we can surmise is there is more of that fishing today and less scrutiny of it than at any previous time. The recreational fishery is far better understood but no less worthy of scrutiny, although not for the same reasons.

There is a significant point of overlap between First Nations' perceptions of recreational fishing and their own demands. Rather than risking misrepresentation of the FN position, I've chosen to include the flyer that residents of Smithers and the surrounding area found in their mailboxes in the last few days of May 2024 (Figure 2). It's almost identical to the message distributed the Gitxsan authorities on April 23, 2021. It strikes me the powers that be might want to take this a bit more seriously than they did with their original response. The area involved includes the Skeena upstream from Kitseguecla, the lower Bulkley, the Suskwa, Kispiox and Sustut rivers and most of the Babine. I wonder how the First Nation that now owns and operates long established Suskeena Lodge on the Sustut River perceives this ultimatum?

The most consistent and long-term data source for assessing the recreational fishery is the Steelhead Harvest Analysis (SHA). It is the output of mailed questionnaire sampling of steelhead angler licensees shortly after the conclusion of each license year.

The process and outputs have been with us since 1967. Critics will claim the methodology involved inflates the true catch because successful anglers respond at a higher rate than those unsuccessful. Fair enough. The point to be made, however, is the methodology has been sufficiently consistent over time that

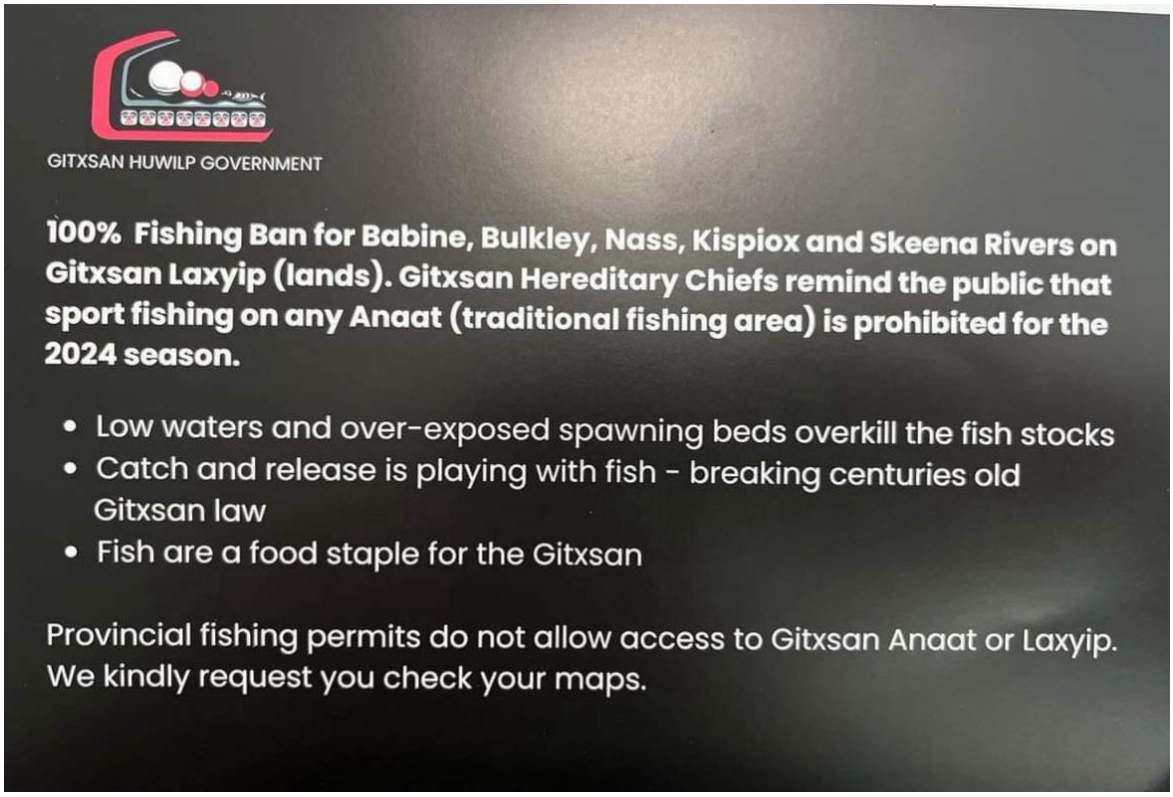

Figure 2. The notice which appeared in local residents' mailboxes in and around Smithers and on billboards in the last few days of May, 2024. The province's 3-year-old response is unaltered. https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/sports-recreation-arts-and-culture/outdoor-recreation/fishing-and-hunting/freshwater-fishing/region_6_gitxsan_closure_declaration_april_2021_update.pdf

trends can be considered reliable. Major regulation events like implementation of catch and release clearly had a major influence so, for purposes of this summary I've chosen to refer

only to the SHA data from 1991 forward when C&R first descended. Further, I've selected the numbers for only the top five Skeena tributaries rather than a dozen others whose collective influence amounts to only a small proportion of the numbers for the least important contributor among "the big five" (Figure 3).

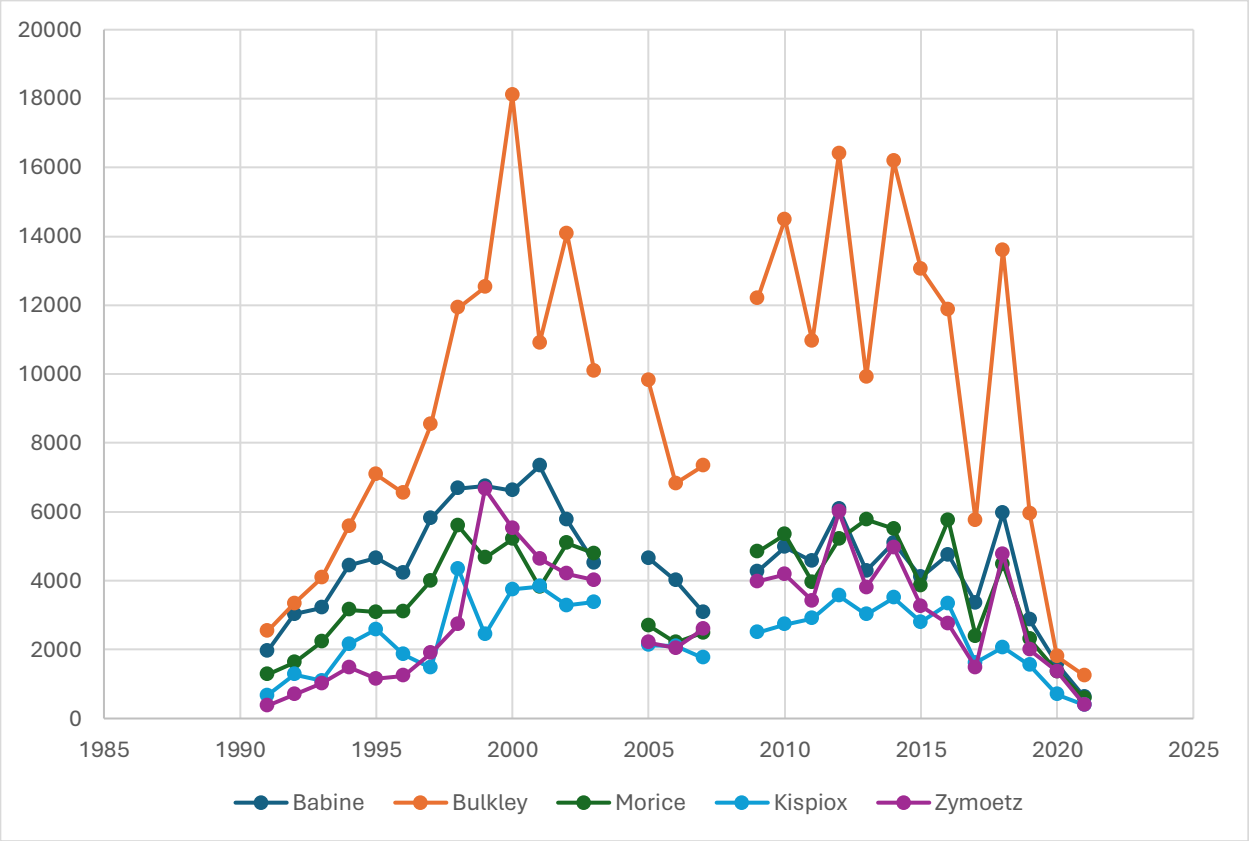

Figure 3. The Steelhead Harvest Analysis figures for the estimated catches of steelhead by anglers fishing the five most popular Skeena tributaries over the period following the initial implementation of catch and release regulations. No data is available for either 2004 or 2008. The figures for the past two seasons have not yet been published.

The mainstem Skeena itself is not included here. Those figures would be misleading because they include passing stocks of tributary bound summer steelhead but also a steadily increasing

number of winter steelhead now being targeted in the overlapping period of license years from March through May. More on that later. Even if the temporal distribution of catches from the lower Skeena could be sorted out, the problem of the stock specific origin of those fish would remain. All that can be said is inclusion of the lower Skeena summer steelhead catches in the stock specific figure above would move each of those lines upward, although the proportional pattern would probably not change significantly, at least not until the latter years.

Several points emerge from the stream specific SHA data. Recall, the 1991, 92 and 93 late summer/fall recreational fishery saw the beginning of C&R. That was in response to the previously noted conservation concerns revealed by the test fishery. The immediate result was abandonment by anglers conditioned to harvest fisheries. License sales and days fished plummeted by 50% or more in the three license years following those regulation measures. It didn't take long for recovery, however. Those that continued to participate in the C&R fishery soon reported excellent catch rates, in part due to reduced competition but also in response to repeat captures. Figure 3 indicates the estimated catches rebounded about one steelhead generation later and remained consistent over the next two decades.

There is instruction in the 2020 and 2021 figures. The first was the COVID year when the Canadian border was closed. That meant the usual influx of foreign anglers that typically contribute a large proportion the angling effort was eliminated. News of the worst ever steelhead return in 2021 was widely disseminated via social media. Even though COVID related

travel restrictions were no longer in effect, the fish supply story undoubtedly had major bearing on participation. Not until the 2022 and 2023 figures materialize there will be any understanding of the more recent relationship between supplies of steelhead and angler response.

It is important to recognize the evolving situation on the lower Skeena. I noted earlier there is no way to determine how many summer vs winter steelhead and which stock they represent in the SHA data set at present. That aside, there are some features of the lower river fishery well worth attention.

Over time there has been a major increase in the targeting of steelhead further downstream in a given river. The two most obvious examples are the Bulkley/Morice system and the Skeena. The original fishery on the former was steelhead specific but its history was centered on the confluence of those two rivers (Bymac) and points upstream. That was the heartland of cartopper style boats equipped with jackass lifts on small outboard motors. Jet boats had not yet arrived. As they did and as angling pressure began to increase, anglers and guides began to move downstream to be first in line to intercept the years' steelhead supply. Today we have jet boats running the entire length of the Bulkley. Most of that traffic is now downstream of Smithers and increasing steadily on reaches downstream from Witset all the way through once virtually untouched water between the Suskwa confluence and the Skeena. There is no longer any untouched steelhead holding water.

On the Skeena we have a fishery that once targeted chinook now another page in old angling diaries. DFO's conservation

measures have eliminated what was once a tremendously popular harvest fishery for sometimes record size fish, particularly in July. Steelhead have replaced the original focus on chinook, with the exception of sockeye and pinks in years when they are abundant. Legions of anglers who take advantage of those two species are generally concentrated in very specific areas and times, do not require a steelhead license and therefore never show up in the SHA data bases. The increase in Skeena mainstem traffic and catch now evident in the SHA outputs (Figure 4) can't be dismissed on the basis of all these new sockeye and pink salmon harvesters.

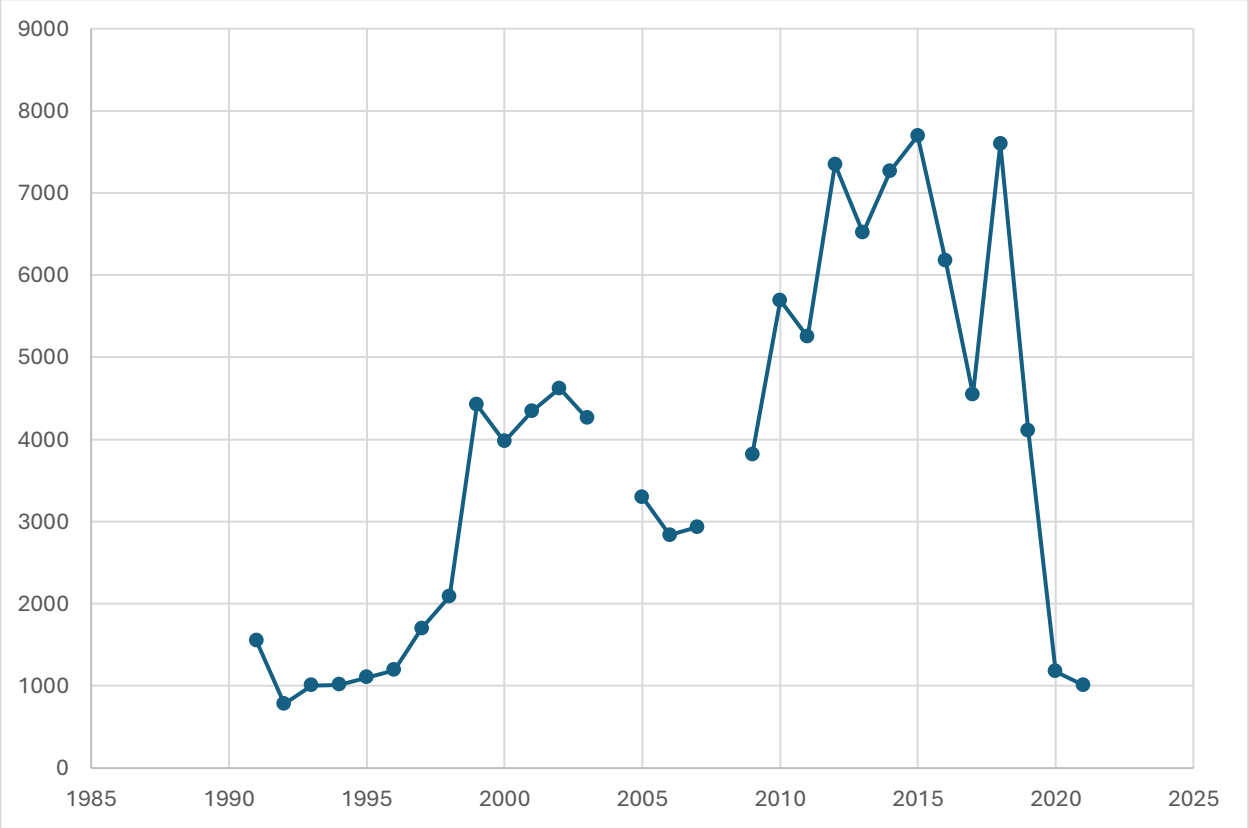

Figure 4. The Steelhead Harvest Analysis data for the estimated number of steelhead caught and released on the Skeena River since the implementation of mandatory release regulations began in 1991.

The increased catch on the lower Skeena is certain to have been dominated by summer steelhead. The sharp declines in 2020 and 2021 were identical to those seen on the major tributaries where there are no winter steelhead. Estimated annual catches 4K to 8K higher for 11 consecutive years contrasts sharply with an annual average far less than half of that a decade earlier. For any given years' supply of steelhead, the more catching that occurs downstream from Terrace, the less that will occur in all those world-famous tributaries upstream. With the trend toward lower summer flows the lower Skeena fishing conditions become increasingly inviting. When the SHA data for 2023 is available it is a safe wager that the trend toward increasing effort and catch so evident for the period from the late 1990s through the following 20 years will re-emerge.

The rapid evolution of the winter steelhead fishery on the lower Skeena is just one more example of climate change influences. Accessibility, season duration and water conditions have all changed markedly. Popular, fishing related social media sites now extoll the virtues of the spring fishery on the lower Skeena frequently. A rapidly growing fishery that never existed in any commercial context in the 1990s when restrictions on effort by guides and foreign anglers were first imposed on the summer steelhead waters and seasons is now another emerging reality. The difference is there are no restrictions on commercial recreational fishing and no additional license requirements for any participants.

The winter steelhead fishery is not difficult to put into context. We know the large majority of those fish originate from waters

whose quantity and quality of habitat can be estimated reasonably. Add it all up and factor in there is no commercial fishery anywhere along the winter steelhead migration route and timing and it isn't difficult to gain an appreciation for how many fish are likely to be available for catching. But, is anyone even thinking about the rapidly evolving relationship between supply and demand? When the access constraints imposed by Mother Nature are being erased by climate change, surely some evaluation of the sustainability of what is unfolding is warranted.

The Illusion of Abundance

Among the voices that government decision makers commit themselves to hearing, who advocates restrictions that might negatively impact angling quantity? The business community in its many forms certainly doesn't. Instead it puts on its selective eyes and ears that filter out any possible influence the catching power of the recreational fishery now exerts. Government accepts such perceptions without ever examining the evolution of the recreational fishery over the period most easily examined, that being from the implementation of quality waters management and mandatory catch and release regulations (early 1990s).

Between the number and sophistication of boats, the remarkable development of ever more effective angling equipment, improved access and constant bombardment by social media marketers capitalizing on every possible angle to derive income from a dwindling public resource, the angling community is a

force never imagined short years ago. The angling guide component is a large but still never properly quantified component of that scenario. The number of magnificent new lodge facilities, many foreign owned and not all operated by appropriately licensed angling guides, is beyond anything ever imagined when the classified waters legislation was enacted in 1990. Some of the proprietors conduct business outside Canada to avoid detection of violations that would have consequences here. In combination, the end result of all of this evolution is catches tend to hold up, not because there are as many fish, but because we are now able to catch the highest ever proportion of them, often multiple times. Ergo the illusion of abundance and the demand by vested interests to reject any measures perceived to compromise their access and returns from a public resource.

The obvious example of the disconnect between steelhead supply and demand is the 13-fold variation in abundance, as estimated by the DFO test fishery between its all-time high in 1998 and its all-time low in 2021. Remarkably, there was no regulation measure imposed that reflected the gravity of the 2021 steelhead scenario. A one liner from the top-ranking official in the provincial office responsible for Skeena steelhead management says all. This came in response to a message I sent him parroting a number of experienced, knowledgeable sources who, independently and consistently, reported a major dearth of steelhead through late August. *"Thanks Bob. Interesting since I keep getting reports from guides saying all is good."* This on August 31, 2021 when the test fishery index indicated 5,280 steelhead, a mere 66% of the recently lowered (yet to be formally explained) extreme conservation concern threshold of 8,000. When the test fishery was terminated on September 26,

2021, only 181 additional steelhead had shown up. Message received!

To put this into perspective, consider how DFO responds to serious gaps between its sockeye escapement target and an estimated in-season abundance that is a fraction of that target. No doubt there would have been advance notice of the probability of such an event but there is also no doubt all fisheries would be closed. Even the food, social and ceremonial fishery concessions for FNs would be seriously compromised or eliminated if a sockeye situation comparable to the 2021 steelhead scenario unfolded. In more than 40 years of association with the DFO test fishery I do not recall a single incidence of commercial fishery spokespersons demanding zero constraints on their fishing opportunity when test fishery estimates of sockeye abundance clearly warranted them.

Unrecognized influences

We've now seen and heard the Alaska dirty secret story more times than I care to remember. But, who appreciates we have our own rendition of a dirty secret in full view of the major highway through the Skeena Region 25 minutes away from the office housing the provincial steelhead management agency? Ever since 1999 there's been a mark and recapture (M/R) steelhead population estimation project undertaken at Moricetown Falls at Witset on the Bulkley River. The Bulkley system is the single largest producer of steelhead among all Skeena tributaries and once supported the largest wild steelhead fishery in BC. The original estimates of Skeena steelhead productivity (circa late

1970s) had 40% originating from the Bulkley/Morice system. More recently the figure has diminished to about 32% according to DNA sampling of test fishery catches. (Those results were denied the aforementioned PSF led recent report on the status of wild steelhead in the province!) So, what has changed?

The effort involved in capturing, marking and recapturing steelhead at Moricetown Falls increased demonstrably in the early 2000's to a peak in 2010 when a population estimate of 41,000 was calculated for the Bulkley system upstream from that point (Figure 5).

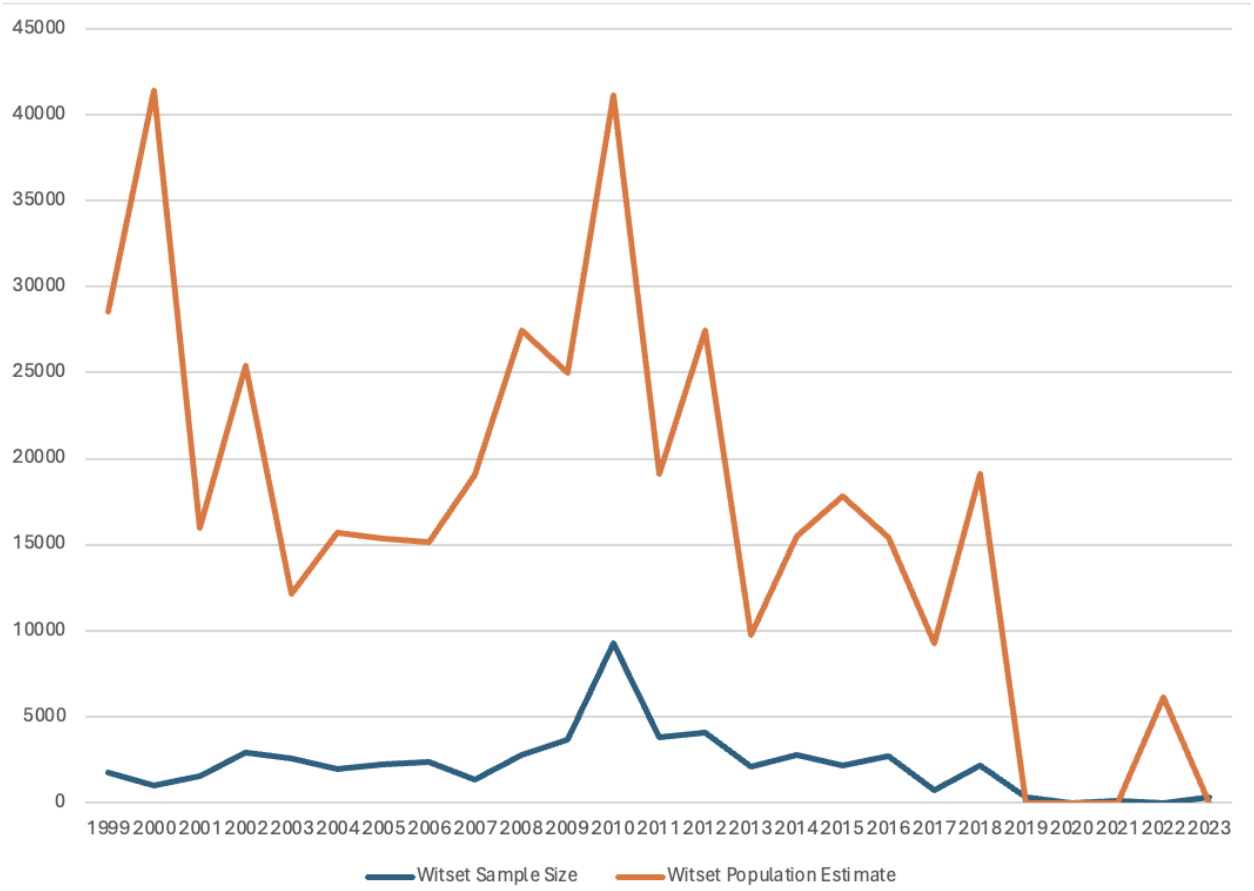

Figure 5. Annual steelhead sample sizes and the subsequent population estimates derived from the mark-recapture program at Moricetown Falls, 1999 – 2024.

I tend to discount the first two or three years relative to those that followed because the effort and catching techniques were not comparable to what followed. By 2010 the circumstances were becoming alarming. When 9,269 steelhead were captured, processed and released alarm bells ought to have been ringing. The population estimates should have been an even greater concern. Several (most) of the assumptions inherent in the population estimation methodology were never met. The result, very predictably, was inflated estimates. That 2010 population estimate implied 72% of the aggregate Skeena steelhead population, as estimated by the DFO test fishery, originated from the Bulkley system upstream from Witset. How plausible is that? When did anyone contest the methods and results? How could all of the M/R processes and results escape notice by the PSF sponsored analysts?

Figure 5 reveals that the number of steelhead captured was insufficient to even prepare a population estimate in four of the past five years. Most of those saw unusually low water during much of the fishing season. Low water has a major influence on the capture efficiency of the dip netters at the falls because migrating steelhead are confined to a single channel where they are much more likely to be caught. A decline of 97% between the peak number caught in 2010 and the average of the past five years cannot be dismissed on the premise of declining ocean survival!

If people involved hadn't been negligent or afraid to speak out, they would have highlighted the obvious. For example, the recapture of tagged steelhead was dominated by beach seine caught fish even though the number of dip net tagged fish

always exceeded seine tagged fish by a wide margin. Recaptures commonly occurred far downstream from the tagging site. Dead and near dead tagged fish were often encountered by anglers. No effort to encourage anglers and guides to report tagged steelhead catches was ever made. When the PSF conducted its comprehensive review of the provincial steelhead scenario, the only mention made of the Wet'suwet'en's steelhead involvement was as follows:

"Steelhead spawners returning to the Bulkley and Morice CUs have been monitored since 1999 by the Wet'suwet'en Fish and Wildlife Department and the Province of BC. However, data from this monitoring are only published up to 2012 so we were unable to assess current biological status for the Bulkley or Morice CUs.29"

More than two decades of a mark/recapture steelhead populations estimation program, inestimable dollars spent, and a two-year comprehensive review of all provincial steelhead data by a group involving several veteran provincial fisheries management staff and that is as much as they could put in print?! There is something seriously wrong here. If there was the slightest bit of useful management information stemming from the M/R program, there might be an argument that the harm done to the fish was an acceptable cost of doing business. That is not the case and that has been very well known for well over half the life of that program.

Now, what about the one fishery under direct control of the Provincial government agency charged with managing it? The latest iteration is known as the Ministry of Water, Land and

Resource Stewardship. It's senior authority, Minister Nathan Cullen, lives right there in the heartland of Skeena steelhead, Smithers. What have we seen from his shop over the same period that the DFO test fishery estimates have slipped?

Refer back to Figure 3 . What it instructs is there has been a steady decline in the estimated angler catch of Bulkley steelhead since 2010. That same decline is nowhere near as significant for any of the remaining "big five" streams. Even though the Morice is a major contributor to the system's steelhead population, it does not reveal the same pattern. The Morice stock peak timing is weeks earlier than the Bulkley. River discharge is higher during the Morice timing window and its fish are not as vulnerable to capture at Moricetown Falls under those conditions. Also, angling effort (days fished) remained stable on the Morice between the mid-1990s and the arrival of COVID. In contrast, the angling effort on the Bulkley doubled over the same period. Whereas the Morice catch estimates declined, somewhat mirroring the pattern evident for the Kispiox, Babine and Zymoetz , the Bulkley decline was far more dramatic. Increasing effort and declining catch is not something to be ignored when we know the efficiency of anglers has increased over that same period.

The angling related statistics for the Bulkley River mirror those from the steelhead population estimation efforts at Moricetown Falls. If the Bulkley/Morice has been the major contributor to the Skeena aggregate steelhead stock but is now reduced to the extent evident, it follows that the test fishery would reflect that closely. All available information points to that outcome. How is more and better science and the endless wait for 100%

reliability going to help? The only real debate now is how much has each of the recreational fishery and M/R projects contributed to the present circumstances?

Based on extensive personal association with both fisheries I take the position the M/R program is dominant. The complaint from First Nations about anglers playing with their food is more than slightly hypocritical relative to the treatment meted out in the conduct of the M/R program. I have many dozens of photographs from 35 years of observation to demonstrate harm done through the latter. Nonetheless, whereas the site and time specific photos are clear indication of a problem, the out of sight, out of mind influence of anglers catching and re-catching steelhead is not something to be ignored. Long overdue is examination of the issue of how much catching is too much catching?

Boat traffic on the Bulkley River cannot be discounted as a major factor in the steelhead abundance scenario. The progression from a small fraction of the angling effort accommodated by jet motor powered vessels in the late 1980s to half of or more of today's traffic utilizing such vessels invalidates any comparison of angling impacts then versus now. The difference in catching power of an angler in a jet boat vs one on foot or even one in a drift craft is enormous. I speak from personal experience having utilized my own succession of jet boats to stay ahead of the competition for half a century. When 200 HP inboard "sport jets" fully capable of running water levels such as in 2023 and likely to be repeated in 2024 are ever more common, steelhead are pressured as never before. (The Bulkley discharge in 2023 was about half of the longer-

term average for the prime fishing months of September and October.)

Babine River is the only other Skeena tributary that sustains boat traffic commanding attention. Consider 2023 again. The Babine was at its lowest discharge in memory. The Water Survey of Canada had the Babine Lake outlet flow at less than 20 cubic meters per second (cms) for the entire fishing season. The contributions of the Nichyeskwa and Nilkitkwa rivers a short distance downstream made only a marginal difference.

For those familiar with such numbers and their influence on navigability and fish behaviour and susceptibility, the Bulkley was at roughly 50 cms over the same period. More than a dozen guide-operated jet boats harassing Babine steelhead already hunkered down in overwintering habitat by mid-October is not biologically or morally responsible. Marketing “the secret season” of November is even less defensible. Small wonder the Gitxsans take exception to anglers playing with their food when they can point to 30 or 40 jet boat transported anglers daily bouncing off rocks while chasing sitting duck steelhead for fun and profit.

Postscript

In 2011 my first book, Skeena Steelhead – Unknown Past, Uncertain Future, was published. I thought I understood the

uncertain future was exactly that but I never appreciated how certain uncertain would prove to be.

There is a great deal more data, particularly that associated with the recreational fishery, that could be blended with much of what appears previously. That could easily sustain a growth industry around which science would be picked to either support or refute anything said. Unless we make some moves to address the obvious based on the best available information, fish and fishing will be buried by inertia.

The high elevation view for today is indisputable. There are fewer fish and a steady and deliberate retreat of the people traditionally paid to manage them on behalf of taxpayers. Co-incidentally we see an absurd number of unconnected non-government groups and organizations with access to unprecedented sums of money tripping over each other in pursuit of their personal agendas. In addition we have three governments continually meeting behind closed doors pursuing whatever the latest interpretation of “reconciliation” becomes and whatever those three governments want to insist are obligations pursuant to the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People. Throw treaty negotiations into the mix and understand fish are a major currency of all three. Then see if anyone in a position of authority will commit to answering the question of what might be left over for someone interested in catching one of those lowly steelhead a few years hence?

While all these dark clouds hang over us, there are still useful things that could be done to at least slow the rate of decline of steelhead and sustain some opportunity to find one in a Skeena

waterway for a few years yet. How about that Alaska scenario too many people have bought into as the only factor of concern re Skeena steelhead? Take some of those millions governments are throwing at unproductive, politically correct projects like that lower Skeena trap and commercial fishery observer programs where foxes guard hens and devote it to contracting commercial seine vessels to mirror the Southeast Alaska fisheries allegedly harvesting half our steelhead? How hard would it be to put together a carefully designed, well-administered program to put facts on the table that would place Canada in a defensible position to demonstrate harm done by Alaska and the conservation imperative? That isn't my suggestion. It comes from former commercial fishing heavyweight come conservationist Greg Taylor. He knows what he's talking about. A fraction of our taxpayer dollars being spent on that unbelievable trap project on the lower Skeena would answer a lot of outstanding questions.

Abandon the M/R program at Moricetown Falls or, if you prefer, Witset. Pay the participants to work on the habitat front instead. No doubt there is an abundance of opportunities to do such work in their traditional territories. What better investment in the future of fish than protecting and maintaining their habitat?

Get serious about bringing steelhead supply and angler demand into balance. Revisit the regulations governing rod day allocations for guides and how those rod days can be utilized. The last effort I made before retiring was to get the designated hitter for fish and wildlife regulations in the Ministry of Attorney General (MAG) to commit to amending one little sentence in the angling guide related rules. All he had to do was

stickhandle a revision that would allow the statutory authority for angling guide license adjudications to apply conditions on any angling guide license, not just those that applied to classified waters. That simple creation of an administrative tool could have made a major difference in the proliferation of commercial activity on waters that never should have been subjected to such a fate. It never happened. I'd love to run into that MAG rep today. The ability of the statutory authority to place conditions on guide licenses applicable to classified waters has never been used to the extent it could have and should have. Why aren't there guide free zones and/or times? Why aren't there limits placed on the number of assistant guides that can operate under a single guide license? Why does one guide license facilitate its owner operating multiple lodges on widely separated waters co-incidentally?

Boats have been a well-recognized issue for a very long time. So have all the excuses why nothing can be done to control them. When might we see leadership and collaboration on this issue instead of avoidance?

Put some serious resources into wholly independent third-party monitoring of the First Nations' harvest of steelhead. Do the same for commercial and recreational fisheries as well. The solicitations for projects coming from that growing list of groups and organizations now in the fisheries game instructs money is a distribution issue, not a supply issue.

Get serious about limited entry for steelhead seeking anglers on at least one or two streams. Thirty years ago I approached the BC Ferries people responsible for their reservation system. It

was easily directly adaptable to steelhead fishing, as well as relatively inexpensive. Recommendations to test the system (the Bulkley was always the logical choice) fell on deaf ears. So did those made for adapting Quebec's ZEC system for several of its blue-ribbon Atlantic salmon streams to one or two of our steelhead situations.

The list of options could be much longer but enough is enough when the prospects for implementation are as remote as they appear. I would like to be proven wrong.

R.S. Hooton

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