



Overall Salmon Recommendation = Some Concerns

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2008 BC Pacific salmon recommendations: Better and worse alternatives

Although the overall SeaChoice ranking for BC Pacific salmon is “yellow,” there is a diversity of fisheries and salmon populations within this category. Nass River sockeye is a “better choice” for 2008. Fraser River and Skeena River sockeye salmon are two “poor choices” for 2008. If the river of origin or species of salmon is not available on the label we encourage consumers, retailers and chefs to ask where their salmon has come from. Commercial buyers, in particular, should be able to get fairly reliable information on the origin of the salmon they buy from brokers or distributors.

Returns of many salmon stocks across Western Canada are expected to be very poor in 2008. In many cases, these returns mark a continued decline of populations of all five species of salmon caught in commercial fisheries. Habitat loss, past fisheries mismanagement, and unfavourable ocean conditions have all contributed to the current state of Pacific salmon. Due to these widespread challenges, SeaChoice has only provided one “better alternative” for the 2008 season.

Please contact us at info@seachoice.org for assistance in obtaining this information.

Better Alternatives:

Nass River sockeye salmon

Returns of Nass River sockeye salmon in 2008 are expected to be about average. The different populations contributing to this aggregate return are relatively well known, although the status for the smaller populations could be improved. In-season assessment methods are relatively strong.

Worse Alternatives:

Fraser River sockeye salmon

A range of sockeye stocks throughout the Fraser River are in a threatened or endangered state. Fisheries targeting Fraser sockeye can also affect chinook and coho stocks of

concern. Current fisheries practices have limited potential to avoid stocks of concern and rely heavily on unreliable forecasts of sockeye abundance.

Skeena River sockeye salmon

Many sockeye stocks throughout the Skeena watershed have experienced significant declines and have been subjected to high fisheries exploitation rates in recent years. Late season sockeye fisheries in 2007 likely resulted in significant impacts to steelhead stocks of concern as well. A panel of salmon scientists reviewed the Skeena sockeye fishery and made a number of recommendations, including reducing the ocean harvest of Skeena sockeye and improving stock assessment capabilities (Report available here: http://www.psf.ca/programs_initiatives.php?article=skeena_river). Until these recommendations are implemented, Skeena sockeye are a poor alternative.

2008 Synopsis

Forecasted returns for BC salmon for 2008 are low across much of the province, with very few strong returns expected and serious concerns remaining for many populations, particularly Coho, sockeye, chum and chinook. Salmon returns in 2007 were lower than expected for many stocks, due in part to very poor ocean conditions when many salmon went to sea in 2005. Many salmon returning in 2008 also went to sea in 2005, particularly Chinook, and may have suffered similar challenges.

The availability of 2008 BC salmon in the marketplace will likely be limited and sporadic. Wild Pacific salmon are available for purchase as fresh or processed product. Pacific salmon products available in Canada may be from other countries, such as the US or Russia. For further information on the status of United States Pacific salmon fisheries please refer to www.seachoice.org.

Sockeye salmon: Of the 28 different sockeye management units in the 2008 fishing plan 19 are identified as “low” or “stock of concern.” Two sockeye stocks (Sakinaw Lake and Cultus Lake) have been officially listed as endangered by a federal scientific body, but are not given legal protection under Canada’s Species At Risk Act. Under the federal Pacific Wild Salmon Policy the current draft number of “conservation units” of sockeye salmon that the government has committed to protecting is 242, which is considerably more than the 28 management units considered in the fishing plan.

Pink salmon: Of the 6 different pink management units in the 2008 fishing plan all are below target with 3 identified as “low” or “stock of concern.” Pink salmon usually live for 2 years and the populations that return in odd years are separated from those that return in even years. Under the federal Pacific Wild Salmon Policy the current draft number of “conservation units” of even-year pink salmon that the government has committed to protecting is 13, which is higher than the 6 management units considered in the fishing plan.

Chum salmon: Of the 11 different chum management units in the 2007 fishing plan all are below target with 6 identified as “low” or “stock of concern.” Under the federal

Pacific Wild Salmon Policy the current draft number of “conservation units” of chum salmon that the government has committed to protecting is 38, which is more than the 11 management units considered in the fishing plan. These 38 CUs include over 1200 separate chum spawning systems.

Coho salmon: Of the 19 different Coho management units in the 2007 fishing plan all are below target with 17 identified as “low” or “stock of concern” and 1 with insufficient data. One Coho stock (Interior Fraser) has been officially listed as endangered by a federal scientific body, but are not given legal protection under Canada’s Species At Risk Act. Under the federal Pacific Wild Salmon Policy the current draft number of “conservation units” of Coho salmon that the government has committed to protecting is 43, which is more than the 19 management units considered in the fishing plan. These 43 CUs include over 1400 separate Coho spawning systems.

Chinook salmon: Of the 24 different Chinook management units in the 2007 fishing plan all are below target with 18 identified as “low” or “stock of concern.” One Chinook stock (Okanagan) has been officially listed as endangered by a federal scientific body, but not given legal protection under Canada’s Species At Risk Act. Under the federal Pacific Wild Salmon Policy the current draft number of “conservation units” of Chinook salmon that the government has committed to protecting is 68, which is more than the 24 management units considered in the fishing plan. These 68 CUs include over 500 separate Chinook spawning systems.

Background for Yearly Salmon Recommendations

There are five species of Pacific salmon consisting of several hundred unique conservation units found in British Columbia waters. The marketplace usually identifies Pacific salmon by species (e.g., pink, sockeye) and sometimes country of origin but does not recognize the various distinct spawning populations. While it is not possible to give a seafood recommendation for all the possible runs of salmon, SeaChoice does provide general species-based recommendations.

SeaChoice evaluates all fisheries based on five main criteria: inherent vulnerability, stock status, bycatch, habitat/ecosystem impacts, and management regime (<http://www.seachoice.org/page/assessmentmethods>).

Inherent vulnerability: Pacific salmon are inherently resilient to exploitation because they are relatively short-lived, fast growing and have high reproductive potential.

Stock status: Individual stocks and populations of Pacific salmon vary considerably year to year. Of 5358 assessed Pacific salmon stocks in BC and the Yukon, 5.1% are of special concern, 11.4% are at high risk of extinction and 2.1% are extinct (Slaney et al. 1996).

Bycatch: The capture of birds and weak stocks of salmon along with stronger stocks are the main bycatch concern surrounding Pacific salmon fisheries in Canadian waters. There

is a general management failure to take initiatives to control this problem. Consequently several smaller endangered stocks are at risk of further decline due to commercial fisheries. It is estimated that each year the salmon gillnet fishery captures approximately 12,000 seabirds based on extrapolations from observed test fisheries. The most commonly caught bird species are common murre, rhinoceros auklets, and marbled murrelets. Less than 5% of the birds caught are returned alive. The marbled murrelet is a 'threatened' species under the federal Species At Risk Act.

Habitat/ecosystem considerations: Salmon are caught commercially by seine (~50%), gillnet (~25%) and trolling (~25%). These gears operate in mid-water, so habitat damage from fishing practices is considered minimal. Spawning Pacific salmon provide far ranging ecosystem values resulting from the transfer of nutrients to marine and terrestrial plants and animals. Salmon fisheries management has not yet accounted for the broader ecosystem values of salmon. Many freshwater habitats have been degraded or lost through forestry, agriculture, or development which, when combined with narrow geographic areas for unique stocks, is cause for concern.

Management regime: Commercial salmon fisheries are managed using restricted area, gear, and time openings. Harvest is generally regulated to manage impacts to stock aggregates. Enforcement and in-season management adjustments are used to ensure different management measures are met. However, many of these management measures do not yet protect weak stocks or consider the ecosystem role of returning salmon to other organisms. The recreational fishery for salmon is substantial in many areas and is inadequately monitored. Although Fisheries and Oceans Canada has a "Wild Salmon Policy" intended to protect salmon diversity and support ecosystem values, it has not yet been effectively implemented. Maintaining genetic diversity is considered necessary to allow salmon to adapt to predicted environmental changes associated with climate change (e.g., increased stream temperatures). Intensive fisheries present an unknown threat to this diversity.