

Green Scene: Celebrating Salmon

By Elaine Golds

(published October 21, 2011 – *The TriCity News*)

By mid October, adult salmon are beginning to move into local creeks in search of a mate and clean gravel for spawning. Only a few years earlier, they emerged from this same streambed as young salmon. The return of these salmon to their birthplace in small streams where they will spawn and die is one of the more remarkable biological sagas of the Pacific coast. Unlike Atlantic salmon which can survive after spawning and return to the ocean, all species of Pacific salmon face certain death once they spawn. Biologists now understand the decaying bodies of these mature salmon fertilize streams and help to ensure the survival of the next generation. Nonetheless, there is something very inspiring about the ultimate sacrifice these adult salmon instinctively make for their offspring.

Salmon returning to Hoy Creek in Coquitlam. Volunteers have been operating the hatchery on Hoy since 2000.
V. Otton photo.



When the settlement of greater Vancouver began in the late 1800s, the value of small streams was totally unappreciated. As a consequence, far too many streams were buried underground. While these streams continue to convey rainwater to the ocean, they have forever lost the ability to produce salmon and support many other species. Most of the streams in the older part of Port Moody, which was the terminus of the transcontinental railway in 1886, suffered this fate. Fortunately, over the decades as development has converted ever more forests to suburbs, an appreciation for the value of urban streams has grown tremendously. As a consequence, some urban streams have escaped the fate of being reduced to an underground pipe. A few of these streams now have small hatcheries where volunteers work to enhance public appreciation for streams and incubate some eggs within the hatchery as insurance against catastrophic failures in the natural environment.

All of us, in many different ways, can have an impact on the survival of salmon in these urban streams. For example, most of us drive cars - which sometimes leak oil. Any oil deposited on city streets will eventually be carried by rainfall to storm drains and then into local streams where it can become a major source of pollution. Even the soap suds from washing cars and chlorine from garden hoses are harmful chemicals if they reach the stream environment. Choosing not to use weed-killers and other pesticides in your garden will help to keep harmful chemicals out of local streams. Cigarette butts, often discarded on streets, contain a variety of harmful chemicals including carcinogens. Carried by rainfall, these butts can deliver a harmful load of toxic chemicals into urban streams. Animal wastes which are not properly disposed of can also contribute to the burden of noxious chemicals in urban streams.

While trails close to streams can provide an awesome view of spawning salmon this time of year, it is important to avoid disturbing these salmon or damaging their fragile eggs. Dog-owners, in particular, should be aware that dogs can do a great deal of damage if they are allowed in streams anytime from fall to spring.

Even the groceries you purchase can have an impact on salmon. A new “Salmon-Safe” program introduced this fall by the *Pacific Salmon Foundation* and *Fraser Basin Council* involves working with local farmers to ensure their agricultural practices do not harm salmon streams. Their certification process requires a visit to the farm and a rigorous review of irrigation and fertilization practices, soil maintenance and pesticide applications. This program, initiated in Oregon in 1996, provides an eco-label for Salmon-Safe practices (see www.salmonsafe.ca for more information). Obviously, organic growers are good candidates to acquire Salmon-Safe certification. To date, 22 farms in BC have been certified. These include the Glen Valley Organic Farm which sells produce at the Coquitlam Farmers Market and some farmers who supply the local Thrifty’s grocery stores.



People cheering-on the returning salmon at the ‘Hoy Creek Salmon Come Home Festival’ in Coquitlam. V. Otton photo.

The autumn season provides excellent opportunities for local residents to enjoy spectacular views of large salmon spawning in small urban streams. While all species of Pacific salmon use the Coquitlam River, our smaller streams typically provide spawning habitat for only chum and coho salmon. The Hoy Creek Salmon Come Home event this Sunday, October 23 from 11 am – 3 pm provides an opportunity to view mature salmon in Hoy Creek just downstream of Douglas College in Coquitlam. On Sunday, November 13 from 11am-3pm, the Hyde Creek Salmon Festival offers similar views of salmon behind the Hyde Creek Recreation Centre in Port Coquitlam. At both events, community groups will be present with environmental displays and DFO staff will be on hand (and in the creek) to answers questions about spawning salmon. See you there?