Green Scene: Celebrate Salmon in the Tri-Cities

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[Title in Tri-City News: Salmon: hard-working wonders]

When our family moved to British Columbia, we were attracted to the Tri-cities by its abundance of forested areas. On nature walks with my young sons, I was delighted to explore forested ravines with streams replete with fish and frogs. Although not all the forests that greeted us in 1989 remain in place today, treed areas still attract new residents and trails along salmon streams continue to be featured as selling points by real estate agents.

What I didn't understand as a newcomer was how important small streams are for salmon. The north Pacific coast supports the greatest diversity of salmonids found anywhere in the world and seems to have salmon species adapted to all types of aquatic habitat. The headwaters of most small streams sustain tiny cutthroat trout. The main stem of larger rivers, such as the Coquitlam, provides spawning areas for steelhead, pink and Chinook salmon. If a large lake forms part of a watershed, you may find a sockeye run. Smaller tributaries and streams are ideal habitat for coho. Even the streams so starved for water that they disappear every summer still manage to support spawning chum salmon and their eggs during the fall and winter. You might consider this bounty of salmon to be nothing less than one of the major marvels of our west coast.

It's astonishing to watch large adult chum struggle up a small stream so shallow that their backs and dorsal fins protrude above the water. Young chum immediately migrate downstream to salt water once they hatch in the spring. With the benefit of three years spent in rich ocean waters, they grow to an impressive size. Some people consider chum "lazy" because they don't swim very far upstream before spawning. However, for a fish that has undertaken a migration of thousands of miles in the ocean, this is surely a misnomer. Instead, we should consider them clever fish adapted to take advantage of even temporary habitat created by winter rains in downstream areas of ephemeral streams.

Coho are also well suited for the challenges of life in small streams. They tend to return to the streams of their birth a little later in the autumn than chum and have developed a different survival strategy. Because coho spend their first year in fresh water, their spawning areas must be in small streams that flow year-round. After hatching in the spring, young coho salmon seek out even the tiniest of tributaries where they will feed and slowly grow for a year. Tributaries of the Coquitlam River only a foot in width and several inches deep can be literally loaded with coho. Clear waters with the cooling shade of trees plus a cobbled streambed full of insects is all it takes to sustain these small coho until they are ready to migrate to the ocean. Unfortunately, small coho and chum streams seem to be at highest risk from urban development.

Right now, the most immediate crisis faced by returning salmon is the exceedingly low water that is preventing them from moving into spawning sites. While a few salmon have been able to move into local creeks, many remain trapped downstream waiting for long overdue rains to replenish water levels.

Only the Coquitlam River has sufficient water to allow the return of reasonable numbers of salmon. There, many chum salmon can be observed spawning beneath the Patricia Street pedestrian bridge.

The prolonged dry period this fall is creating one more challenge for urban salmon. Regardless, this season still presents a marvellous opportunity to witness the miracle of their annual return to natal streams. Two community events are held every fall in the Tri-cities to celebrate their homecoming. The Hoy Creek event will be held this Sunday while, on November 12, the Salmon Festival in Port Coquitlam will welcome salmon back to Hyde Creek. Volunteers who work to protect stream habitat will be on hand at each event to help visitors appreciate the wonders of our urban streams.