

We Alaskans

Alaska's mysteriously shrinking Kenai king salmon

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A king salmon clears the water after being hooked in the Deep Creek marine fishery of upper Cook Inlet. (Mike Chihuly)

I attended a book signing at a Ninilchik book club meeting in early January of this year and met a bubbly lady by the name of Shirley, who, it turned out, is the stepdaughter of Les Anderson. You may remember that Anderson, fishing with friend Bud Lofstedt, caught the largest king salmon ever taken on rod and reel in North America.

the early run for many years. The finger of blame for the deterioration of the early run could not be pointed at the commercial folks.

Rather, despite our best management efforts to regulate the various fisheries while still protecting the habitat, we loved the river and the resource to death. Today, much like the Columbia River, biologists fear we have diluted the large-fish gene pool of Kenai River kings to the point that it may take decades to recover — if it ever does.

Is this just another sad wildlife story, like that of the passenger pigeons, the Plains buffalo or the Atlantic salmon of the East Coast?

"Water is life," as the Dakota Access pipeline protesters have repeated for months, but "water and salmon are life" in Alaska, too. The book, "Made of Salmon," a product of an advocacy effort called The Salmon Project, chronicles well what salmon mean to Alaska's diverse people, from the salmon troll fishery in Southeast Alaska to the purse seiners in Prince William Sound, from the king salmon derby on Anchorage's Ship Creek to the subsistence sockeye fishery at Batsulnetas on the Copper River.

We need to keep our salmon resources healthy and sustainable. We need to get those big Kenai River kings with their genetic blueprints back in the river and safely on their spawning beds. We need to recapture that genetic diversity that is a bellwether of our health as a people.

So what do we do? Where do we go from here? How do we make it right?

There is no easy solution. Certainly, not all our woes on the Kenai River are locally induced. King salmon productivity and size have suffered statewide for the last decade. Biologists tell us that the age at maturity for kings is decreasing— that is, a higher proportion of kings are coming back after spending one to three years in the marine environment, instead of three to five years. Why? Biologists aren't sure. And there are other factors influencing the health and productivity of our fish runs. But let this not be our excuse or scapegoat. We have a responsibility to be good stewards of the resource and do everything we can to fulfill that obligation and correct past blunders. We must do whatever we can as individual users and harvesters of the resource — including participating in local Fish and Game advisory committees and state Board of Fisheries meetings — to maintain productivity and diversity in our fisheries. Certainly, we can heed our past mistakes and learn from the ongoing research of fisheries scientists, who continue to unlock the secrets of the great Kenai River kings.

For me, I can substitute my kings with canned reds and silvers and make smoked strips out of smaller kings. I like the bigger fish for their oil and I'm not excited about releasing salmon, but if I am trolling for kings on the Miss Shirley this coming summer in the Deep Creek marine fishery, many miles south of the Kenai and Kasilof rivers, and I bring a great king to the boat, I will release it as delicately and judiciously as I can — hoping and praying that it successfully survives the

gauntlet of fishers that await it on its journey to the spawning grounds. Until we find a definitive solution and the health of the Kenai River kings is restored, for me, it's the right thing to do.

Do you have a plan?

If you're a setnetter picking your gillnet on the flood this July at Humpy Point; or a Kenai River dipnetter, chest deep in water, waiting for a hit on your dipnet held hard to the bottom at the mouth of the river; or an angler sitting in the bow of a Willie Predator drifting the Pillars and holding a 9-foot Lamiglas rod with a silver-and-chartreuse Kwikfish on the other end, and you bring in a great Kenai River king, a healthy king worthy of praise even in the heydays of the 1980s, a five- or six-ocean king carrying genes with the potential to make it right again — what will you do?

Will history repeat itself?

Mike Chihuly is a retired fisheries biologist, sportfishing guide and fire chief, and a former member of the Alaska Board of Fisheries. He lives in Ninilchik with his wife, Shirley, and just finished his first book, titled "Alaska Fish & Fire."

Fishing Kenai Peninsula Salmon

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