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## State says fish tales don't quite ring true

*Some sport fishers love Gary Loomis, but commercial operators and state biologists cast doubt on many of his assertions*

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His pitch is dynamic and persuasive - but is it true?

Over the past year, renowned outdoorsman and fishing rod inventor Gary Loomis, featured in an article reprinted in The Daily Astorian Dec. 28, has been rallying troops of sport fishers to join a regional branch of the Coastal Conservation Association with a speech that blames commercial fishing for Northwest salmon woes.

But one of his battle cries doesn't add up, according to the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.

And commercial gillnetters, who have been targeted by Loomis as a factor in salmon declines, say they're being unfairly tainted in an effort to recruit new members to the CCA, a national sportfishing advocacy group that has worked to ban commercial fishing in the Gulf states.

Over and over in his CCA promotions, Loomis recounts the story of the coho salmon run on Cedar Creek in Washington. The creek was so degraded by 1992, Loomis says it only supported 32 salmon before he and the Fish First organization took up the task of rebuilding its coho runs. The group improved habitat and started a near-natural fry production and rearing program on the creek.

But just as their efforts were beginning to pay off, Loomis claims a late-addition commercial gillnet harvest in 2003 cleaned out the Cedar Creek run he'd labored to rebuild. He says the run was 16,000 fish in 2002 and was expected to be 30,000 in 2003, but because the gillnet season it dropped to 6,100.

In a recent report, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife Director Jeff Koenings said those numbers aren't consistent with the data his agency has been collecting or with the way the Columbia River fishery is managed.

Koenings said his agency has been monitoring coho abundance on Cedar Creek and estimating the adult returns since 1999. According to his data, "the actual returns of unmarked coho to Cedar Creek are much lower than those numbers reported to the media."

"It's propaganda," said Hobe Kytr, a spokesman for the commercial fishing group Salmon for All, who reviewed state data on Cedar Creek coho. "It's not based on a word of truth. The Cedar Creek coho story is one Gary Loomis has been telling all over the Northwest, and it keeps getting better and better every time he tells it."

In 2002, WDFW counted 690 adult coho returning to Cedar Creek - nowhere near the 16,000 fish claimed by Loomis. In fact, the most returning adult coho WDFW has counted on Cedar Creek since 1999 was 2,355 in 2005.

"Cedar Creek is a small watershed," said Guy Norman, regional director for WDFW. "Even though it is important - we would definitely agree it's very a important natural production coho stream for the Columbia River - the capacity based on our habitat analysis is a few thousand fish. ... We wouldn't expect runs in the 30,000 range."

Norman said Loomis' work on Cedar Creek has been central to the progress in rebuilding the coho run, and reductions in harvest opportunity have helped too.

"Fish First and Gary Loomis have indeed worked hard and conducted habitat restoration, and that's definitely helped productivity," he said. "Even though the potential is not anywhere near 30,000 - it's much less than that - they're helping with that habitat potential."

Commercial harvest by gillnetters reached 21 percent of the entire coho run in 2003, which would not account for the dramatic drop in returns to Cedar Creek claimed by Loomis. Norman said the overall coho harvest rate is in keeping with what gillnetters would have taken from the Cedar Creek run. Based on the harvest rate, WDFW estimates the commercial harvest of Cedar Creek coho in 2003 to be 487.

But Loomis defends his numbers, saying WDFW isn't properly accounting for the coho that swim by the fish trap. To get to Cedar Creek, coho must swim up the Lewis River about eight miles. A few miles up the creek, there's a a waterfall with a fish ladder that contains the fish trap.

Loomis says when his group launched the Fish First project on the creek, a former hatchery manager at the nearby Lewis River Hatchery told him for every fish caught in the trap eight or nine jump the falls and are never counted. For an easy estimate of the actual run size, Loomis multiplied the number caught in the trap by 10.

"There are more fish going up there than they're able to count," Loomis said in an interview last week. "The trouble is Jeff Koenig only used the numbers that went through the trap. They didn't do anything about the percentage that are jumping the falls."

Actually, Norman said the state does have an "expansion factor" that accounts for the efficiency of the fish trap.

"We realize we're not getting every fish in the trap," he said. "We use a tag and recapture method to get a handle on what percentage of the fish we're actually seeing."

Loomis said the state agency has a reason to downplay the potential run size on Cedar Creek.

"They've been in charge of it for the last 140 years," he said. "Have they done a good job or a poor job? If they've killed off 100 times more than they tell you they killed off, then they really did a bad job."

He also points to observer data suggesting gillnetters have underreported their catch, which would throw off the state's harvest estimates.

WDFW "can only report the numbers that they get," he said.

Underlying the numbers game on salmon runs is a battle for fishing seasons on the Columbia. Though Loomis says his push for CCA is about protecting the fish, not gaining ground for sport fishers in the current tug of war over spring chinook salmon impacts, commercial fishermen note that his recruiting efforts started about a year before this year's allocation decision, which will take place on Friday. Chinook salmon impacts are split between commercial and sport fishing groups.

Jim Wells, president of Salmon for All, said Loomis is using the gillnet fleet as "a whipping post" to build membership in CCA so they can be more of a force in the allocation decision.

"This isn't about conservation," said Jim Wells, president of Salmon for All. "He knew these impact splits were coming up. He needed membership in his group and he's using fictitious numbers for Cedar Creek to get it. Those numbers were never there in the first place, and now he's blaming the gillnetters for wiping them out."