

*"The Observer
has come to stay,
and it won't
take water from
anything that
wiggles."*

— George Hibbet
Observer Founding Editor
Dec. 28, 1900



CHINOOK OBSERVER

The News Source for Washington's
Long Beach Peninsula
since 1900

Editorial: Diverse fishing methods coming back

Important to ensure fairness for families invested in gillnetting

Tuesday, June 22, 2010

There are a great many ways to catch a salmon, though you'd never guess it from watching common practices on the Lower Columbia River in 2010. When it comes to commercial fishing, gillnets have been just about the only show on the water for decades. This may be about to change.

There's no doubt that gillnets are a highly effective means of catching commercial quantities of fish. Mesh sizes, placement, timing and other factors give them good flexibility in what they catch and what they allow to pass. The men and women who operate gillnets are brave and highly skilled artists, worthy of celebration.

But at least one thing gillnets don't do very well is tell hatchery salmon from those that spawn naturally, which we deem worthy of much greater protection. As their name implies, gillnets mostly catch fish by their gills, and they must be hauled aboard to be examined. Unmarked "wild" salmon are put back in the water, but a good many are believed to die from injuries or exhaustion.

Go back a century or even less, and there was a far more dynamic range of commercial fishing options on the Columbia. Purse seining, beach seining, fish traps (also known as pound nets), fish wheels and dip nets were all used at various locations from the river's mouth to The Dalles, Ore. In the first half of the 20th century, nearly all these methods were outlawed, except by tribal members.

Various justifications were put forth at the time for bans on fishing methods, including conservation. There were legitimate concerns that fisheries were being over-exploited and depleted. Behind the scenes, however, the decision to go with gillnets may have had as much to do with regional politics and economic manipulations as with sincere motives to perpetuate the health of fish runs.

But without refighting old battles, the interesting fact is that today state fisheries experts are working with people in both Oregon and Washington to re-examine assumptions about old fishing methods and perhaps revive some for the 21st century.

At a Longview meeting two weeks ago, Washington Fish and Wildlife officials brought the public up to speed on recent trials of purse seines, beach seines and a modernized floating type of fish trap called a Merwin trap. As in the distant past, both beach and purse seines worked very well, but the floating trap less so - previous experiments have found them susceptible to becoming fouled by debris carried in the water column.

All these methods offer the distinct advantage of minimizing injuries and time out of the water for non-hatchery fish.

The bigger, far-thornier issues will come if the states and feds decide it's worth shaking things up and bringing these methods back into licensed use. Who will get the licenses? Who will get the most desirable seining grounds and river locations? Who will give up existing run allocations?

Families that have invested generations of time, money and blood in gillnetting will be justified in watching carefully and deserve a good deal of deference. But if better fishing methods preserve the nation's extremely expensive native salmon, maybe some of the money saved can go into making these allocation decisions palatable to today's fishermen.

"New" fishing methods - and the politics surrounding them - will be a fascinating process to observe.