

According to a guest column authored by Bryan Irwin, Northwest regional executive director of the Coastal Conservation Association (CCA), the mark-selective recreational fishery for summer Chinook has “clear biological benefits for salmon and is part of the solution to increasing wild fish returns to their native habitats while providing increased fishing opportunity for hatchery salmon.” The truth is somewhat murkier, however.

Summer Chinook have a relatively low mark rate. For several years it was figured to be 35-40%, meaning less than four out of ten of these fish were adipose fin-clipped hatchery fish. That means that an angler would have been likely to handle at least three unmarked, and therefore presumably wild, summer Chinook for every two hatchery fish retained. WDFW recently revised the mark rate upwards to around 60%, which is still significantly lower than the mark rate for spring Chinook. Mr. Irwin’s claim that the mark-selective fishery is beneficial is dependent on the certainty that unmarked fish caught and released survive the experience. There is a slight problem with that assumption: there are no independently verifiable data to back it up. No one has ever conducted a hooking mortality study on the Columbia River whatsoever.

One of the problematic issues regarding release mortalities in mark-selective fisheries is water temperature. The waters of the Columbia River during summer Chinook season tend to be about 65° F, which is nearing the point where the temperature alone can cause salmonid mortalities. Add to that the stress of being hooked, played out, handled and released and one can readily see that it is highly possible that a good many of these fish will not, in fact, survive the experience.

Upper Columbia River summer Chinook are not ESA-listed; they are considered healthy. For many years, WDFW staff has reported that their spawning habitat is fully recruited. There is no genuine biological reason for a mark-selective fishery for summer Chinook. The management agencies yielded to pressure from the sportfishing industry to institute a mark-selective fishery for summer Chinook to stretch out their time on the water. A 15% mortality rate was arbitrarily assigned to the fishery, with no data to back it up..

Instituting a mark-select sport fishery for summer Chinook was a political, rather than a biological, decision. Mr. Irwin is using this opportunity to make political hay by bashing the gillnet fishery. He is, after all, an officer of the Northwest CCA. Earlier this year the CCA attempted to get a ballot initiative to ban fishing with gillnets and tangle nets on the ballot in Oregon. It didn’t work, in large part because they didn’t stick with the truth.

The fishery for summer Chinook is conducted when most Columbia River commercial fishermen are in Alaska for the fishing season. Last year there were three openers between June 18 and June 30, totaling all of 32 hours. Compare that to the 46 days of sportfishing Mr. Irwin is promoting. Last year, our commercial fishermen landed 2,371 summer Chinook and 219 sockeye salmon, using 8-inch mesh net. Those are fish that were made available to the general fish-buying public, which constitutes the vast majority of us.

By June 16, when the summer season officially begins, most of the listed Snake River spring-summer Chinook have already passed Bonneville. Sockeye and steelhead are small enough that they typically swim right through an 8-inch mesh net. The fact of the matter is, the most substantial non-Indian mortalities for wild steelhead typically accrue in the sport fishery, not in the commercial. Perhaps Mr. Irwin should address his concerns for their safety there.

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Salmon For All