

It's Salmon Time Again

A Shuswap Passion column for the Shuswap Market News

By Jim Cooperman August 28, 2010

Sockeye salmon are already returning in record numbers this year, which bodes well for this coming October when there will be a dominant run in the Adams River. The predictions call for nearly a half million fish for the early summer run which includes Scotch Creek, Seymour River, Eagle River and other tributaries.

On August 21st, I stopped in at the counting station on Scotch Creek that is run by the Little Shuswap Lake Indian Band's fishery department. Aaron Arnouse explained how already that day they had counted 35,000 fish and so far 160,000 had passed through the fence.

The band has operated the Alaskan style counting station since 1994. It consists of a metal fence with removable stakes. During the peak, band members work in teams, 24 hours a day counting the fish at one hour intervals. During their breaks, they compile the numbers. I watched the salmon crowding up behind the fence that allowed only one at a time to pass through the space where just one stake was removed.

The team also keeps track of the gender, with so far males slightly outnumbering the females. Sometimes, they have to scare away those fish that occasionally swim back to the fence, a job that Aaron's ten year old son particularly enjoys doing.

Another chore for the band's fishery crew is to count the dead fish by cutting off their tails and pitching them up on the creek banks so no dead fish are counted more than once. Every week, a crew walks the entire 25 kilometres of the meandering creek from 12 km up the logging road counting dead spawners, each team covering a few kilometres. The fishery crew also takes biological samples of scales and otoliths (the inner ear) for the Department of Fisheries and Ocean to analyze. As well, the lengths and general health observations are recorded.

While most of their work involves counting fish, the fisheries crew also does some traditional harvesting for band members using nets to capture the salmon in the pool behind the fence. Most of the sockeye are deep red by the time they begin spawning, which means the flesh is only suitable for smoking, however occasionally there are some that are still silver in colour and are thus good for cooking in the barbecue,

fry pan or oven.

Salmon have helped sustain the Secwepemc people for thousands of years and the Adams River run was likely always one of the largest and most significant. One indication of the importance of salmon is that the Secwepemc name for the eighth moon means "time of salmon" and for the ninth moon, "time of spawning." Of course prior to the 1913 Hell's Gate landslide caused in part by blasting for the railroad and prior to the overfishing for the huge coastal canneries, there were multiple large runs every year, spread over three to four months.

Hudson's Bay Company journals for Fort Kamloops provide details of how the traders also depended on dried salmon in the early years. A December 22, 1822 entry explains that the Company sent "Mr. Montigny and 10 men to the Upper Lake on Thompson River" and then four days later returned with 1200 salmon. Other tribes would also travel to the Little River including Indians from as far away as Penticton and Washington State to trade goat, elk and deer meat for dried salmon.

The traditional methods of harvesting usually involved using spears at night with the aid of pitchwood torches either from the shore or from canoes. As the lower Adams River was not suitable for pitlamping, the band built a fish weir at the mouth of the river. They only took as many salmon as they could prepare for drying in one day, and the speared fish were kept in pools until needed. They dried the fish by hanging the fillets on sticks over a small red alder or red willow fire, which was used primarily to keep the flies away as the fish dried by air more than by smoke or heat.

While the Scotch Creek run is in full gear, Chinook salmon are still massing in Shuswap and Mara Lakes as they await the Shuswap River temperature to cool down to 13 degrees from its current 19 degrees. On August 24th, the Splatstin Band held a salmon celebration to mark the beginning of their traditional harvest at the Cooke Creek Recreation site on the Shuswap River.

There were about 150 people there to enjoy a salmon feast, hear talks, watch the Lahal or stick game, hear stories in both Secwepemc and English and observe fishing, preparing and smoking techniques. Our favourite part was the friendship dance, when everyone joined hands to circle and then the lead began shaking hands with the dancers at the end. By the time the dance ended we all managed to

shake hands and have eye contact with everyone else there twice, which served to bring us all genuinely together.