

It's time for Ottawa to tune in to spawning channel problems

Monday, September 10, 2007

MARK HUME

VANCOUVER -- When Blake Covernton saw the spawning channel on the **Glendale** River last spring he knew something had to be done about it.

Now - after launching a project to save the wild salmon in one of the most important rivers in the Broughton Archipelago / Knight Inlet area - he is wiser and \$100,000 poorer.

But he has no regrets. British Columbia's wild stocks are in crisis, he said, and that means everyone who loves salmon has to step up and do what they can. For him that meant doing a restoration project in a few weeks that would have taken years had it gone through the government bureaucracy.

"We had to get in and clean the spawning channel before the pink salmon started coming back. If we didn't do it immediately a whole year would have been lost," said Mr. Covernton, in explaining why he rushed into the project before funding was in place.

"We're losing our wild salmon on this coast. We can't afford to stand around and talk about it any more. We have to do something. So I did something."

Boy did he ever.

He mobilized a task force that barged equipment into the remote **Glendale** River, which is found on the mainland coast, off Vancouver Island's northeastern shoulder. Within a few weeks they churned through tonnes of gravel, restoring it to a condition that was ideal for spawning.

The **Glendale** spawning channel was built by the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans in 1988. It worked well at first, but gradually a blanket of organic material built up that smothered the gravel. Any eggs laid underneath that muck would have suffocated.

"Spawning channels are artificial and they have to be cleaned every couple of years. For whatever reason the **Glendale** channel was forgotten ... it had never been cleaned," said Mr. Covernton, a former commercial fisherman who now does project management for resource companies.

When Mr. Covernton contacted DFO about the clogged spawning channel he was told there was no money available in the 2007 budget. But DFO would consider a restoration plan if it didn't have to pay for it.

Within days Mr. Covernton had Victor Ewert, a top fisheries consultant, flown into the watershed by helicopter. That trip produced a report that stated the channel was nearly dead and prompt action was needed.

With that report in hand Mr. Covernton got approval from DFO, the local Da'naxda'xw First Nation and the B.C. government. And a few weeks after that he had a crew in the remote watershed fixing the problem.

Only afterwards did Mr. Covernton start looking for money to pay the \$163,000 bill he'd rung up in the name of salmon restoration.

The B.C. government's Pacific Salmon Forum and the Wilderness Tourism Association have since kicked in money. A salmon farming company offered support, but was politely turned down because that industry is controversial in the Broughton Archipelago, where sea lice from farms are suspected of killing pink salmon.

Mr. Covernton, who is still \$100,000 short, has launched a fundraising effort.

Brian Gunn of the WTA praised him for tackling a problem most people would still be talking about.

"The Broughton Archipelago and wild salmon need more Blakes," he said. "He's a gutsy person who has taken initiative."

Mr. Gunn said B.C.'s wild salmon are in dire straits and dramatic action is needed to save them.

"I think Blake is important because he can be a catalyst for bringing people together. We can use this project on the **Glendale** as a model for getting things done," he said.

Wilf Luedke, DFO area director for the south coast, said the **Glendale** project was done to high standards - but the proposal simply came in too late to qualify for funding this year.

And now that the work has been done the government is caught in a process bind.

"We can't back-date contracts," Mr. Luedke said.

He noted that 100,000 pink salmon have returned to the **Glendale** River this month, and 7,000 are in the spawning channel.

"It's early yet, and more may move in. We are watching that to see how well the salmon respond," Mr. Luedke said.

He added that DFO would like to work with Mr. Covernton on future projects, but the contract approval process has to be followed.

It's clear Mr. Covernton moved too fast for the bureaucracy this year. But the important thing is that he moved just in time for the **Glendale** River salmon.

Ottawa should bail this guy out. After all, the government built the spawning channel that he just saved.

mhume@globeandmail.com & P

END of ARTICLE

Channel surfing on Spawning Channels to follow below:

Artificial spawning channels are built adjacent to salmon rivers, directing a controlled flow of water over extensive gravel spawning beds. The rate of flow and water depth is set to create ideal spawning conditions.

Salmon spawn naturally in spawning channels.

Studies have shown that egg-to-fry survival rates can increase 10 fold in spawning channels as compared to survival in the adjacent, natural stream.

The serpentine channels are not exposed to the seasonal floods that can wash away and kill salmon eggs in the natural river. But without floods to flush the gravel clean, sediment builds up eventually smothering the spawning beds.

Spawning channels have to be cleaned every few years by crews that use heavy equipment to scoop up dirty gravel and "cast" it over the bottom, dislodging sediment, which is washed away. Dirty water created in the cleaning process is pumped away from the channels so as not to settle farther downstream.

Spawning channels attract bears during the fall, because the salmon are easily caught in the shallow waters and steady currents. That phenomenon has led to the creation of bear tourism businesses in B.C. and most spawning channels now have bear viewing platforms on them.

PDF Edition(s) of Page S1: [GTA ISL TOR](#)

[Print Format above article](#)

Author: Mark Hume

Geography: Glendale River; British Columbia;

Byline: MARK HUME

Source:

Organization:

Subject: wildlife; salmon; conservation

Persons: Blake Covernton

Words: 985

Page: S1

Ownership: Staff Writer