

Wild Times

Skytrain Salmon

by Joe Foy

The end of summer signals the beginning of salmon season in my community of New Westminster.

First, summer begins to slow down, tangled up in an explosion of spider webs. You almost can't walk anywhere near tree branches in September without the sticky nets wrapping around your face. The spiders always remind me of fishers patiently tending their set nets, waiting for the next big run to start.

When the blue skies of summer eventually turn grey, the salmon rains roll in. Local streams and ponds parched by the long dry days of July and August are recharged with the blustery downpours of October.

In our neighborhood, the salmon come in from the North Pacific, and make their way into the mouth of the Fraser, and home in on the Brunette River – a five minute walk down the hill from my house. They wait for the rains to raise the water level so they can complete the final leg of their journey to their spawning grounds in the Brunette's headwaters in Burnaby and Vancouver.

No one really knows how the salmon actually pull this off. They have some kind of internal memory and perception that allows them to navigate thousands of kilometers in the Pacific Ocean – then return to spawn in the exact stream where they were hatched.

Each fall, when the salmon are safely back on their spawning beds, I put on my gumboots, grab a grandkid or two and head down to the Brunette to meet them.



Checking out the chum salmon in the tea-coloured Brunette is a family tradition I treasure every year. Standing on the mossy riverbank, under a canopy of huge maple trees decked out in their bright yellow and orange colours, I'm left amazed that the salmon continue to persevere.

It almost didn't happen.

Colonial records from 1860 report that Coast Salish families were gathering every fall, as they had always done, to harvest from mighty runs of salmon so vast that the banks of the Brunette could scarcely contain the abundance.

After 100 years of "industrial development," by 1960, the Brunette was reduced to a scoured ditch. A toxic brew from a local distillery, plywood mill, stockyard, and other polluting enterprises flowed through the river.

Consequently, the salmon were almost completely snuffed out.

In 1969, a group of activists who called themselves the Sapperton Fish and Game Club started the seemingly impossible

task of bringing the Brunette back from the brink. For over 50 years, this group and other supporting organizations have been salvaging the river, with major changes occurring recently.

These days industry no longer pipes their crud into the river. Gravel for spawning beds has been returned to the scoured sections. Large logs have been anchored at the riverbanks to provide quiet water refuge areas for newly hatched salmon. Old dams have been busted or jumped with fish ladders to allow salmon to head up river.

Because of all this good work, the Brunette teems with life again – though not as abundant as before, it is still a delight to behold in the urban centre of Metro Vancouver. There are beaver and herons and sometimes, believe it or not, there is a black bear or two enjoying the river too.

This miracle has shaped my neighborhood in so many ways. Instead of an open sewer, the Brunette is a cool leafy place to go for a walk on a hot summer day. People are proud of the river and care about its health.

The fight for the Brunette is not over – and probably never will be. Competition for urban living space and polluted runoff from roads and parking lots have replaced industry as the biggest threats facing the river these days.

Yet this amazing slice of wild in the city is clearly a success story. I hope that the Brunette River provides city managers with inspiration and a blueprint for bringing nature back into our urban spaces, starting with the restoration of lost salmon streams. I dream of the day when Coast Salish people are back harvesting from a clean and abundant Brunette River.

For now, I can tell you it's pretty cool living with salmon and bears within walking distance of the Skytrain.

Joe Foy is the national campaign director for the Wilderness Committee, Canada's largest membership-based wilderness preservation organization.

Save Wild Salmon – Bill C-228

Port Moody-Coquitlam MP Fin Donnelly (NDP), founder of the Rivershed Society of BC in 1996, and member of the Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans, presented at the Rally on the importance of the Fraser River watershed. He has introduced a private member's bill to the House of Commons. Bill C-228, "will end the expansion of harmful open net fish farming and transition current farms to safe, closed containment technology," said William Shatner in the lively video presentation that introduced the bill to the delegates at the 2016 Living Waters Rally.

While it's difficult to get a private members bill passed, it's not impossible. Here are ways to help make C-228 law:

- **Endorse** Bill C-228 by contacting Fin's office at 604-664-9229 (or fin.donnelly@parl.gc.ca) and **send an email** to your MP to support the bill (salmon.advokit.ca)

- **Join** the #SaveWildSalmon Campaign (findonnelly.ndp.ca/protect-west-coast-wild-salmon) and **share** this campaign.

When asked what he thought were the top three threats to water in Canada, Fin listed climate change as #1, urban development as #2, and resource extraction in rural and wilderness areas as #3.

For a person who has twice swum the 1,400+ km length of the Fraser River, I'd say he knows what he's talking about.

Maggie Paquet

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