

Fish on! That has been the cry across Humboldt County. Ocean salmon fishing has been, well, beyond belief. I grew up here and this is my 45th year of salmon fishing in the ocean. I can't remember it being any better.

The Chinook salmon is one of our cultural icons and a very important historical part of local native cultures.

Two years ago a U.C. Davis study concluded that salmon on the Eel River, one of the most important salmon rivers on the North Coast, was headed for extinction. Runs had declined 99% from historical highs.

Some of you may not know that a commercial fishery operated on the Eel as early as 1854. It ended in 1926. Canneries flourished and produced 15,000 cases of salmon and 50,000 lbs. of smoked salmon annually. Up to 800,000 Chinook returned to the Eel every year. By 1950 the run declined to less than 100,000 fish. After the floods of 1955 and 64, Chinook numbers fell to less than 10,000 on the Eel.

The decline of habitat, diverting water to Sonoma County, the recent Pike Minnow predator fish and local marijuana growers taking water out of creeks and streams has created a tremendous challenge for our salmon.

But, I'm optimistic. Late Spring rains and great ocean conditions the last three years have teamed up for a remarkable rebound. In Dec. 2010, more than 30,000 Chinook returned to the Eel River with over 2,000 making it all the way up to the Van Arsdale counting station, breaking all-time records. The number was even higher last year.

The Klamath River is also rebounding. In 2008, only 68,000 Chinook returned. This year's projection....are you ready, is 1.6 million fish.

When I heard that number a few months ago, I couldn't believe it. I thought if this is even close to being accurate, the ocean salmon fishing will truly be off the charts. Folks, it's off the charts.

In this year of bounty, please remember a couple things:

- Let's not take more than we need.
- Continue to work hard to restore water to our rivers. A brilliant scientist concluded there is a direct relationship between fish and water.
- Welcome out of town visitors who want a fishing experience of a lifetime, and
- Support our local charter boats and sporting goods stores that rely on fishing and outdoor recreation.

And to all my friends... The salmon I caught the other day was over 40 lbs. Honest. Really.... it was. You know that I wouldn't exaggerate a fish story.

This has been Jon Sapper for Community Comment.

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