Salmon vs. Salmon - Too Many Salmon Obscures the Fact That Some Are Endangered

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Tidepool, an environmental website

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It's one of the hardest things for a salmonista to explain to the uninitiated. It's the problem of abundance. After all, how many other endangered species can you name that sell for less than a dollar a pound at the docks?

Different fish, of course.

'These salmon are endangered, close to being wiped off the face of the earth by human activity,' is the message. 'Those over there, well, plenty enough of those salmon. Feedlot salmon, domesticated and raised in farms. Too many in fact. They're making things worse for the salmon fishermen in Alaska who can't compete.'

It was easier to explain a few years ago when the plentiful salmon -- the salmon that we ate -- originated up in Alaska.

Alaska -- lacking the dams and development of the Columbia River system, the last frontier. Alaska was an idea people could put in their minds and envision the plentiful salmon returning to unspoiled waters in abundance.

It is harder now. As ocean conditions changed to once again favor fish originating from the Columbia and Snake rivers, fishing boats once again started proliferating at the mouth of the Columbia. In coastal streams the cool waters swelled with the teeming mass of silver and rouge thrashing up streams.

There are plenty of salmon.

Different fish of course.

'Most of those fish are hatchery fish,' we say now. 'They aren't the same as the wild ones. If fact, they're making things worse for the wild ones that can't compete."

How do you save a species that appears so abundant? How do you convince the public that there is plenty of one kind of wild salmon and too few of another? How do you explain that a hatchery fish and a wild fish are different, though genetically they may be the same?

Salmon face many problems, few as thorny as the problem of abundance. Through artificial propagation from farms and hatcheries, we have created a situation where there appears to be a surplus of salmon.

Farmed salmon pose greater problems for wild fish than this false sense of abundance, of course.

So too do hatchery fish pose a greater threat to wild salmon than simply fooling the public into thinking that salmon have been saved. That the threat to their future is past.

In recent days there has been much maneuvering over salmon hatcheries. Washington state is overdue with a plan for reforming its hatcheries to ensure they don't harm wild salmon population.

Meanwhile, the federal government is a few weeks away from unveiling its plan to reform the Pacific Northwest's salmon hatchery system, the fate of a fish might actually boil down to how we differentiate between a fish born in a plastic tray and raised in a crowded concrete raceway, and one born in a gravel redd, and raised in a creek full of life.

Whatever the feds decide it will surely make someone unhappy, as recent headlines attest to the differing views of hatchery fish and their role in salmon recovery.

Hatchery salmon not only compete for food and habitat with wild salmon in the streams, the bad habits of hatchery salmon attract predators that feed on both the wild and hatchery fish.

Moreover, hatchery salmon eat young wild salmon.

Since salmon from hatcheries eat young Chinook protected under the Endangered Species Act, the annual release of 8 million coho and steelhead from Washington state hatcheries is a violation of the Endangered Species Act, according to a suit filed by Washington Trout and the Native Fish Society. Their suit is targeted to the salmon and hatcheries of the Puget Sound.

However, if successful, the argument could be extended to Oregon and California hatcheries.

It would have a huge impact on the fishing boats out on the river as well as the fishermen on the banks or Northwest streams. Most hatchery fish are produced for sport fishing, a multimillion dollar industry. Moreover, sport and commercial fishermen are strong advocates for salmon recovery.

Meanwhile, another strong advocate for salmon restoration - Northwest Indian Tribes - see hatcheries as vital tool in the restoration of wild salmon.

On the other side of the spectrum is the Pacific Legal Foundation, and the Washington Building Industry Association. They claim that there is no difference between hatchery and wild salmon - a claim that has been successfully upheld in court. The court decision in their favor issued on Sept. 10, 2001 -- is what prompted the federal government to

rethink its policy toward hatchery salmon. This week they filed a petition to require that salmon from hatcheries be counted as native stocks.

Counting hatchery fish and wild salmon could lead to the delisting of a dozen stocks of threatened and endangered salmon. Such a course is unlikely given the wider implications it would have on the Endangered Species Act itself. It would, after all, mean that an artificially produced animal is just as good as a wild one under federal law. No longer would habitat have to be protected for salmon -- or other species -- so long as one existed in captivity.

It is doubtful that the federal government will agree with that vision of man-made salmon serving as equals of their wild cousins. In fact, NOAA Fisheries reacted to the court decision by issuing a clarification: Where salmon are concerned the goal of the Endangered Species Act is "the preservation of self-sustaining naturally reproducing populations in their natural habitats."

Wild salmon -- salmon spawning and returning to streams and watersheds of which they are vital ecological component -- that's what counts. That's what the goal of the ESA should be.

Yet, how ironic it is that some of the biggest threats to wild salmon turn out to be other salmon -- crude doppelgängers created by human hands out of our misguided love for this fish.