

Still Starving:

A Science-Based, Win-Win Solution for Killer Whales

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Last year, acting in response to the continuing decline of the critically endangered Southern Resident killer whale (SRKW), Washington State Governor Jay Inslee created a task force to provide recommendations that would initiate recovery and ensure the species avoided extinction. Closely tied to those recommendations were to be efforts that increased the size and abundance of similarly threatened wild Chinook salmon, as large, wild Chinook used to make up the majority of the starving Southern Resident's diet.

We, the undersigned, have pressing concerns about the actions currently proposed by this task force to save both wild Chinook salmon and Southern Resident killer whales from extinction.

Killer whale and fisheries experts agree there are numerous factors contributing to the decline of SRKWs, a resident species of killer whale that calls the coastal waters of northern California, Oregon, Washington, and British Columbia home. These factors include, but are not limited to, decreased prey size and abundance, pollution, vessel effects, and habitat loss – all of which require immediate attention.

It's true that the task force's current recommendations address many of these issues.

Additionally, the removal of four dams on the lower Snake River in eastern Washington and the restoration and protection of critical freshwater salmon habitat are essential steps to the long-term recovery of Chinook and SRKWs. But habitat improvements alone cannot remedy this crisis.

Starving killer whales and smaller and less abundant Chinook are merely symptoms of the fundamental problem of broken harvest management on the Pacific Northwest coast. Unfortunately, in its first year, Governor Inslee's task force quickly abandoned this politically-charged aspect of the SRKW crisis.

Over time, we have significantly altered where, how, and when we fish for salmon in the Pacific Northwest, resulting in dramatic changes to Chinook salmon and killer whales that feed on them. Technological advances in the 20th century allowed fishers to move from rivers to the open ocean, where salmon from different watersheds vary widely by age and size. In this coastal fishery, it's impossible to discriminate between healthy runs, threatened or endangered runs, and immature runs.

Today, in large part due to ocean harvest, Chinook are less abundant, smaller, younger, less diverse, produce fewer eggs, and are less successful in spawning than they were a hundred years ago. In 1920, the average Chinook was 20 - 25 pounds. By 1975, the average was 10 - 12 pounds, a 50% reduction in size in only 55 years. Hatchery Chinook, on average, are even smaller.

To compensate for the reduction in salmon size and abundance, SRKWs now need to find and catch far more salmon, exerting far more energy and stress to meet even their minimum daily caloric needs.

Emergency harvest reductions or closures can provide benefit to wild salmon and killer whales in the short term. But a complete restructuring of where, how, and when we fish in the coastal ocean fishery is needed to restore the size, abundance, distribution, and diversity of wild Chinook that will feed killer whales.

This requires reopening the Pacific Salmon Treaty, an international agreement that negotiates the distribution of ocean salmon harvest for transboundary stocks between U.S. and Canadian fisherman every ten years. Despite assurances that the SRKWs were considered in the negotiations, there is no mention of killer whales in the latest version of the treaty, let alone their complex prey needs.

SRKWs must be given a guaranteed harvest allocation under the Pacific Salmon Treaty, as is done with commercial, tribal, and recreational fishers. This allocation, however, will need to address how changes in harvest would provide the needed improvements not only for Chinook abundance, but also size, distribution, and diversity. U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and U.S. Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross have the power to pursue reopening this treaty and to request the Pacific Salmon Commission adequately evaluate and address the complex prey needs of federally-protected SRKWs. We, the undersigned, urge them to do so immediately.

In place of re-evaluating the existing problems in harvest management, Washington State has elected to significantly increase hatchery production, continuing a misguided tinkering with nature that attempts to treat a symptom, not a cause, of the SRKW crisis.

More hatchery fish may actually harm salmon recovery by increasing the number of hatchery fish spawning with their wild counterparts, undermining the fitness and survival of endangered wild salmon, and increasing competition with wild fish for limited resources. Decades of massive increases in hatchery production have proved to be incompatible with wild salmon recovery, and are not a sustainable solution for salmon and SRKWs.

Uncomfortable as the discussion may be, the current SRKW predicament presents an opportunity to have these hard conversations, reevaluate existing harvest and hatchery management strategies through a new lens, and take the truly bold actions needed to save salmon and the Southern Residents. We recognize that such a reevaluation will be challenging. But we believe the current killer whale crisis requires our immediate attention, and compels us to act in accordance with scientific evidence and our obligation to future generations.

Signed,

Friends of the San Juans

Wild Fish Conservancy

Wild Orca
