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On the Edge: Wild Clearwater B-run Steelhead

In the mid-1950s, I often watched Clearwater River B-run steelhead leap from pool to pool ascending the fish ladder on the north end of the Washington Water Power Dam three miles upstream from the river's mouth. According to the Idaho Department of Fish and Game (IDFG), in the 1950s and early '60s, 40,000 wild B-run steelhead crossed that dam each year. Now 2018, 98% of the once famous Clearwater B-run steelhead are gone.

The destruction of this magnificent steelhead run began officially on March 14, 1947, as noted in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' *Special Report on Selection of Sites, Lower Snake River, Oregon, Washington and Idaho*.

“The problem of passing migratory fish over dams on lower Snake River was discussed with representatives of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, State of Washington Department of Fisheries, Fish Commission of Oregon, Oregon State Game Commission, and the State of Idaho Department of Fish and Game. **The consensus of opinion of these agencies was that any series of dams on lower Snake River would be hazardous and might entirely eliminate the runs of migratory fish in that stream.** [Emphasis added.] In view of the experience at Bonneville Dam, this office does not concur with this unfounded opinion.”

The actual destruction of the Clearwater's B-run steelhead began in 1956. The U.S. Corps of Engineers constructed Ice Harbor Dam 1956-1961; Lower Monumental Dam, 1961-1969; Little Goose Dam, 1963-1970; Lower Granite Dam, 1965-1973. In 1973 the completion of Dworshak Dam on the Clearwater's North Fork struck another blow.

The early 1960s saw more than 100,000 wild A-run and B-run steelhead* enter the Snake River each year. By the 1974-75 season that number had dropped to 12,200—with only 3,000 fish returning to Idaho rivers and streams. In 1997 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed all Snake River steelhead as threatened of extinction under the Endangered Species Act.

Fast forward 20 years. In 2017 fish managers predicted as few as 770 wild B-run steelhead would cross Lower Granite dam during the 2017-2018 season, later raising this figure to 1100. Pinning down accurate fish numbers is complicated. Not all B-run steelhead are over 78 centimeters in length, cross Bonneville between August 25 and November 1, or spend two years in the ocean. Further, up to a third of the B-run over Lower Granite Dam are bound for the Middlefork and Southfork of the Salmon River rather than the Clearwater. Yet slice the figures any way you wish, since the late 1950s around 98% of the Clearwater River wild B-run steelhead have disappeared.

Citing present ocean conditions as a major contributor to the extremely low 2017 Snake River steelhead returns, IDFG fish biologist Joe Dupont recently wrote: “If we had better spawning, rearing and *migratory conditions*, it would buffer the poor ocean conditions to the point that we could still provide harvest fisheries in Idaho, *and wild fish would not be threatened of going extinct.*” [Emphasis added] This may be as bold a statement as an IDFG staff member dare make with its reference to “migratory conditions.” In 1999 the Idaho legislature whisked

management of ESA-listed fish species away from IDFG with the creation of the Office of Species Conservation in the Governor's office. The State of Idaho, a defendant in the current Bi-Op case before Judge Michael H. Simon, is aligned with the federal agencies and special interest groups trying to maintain the status quo on the lower Snake River—fish be damned as well as dammed.

In its *2002 Lower Snake River Juvenile Salmon Migration Feasibility Study*, the Corps of Engineers identified three action alternatives to address the issue of threatened and endangered Snake River salmon and steelhead: the maximum transport (barging) of juvenile fish around the dams, major dam passage system improvements, and dam breaching. The biological analysis concluded the third alternative, breaching, presented the highest probability of recovering endangered and threatened Snake River salmon and steelhead.

The Corps and Bonneville Power Administration have since spent billions of taxpayer and ratepayer dollars implementing the first two alternatives. These least-likely-to-succeed alternatives have failed. No Snake River threatened or endangered fish species is on its way to recovery. In November 2017 National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Fisheries released its new "Recovery Plan" for threatened Snake River steelhead. The plan includes an extensive list of actions continuing over the next 50-100 years projected to cost hundreds of millions of dollars. Two points of particular note in the report: first, the plan keeps the lower Snake River dams in place, and second, astonishingly, NOAA Fisheries acknowledges that "the actions will not get us to recovery."

The public is thus now asked to invest more millions of dollars in a fish recovery plan designed to fail while ignoring the one action fish scientists have consistently identified as having the greatest potential for successful recovery: dam breaching. And all this while the four lower Snake River dams continue to produce electricity we no longer need, while we subsidize the Snake River shipment of wheat to Asia, and while we watch our once plentiful and thriving wild salmon and steelhead disappear.

By NOAA's own admission, the federal government's recovery plan for threatened Snake River steelhead is a sham deserving of public outrage. The special interest groups that support the *status quo* on the lower Snake River—including government agencies like the Corps of Engineers and NOAA Fisheries—deserve the public's disdain. Politicians who do the bidding of these organizations and who willfully deceive the public with misinformation and false statements regarding Snake River steelhead and salmon must be held accountable.

Based on Jared Diamond's award winning book *Collapse*, the only remaining hope for avoiding the extinction of Snake River wild salmon and steelhead rests with an aggressive mass movement of individuals who refuse to see these iconic species disappear. Individual anger without collective action is a sure path to species extinction.

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* A-run steelhead generally pass Bonneville Dam between July 1 and August 25. These are primarily one-year-in-ocean fish less than 78 centimeters in length. B-run steelhead pass Bonneville mostly after August 25 and before November 1. These fish typically spend two years in the ocean and are headed for Idaho's Clearwater and Salmon Rivers.