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- December 19, 2013
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Elwha Restoration Roundup: Record Chinook Return, Salmon Habitat Improving

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The Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe says that changes to the Elwha River are occurring faster than anticipated since deconstruction of the two fish-blocking dams on the Elwha River started in 2011.

The most recent milestone is the 4,700 chinook salmon that returned to the river this year – the most since 1992.

“The overall return is double what we’d seen in the past two decades,” said Mike McHenry, the tribe’s habitat program manager. “But that’s nothing compared to what we expect to see in the future.”

In mid-September, biologists from the tribe and federal and state agencies spent one day surveying 13 miles of the river, from the mouth at the Strait of Juan de Fuca to the Glines Canyon Dam site, plus tributaries Indian Creek, Hughes Creek and Little River. On that day alone, biologists counted 1,741 adult chinook and 763 salmon egg nests. Of the total number, approximately 75% of the salmon and redds were found upstream of the former Elwha Dam site.

In addition to seeing the chinook, biologists found that the salmon habitat between the Glines Canyon and former Elwha Dam site was in excellent condition, McHenry said. Salmon also had spread themselves throughout various parts of the watershed, including the river’s mainstem, former Lake Aldwell, and the river’s tributaries and sidechannels.

“We found the biggest concentration of chinook at the base of Glines Canyon Dam, which indicates to me that they want continue on,” McHenry said.

Habitat Looking Healthy

Contributing to the prime salmon habitat are the engineered logjams that the tribe has been building in the lower river for the past 14 years.



Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe habitat program manager Mike McHenry measures a coho salmon before setting it aside to be released into Indian Creek.

“We’re up to 45 logjams and now it’s just a matter of monitoring them as well as watching how the river is reconstructing logjams on its own,” McHenry said. “We need to determine if we need to build anymore since so much wood is transporting down the river and ending up on the old Aldwell reservoir, naturally creating more logjams.”

The tribe is in its third year of releasing coho salmon to Indian Creek and Little River, two tributaries to the mainstem. Nearly 1,000 salmon that returned to the tribe’s hatchery were spaghetti-tagged, with a small portion of them radio-tagged so their migration patterns can be monitored by the tribe.

“It’s been a very successful program,” McHenry said. “We’ve been tracking where they spawn, plus looking at the juvenile communities and finding smolts.”

Checking The Estuaries

Down near the mouth of the river, Matt Beirne, Tribal environmental quality coordinator, and his crew have been monitoring the fish communities in the estuaries.

Every two weeks since April, Beirne and staff have been seining the estuaries and collecting stomach contents of juvenile salmon to study what they are eating by gently pumping the salmon stomachs.

“This work we’re doing now will be compared to the similar work we did in 2007 and 2008, so we can see what kind of changes have been taking place during dam removal, such as what species are using the estuaries and what they are eating,” Beirne said.

“Some surprising catches have been a few lampreys and an abundance of red side shiners, which we’ve never caught in the estuaries before. We assume that they have moved downstream from Lake Sutherland since the removal of the Elwha Dam.

“The preliminary results of the diet sampling suggest that juvenile salmon are feeding mostly on land-based invertebrates since continual deposits of fine sediment in the estuary has temporarily disrupted the aquatic invertebrate populations that make up much of their diet.”

Deconstruction Resumes

The dam removal at Glines Canyon, after being on hiatus since October 2012, resumed again this fall, but due to the fish window in November and December, has stopped and will start again in January.

Dam removal was halted because sediment clogged the Elwha Water Treatment Plant last year, forcing deconstruction to stop until filtering issues were worked out. Complete dam removal is still slated for completion by end of 2014. The Elwha Dam is completely removed, with salmon moving beyond the site to spawn further up river.

River Exhibit at Burke Museum

The University of Washington’s Burke Museum in Seattle is currently showing an exhibit on the story of the river restoration project, based on Seattle Time’s reporter Lynda Mapes and photographer Steve Ringman’s book, “Elwha: A River Reborn”.

The exhibit, which runs through March 9, 2014, includes Mapes’s and Ringman’s stories, videos, timelines and photos as they followed the long process to get the dams removed.