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Love of 'Magic Skagit' beats out animosity

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As I watched growing up in nearby Bellingham, two truisms held fast during the long, fractious battle between tribal and sports fishermen over Skagit steelhead:

The two sides loathed each other, but each professed an almost mystic love of the Skagit River.

Shared emotion, and five years of sharing the table, have managed to bring these and other decades-long rivals together in a draft Puget Sound salmon recovery plan. The plan was turned over to federal officials yesterday at a Seattle ceremony.

It covers the "Magic Skagit" -- home to a large natural salmon population and three Seattle City Light dams -- and 13 other watersheds over an area ranging from Neah Bay to the Canadian border to Mount Rainier.

The plan is not merely a strategy for hanging onto a remnant, but envisions restoring once-great chinook salmon runs to a robustness fitting a fish that helps define our region.

"It IS the Pacific Northwest, it IS Puget Sound," Gov. Christine Gregoire told the ceremony. "It is an indicator of our human health, not just the health of salmon."

Winston Churchill declared, famously, "It is better to jaw-jaw than war-war."

Wise counsel, not always followed, as can be seen in salmon struggles elsewhere in our region.

Irrigators, transportation interests and federal power managers on the Snake River have mounted a massive-resistance strategy against even modest steps to assure survival of imperiled salmon.

Idaho's Cro-Magnon Sen. Larry Craig is trying to delete money to the small science agency that tracks salmon populations and analyzes data essential to recovery.

On Icicle Creek, just outside Leavenworth, federal hatchery managers have blocked an effort by local residents to remove weirs and restore a mile of natural spawning habitat in the diverted creek.

Two Interior secretaries have taken personal interest in the Icicle project, but been undermined by their own bureaucrats. Sen. Maria Cantwell is now trying to prod them.

The picture in the Puget Sound Basin could not be more different.

An outfit called Shared Strategy with a total staff of just five -- consider the Seattle Monorail Project by comparison -- has midwived a remarkable tale of cooperation.

In the Snohomish River watershed, for instance, a 38-member group labored to produce a recovery plan: It was co-chaired by the Tulalip Tribes, the Pilchuck Audubon Society and the Master Builders.

Nor is this the only case of opposites living together. The Tulalips and the Farm Bureau are mounting a joint effort to generate electricity and produce compost out of dairy waste and fish carcasses.

"The process reminded me of the Stockholm syndrome," said Seattle City Councilman Jim Compton, referring to the tendency of prisoners and captors to identify with each other if held together long enough.

"We had opposites thrown together, including some very conservative rural King County people," Compton said. "I chaired meetings that went on for five hours. We stopped talking about property rights, and put our heads together about putting wood stuff in the water to help fish spawn."

The task of restoration is complex and will be costly.

"The man and the fish can coexist," presidential candidate George W. Bush declared on the campaign trail in 2000.

Puget Sound is the epic test of this Bushism. About 1.4 million people will move into the basin over the next 15 to 20 years, on top of the current population of 3.8 million.

At the same time, the salmon plan envisions bringing the chinook salmon population back up to 270,000 fish -- a nine-fold increase over current levels. An estimated 390,000 chinooks once returned each year to spawn in the basin.

The plan would complete removal of two dams from the Elwha River on the Olympic Peninsula, restoring a 238-square-mile watershed that once produced 100-pound salmon.

The Elwha is mostly protected in Olympic National Park. Not so other watersheds. A key plan provision is to restore 6,000 acres of estuary habitat around Puget Sound, waters in which juvenile salmon would grow up before going to sea.

By "moving levies and dikes back to let rivers breathe," in the words of Shared Strategy director Jim Kramer, the recovery plan would have an immediate, positive impact.

It's particularly vital in the "Magic Skagit," home to the healthiest remaining wild salmon in the Puget Sound region. Upstream, Seattle City Light, The Nature Conservancy and other groups have bought up thousands of acres to protect habitat. City Light has regulated water levels below its dams so as not to leave spawning beds high and dry.

Estuary habitat is the remaining key. The chief strategist of Shared Strategy -- former Environmental Protection Agency boss William Ruckelshaus -- worked overtime to get Skagit tribes and farmers working together.

Notable at yesterday's ceremony was the presence of Brian Cladoosby, influential chairman of the Swinomish Tribe.

Over the past two years, Uncle Sam has spent \$200 billion on war -- fighting and nation-building in a far-off land whose major natural features are the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers.

Is there money left over to spend on Puget Sound salmon?

Gregoire and Rep. Norm Dicks, D-Wash., did some strategizing yesterday. Dicks wants to get a foot in the door with a "Puget Sound initiative" in the Environmental Protection Agency budget.

He would link salmon restoration here with efforts to bring back fisheries in Chesapeake Bay and the Great Lakes.

"Chesapeake is not doing as well as expected, but they have more money than we do," Dicks told the governor in a private aside.

Gregoire is a quick study. At the dais, moments later, she declared: "If we had as much money as they have in Chesapeake Bay, we would have cleaned up Puget Sound."

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