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Salmon recovery relies on Sound health

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GUEST COLUMNIST

It's logical to score the success of Puget Sound salmon recovery efforts on how many fish are produced for how many dollars. Unfortunately, if this is the only benchmark we use, salmon runs are doomed to extinction.

Recently, questions have been raised about whether money for the Puget Sound salmon recovery plan might be more efficiently spent if it were focused just on large rural rivers with a lot of fish and not on urban rivers with fewer fish.

Salmon recovery isn't just about counting fish. It's also about the overall quality of Puget Sound and the diversity of animals that it supports.

The Sound, the land around it and the streams that flow into it make an ecosystem.

Salmon hatched in the Skagit River as well as other rivers across our region, spend much of their early life swimming and feeding throughout Puget Sound.

The salmon are telling us our ecosystem is sick. Beyond shrinking salmon populations, we're also seeing declines in the orca population, marine birds and other fish.

It's also about people. We, like salmon, need abundant supplies of clean water. We need a healthy rural and urban environment. We value our ability to experience nature close to where we live and work.

A healthy environment and the amenities it provides contribute to our quality of life and supports our economic and individual prosperity.

Puget Sound is one of the world's largest, most complex estuaries. Hundreds of rivers and streams from 14 major watersheds flow into the Sound. But poorly planned human actions have resulted in unintended consequences from construction in environmentally sensitive areas, pollution and reduced stream flows.

We can increase the numbers of salmon from the large rivers in rural areas, but if we don't address stream flow, water quality and salmon habitat throughout Puget Sound it won't be effective in the long run. All parts need to be working to be successful. Writing off urban areas sends a message that it's OK for people to stop caring. Cities are part of the problem and must be part of the solution.

The Puget Sound salmon recovery plan calls for investments in urban watersheds that make economic sense and encourages people to continue to support salmon recovery efforts. We may not be able to achieve runs of historic proportion in urban rivers and streams, but we can create a place for salmon to survive and contribute to the overall diversity and health of the region.

Enhancement projects on urban rivers improve habitat for salmon rearing there. But the projects also help manage storm water runoff, improve water quality and reduce flood hazards -- providing water quality benefits for fish and people.

We've lost more than one-third of the salmon diversity that once existed. If salmon are going to survive global warming and other pressures, we can't lose any more diversity -- in the urban or rural areas.

The Puget Sound plan is the work of hundreds of people, representing many different interests from each of the watersheds, who worked tirelessly and cooperatively over the past three years to develop a plan that addresses all the Sound. We are fortunate to have the leadership of three urban county executives, Ron Sims, John Ladenburg and Aaron Reardon, as well as elected officials from cities. Collectively, they have supported our congressional delegation to provide federal dollars that benefit the entire Sound.

We are creating benchmarks to assure taxpayers that money is being spent wisely and that progress is being made. Fish count is one of the criteria. But we also need to look at whether rivers are cleaner and have improved flow, and whether habitat is being improved throughout the Sound.

Money is flowing in the right direction. Working together we have produced a cost-effective, achievable salmon recovery plan. Its goal to bring back salmon is a wise use of the public's money.

Jim Kramer is executive director of Shared Strategy of Puget Sound, a non-profit organization leading Puget Sound salmon recovery efforts.

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