

# River salmon beat overwhelming odds

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**W**E'VE BEEN leaning over the bridge for about five minutes now, peering down into the ravine, waiting for the fish to materialize in the gin-clear creek.

It always happens this way when you're looking for salmon fry. You have to stare at the water until your eyes begin to distinguish them from the rocks and sticks and silt that forms the bottom of a typical stream.

Howard Paish spots a solitary swimmer waiting in a shallow tail-out for bits of food to sweep past.

Then another becomes visible, then a group and another group and it comes to you suddenly that this trickle of water feeding into the Salmon River is alive with baby salmon.

It was a flash of insight like this that led Paish to do some pioneer work on keeping a stream alive under the crush of industry and urbanization.

Paish wanted to know how coho in the rural Langley stream could survive under conditions that have threatened or wiped out other

## Fish victimized by urbanization need protection from extinction

strains of coho.

The threat to coho throughout the Georgia Strait watershed is so great that federal scientists predict the fish could be wiped out in 20 years.

Their disappearance would leave Georgia Strait, the belly of the province's recreational fishery, without a breadwinner.

Paish convinced the department of fisheries and oceans to fund some research.

He wrote a report in 1979 that provides an exhaustive model of just about everything that has to be done to allow fish and humans to coexist without resorting to hatcheries.

A key point was that where streams are concerned, the interests of municipal, regional, provincial and federal governments, as well as homeowners, developers and industries, tend to clash. Fish are always the victims.

Paish suggested they learn to cooperate. He offered models of how this could happen.

The report was widely praised

and like several well-intentioned government reports, ignored.

"It was innovative and forward-looking but it wasn't part of the official establishment budget. They're always the first things to get shaved," Paish said.

Ten years after Paish's study, federal fisheries scientists produced their own report.

The 1990 report says the wild coho population in Georgia Strait is less than half of what it was in the mid-1970s, when there were about a million adult salmon annually.

The population is falling by 66,000 coho per year and will be extinct in 20 years.

Federal fisheries suggests the main problem is overfishing, which reaches a genocidal 90 per cent for some wild stocks.

It says the use of hatcheries has aggravated, not reversed, the decline.

It also says coho stocks can't be saved if their environment is destroyed and suggests that "govern-

ment, developers and individual citizens" will have to work together to save the fish.

But Paish is not the only one with an I-told-you-so story.

The coho decline was predicted in a 1977-79 study by a team of scientists from federal fisheries and the University of B.C.

They warned that the introduction of hatchery fish would lead to the destruction of native stocks.

Their prediction was based on a sudden crash of coho populations in Oregon, where the 1977 return was 25 per cent of what it had been the year before.

By 1980, the Oregon population was down to about the same level as 1960, before a hatchery program began.

One of that study's authors, UBC scientist Carl Walters, says the department of fisheries and oceans (DFO) has been "bloody irresponsible" for taking so long to recognize the problem and begin to talk about addressing it.

"It ain't like it's a new problem. The writing has been on the wall and the biologists have been talking and

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# FISHING: Protection needed

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writing about it for a long time," he added.

But if you're looking for easy culprits, there are plenty more, according to the DFO report.

Streams are sucked dry in summer so golf courses and suburban lawns can stay green, leaving little or no refuge for young fish.

Poor logging practices load streams with choking silt and create drastic fluctuations in flow. And housing developments, mines, dams, farms, highways and industry are all major threats.

Sport fishermen kill too many wild fish — those that are born, spawn and die in their native streams. The situation is so serious that Fisheries Minister John Crosbie is being called on by at least one group to take strict new measures to lower the kill.

The uses of hatchery coho to boost the over-all catch in Georgia Strait, the preferred strategy since the 1970s, has disguised an "alarming" decline in the population of wild fish.

The proper approach is to make sure the fish's original environment is preserved, says the report.

Yet little is being done by any level of government to protect streams and their populations of wild fish.

Municipal bureaucrats allow development that destroys suburban watersheds and streams, strips away bankside foliage that provides cover and shade, and turns living streams into low-cost, toxin-laden storm drains.

The provincial Water Act does not provide for the protection of fish, and actually forbids government officials from denying water permits even when it is clear there is not enough water in a stream to support all the permits on it, let alone the fish.

Government documents extolling the virtues of habitat preservation abound. But the good words seldom lead to good actions.

The 1982 Pearse royal commission on the Pacific fishery, the 19th-such special investigation by government, recommended that Ottawa

and B.C. team up for an inventory of fish habitats in B.C.

An internal fisheries document said in 1984 that habitat degradation threatened most of the province's productive areas for coho and that "almost all" coho stocks were in decline.

But the only action by government has been to issue more reports.

In 1986 Ottawa issued a new policy aimed at protecting spawning streams and rearing areas for young fish, places which then-fisheries minister Tom Siddon called "national assets."

The policy said all levels of government should be consulted in decisions about managing fish habitat.

Yet to this day, DFO's own habitat biologists are not consulted when decisions are made about managing the fishery.

How much habitat has disappeared? Nobody knows, according to DFO.

"Data is not available to quantify the amount of coho production which has been lost over the period of decline," says the 1990 report.

It's not uncommon for provincial fisheries branch staff to be closer to the problem than federal counterparts.

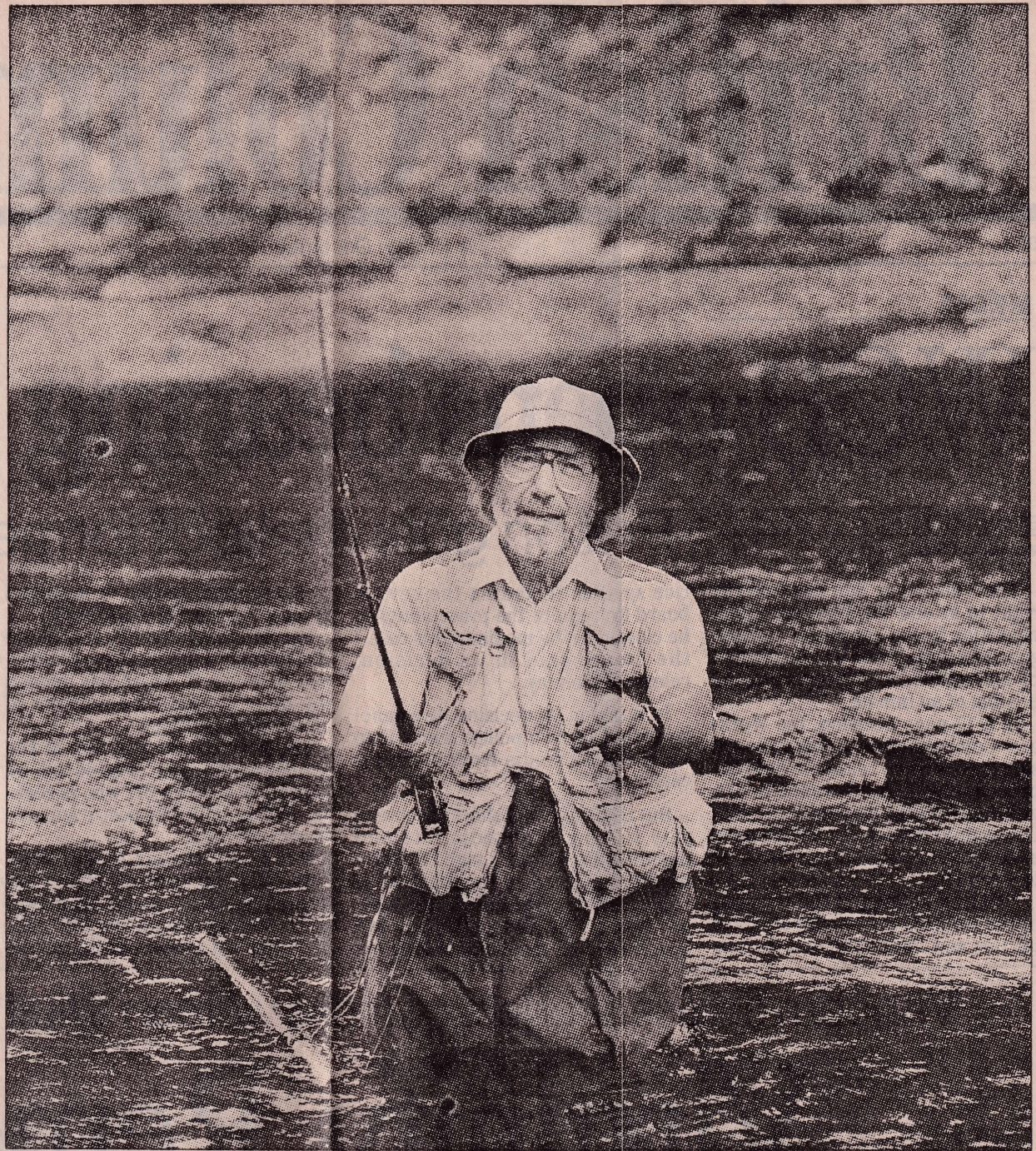
Branch biologists regularly walk, raft and even snorkel down streams to gauge the health of cutthroat trout and steelhead, two seagoing species under B.C.'s jurisdiction.

Vancouver Island biologist Craig Whiteman notes the problems facing "his" fish are shared by coho because all three species spend at least one full year in fresh water.

He says, diplomatically, that DFO has failed to integrate all its responsibilities into one cohesive package.

"My perception (with DFO) is that there's not quite the strong linkage between what's happening in stock and harvest management in saltwater, and what's required on the freshwater side to sustain those fisheries," Whiteman said.

Brian Tutty, one of seven DFO habitat biologists responsible for tending all watersheds in the southern half of British Columbia, says federal fisheries is lagging far behind other levels of government in



AT WORK OR PLAY: Rev. Charles Brant at peace in a stream

MARK VAN MANEN

keeping an inventory of streams and water systems.

"The old way of using maps with crayons, quill and ink, is over," Tutty says. "We're into the computer era, but we're caught in a technology transfer. A lot of communities are into new geographic systems of keeping their information and we're still running around with cray-

ons and maps."

But the promises keep coming:

Last year, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney announced his "Green Plan for a healthy environment," a 174-page document pledging, among other things, better protection of fish habitat through the Fisheries Act.

The plan reiterates the "no net-

loss" policy and a promise it will be in place by 1993.

Almost 10 years after the Pearse report, there are glimmerings that such an arrangement may occur, but so far it remains just talk. And while 10 years may be a short time in the lifespan of a bureaucrat, a decade reaches across four generations of coho.