

Proposals Threaten Oyster River Fish Life

The entire fish life of the Oyster River is threatened by up-stream logging, the proposed diversion of water by the Campbell River water board, channelization of the lower reaches, and now a proposal for a deep-sea channel and breakwaters at the rivermouth.

That is the warning given to the environmental committee of the Comox Strathcona regional board by Father Charles A. E. Brandt at a meeting last week to discuss proposals of George Ward Holdings (Pacific Play-

grounds resort at mouth of river) to construct a deep-sea test channel in the Oyster River.

Father Brandt presented a brief on behalf of the Steelhead Society of British Columbia and warned "if this goes ahead the river will be a write-off."

He said the proposed deep-sea channel, with the proposed breakwater on either side, and its proposed rock groin downstream of the present existing boat basin alongside the river channel

"pose a grave threat to the life of the estuary."

Six conservation and citizen groups joined forces to oppose the proposed construction.

George Ward Holdings wants to build a channel which would allow boats from the marina to get to and from the ocean during both low and high tides. At present they can only navigate at high tides.

Father Brandt charged the provincial lands branch had given permission to dig the test channel, even though there was strong opposition and the regional board had recommended nothing be done until a public hearing could be held.

He also charged that an opening into the river from the basin was already cut, although no record of permission can be found, and that some dredging of the river has taken place in the past. He suggested the dredging

Outdoors

with Alec Merriman

was done without permission and noted that both federal and provincial fisheries department are opposed to dredging of the river.

He also noted that much work has been done by Pacific Playgrounds in constructing the basin at the north end of Saratoga Beach. He said the gravel from digging the basin was used for road construction in the company's subdivision, campsites and cabins.

"And so the situation now seems to demand that permission be given for the channel

itself," Father Brandt said. "Though we sympathize with the developer's outlay of monies, we cannot condone the fact that permission or recommendations from the department of lands was not acquired or solicited prior to this expansion. And we feel the department should not be pressured in any way into granting permission to disturb this estuary in any shape or form," he said.

He notes the Oyster River, midway between Courtenay and Campbell River, supports populations of coho, chum and

pink salmon and steelhead trout, and is considered one of the foremost searun cutthroat trout streams on the east coast of Vancouver Island.

He said the Oyster River estuary provides important rearing habitat for anadromous fish, and a feeding ground for waterfowl. In addition the area is used heavily by fishermen and general recreationists, including campers, boaters and beachcombers.

The proposed dredging would upset productivity of these waters for both fish and waterfowl by destroying important habitat," he said.

Father Brandt noted "extensive channelization in the lower reaches has already decreased fish production. He explained channelization means getting into the river with a cat and moving the gravel (spawning gravel of the future) up against the

banks in an effort to protect property. He said the whole lower section of the Oyster had been channelized, and noted biologists label it as one of the most destructive devices to fish habitat. Indications are it takes a river 80 years to recover from that type of abuse.

He said the Oyster already carries a large sediment load, primarily due to logging in the upper and middle reaches. Dredging a channel would result in new sediment deposits and necessitate future dredging, he warned.

He said clearcut logging has gradually stripped the upper watershed of trees and removed green strips alongside the Oyster River and feeder streams, so that now the

Oyster is subject to extreme high runoffs and flooding in fall and winter months, resulting in destruction of eggs and small fish in the gravel. Logging has also caused low water in summer when water is badly needed by rearing fish.

He noted the Campbell River water board seeks 11 million gallons of water a day during summer low flows, to further aggravate the situation.

He said the federal fisheries has started a two-year study of the Oyster River estuary and urged the regional board not to sanction the proposed test channel or further development of the deep-sea channel from the existing boat basin.