

RIVERS SMITH SALMON ECOSYSTEMS PLANNING SOCIETY

AGM MEETING

March 13 2006

9:30 a.m. to 3:30

Present:

Karl Wilson, David Stevenson, , Sharon Chow, Julian Sturhahn, Sandie MacLaurin, Bruce Burrows, Don Chamberlain, Colleen Hemphill, .Mike Rough, Doug McCorquodale, Nigel Hagen

1. RSSEPS atlas of Sensitive Habitat for Owikeno Basin salmon

The AGM began with a presentation by Don Chamberlain on the Sensitive Habitat Survey for Owikeno Lake Sockeye. The products produced include the online FISS habitat atlas mapping tool (URL <http://www.shim.bc.ca/RSSEPS>) as well as a series of 20 maps illustrating the location of sensitive spawning and rearing habitat for the Owikeno and Chuckwalla/Kilbella watersheds.

The purpose of this project was to complete a review of existing information in order to identify critical salmonid spawning and rearing habitat for the Owikeno and the Chuckwalla/Kilbella watersheds. From the reference material, a total of 93 new points with associated spawning and/or rearing habitat information was added to the existing web based FISS habitat atlas. Based on this information, a database and accompanying GIS map files were developed to highlight sensitive fish habitat in the study area. The database provides a user-friendly Internet access to compiled information as well as tools to add or update information. This will allow the RSSEPS to iteratively build capacity within the database and update maps subsequent to the current project. These maps are available over the Internet for anyone with a web-browser to view as a dynamic map that can be tailored to the viewer's specific interests. In addition, the data will be retained in formats customized for RSSEPS desktop GIS use for subsequent analyses and hard-copy map making.

The consultants also provided a CD with maps and fish distribution data showing the different species distribution as SHAPE files. This requires an ARC View program in order to access the files. The CD also contains the data base created for the project which is stored as an Access Data Base. A copy of the CD is available on request. Don demonstrated how to access the atlas on line, select specific areas, choose different layers of information and access the FISS data files attached to the different points on the map.

There was some discussion as to why Smith Inlet data was not included in the atlas. David agreed to look in the minutes of past Technical Committee meetings to clarify how the decision was arrived at. Julian asked for hard copies of the maps. Don agreed to provide copies of the maps. The map will prove to be valuable for the Wuikinuxv in assessing forestry development plans. The main data base is controlled by Brad Mason. There are 2 servers, one in Squamish and one in Abbotsford.

2. Coordinator's Report:

Funding for 2006 from the Pacific Salmon foundation has been reduced to \$20,000 for the Coordinator's position. The projects undertaken in 2005 were as follows:

1. The Sockeye Enhancement Evaluation project for 2005 remains unfinished. There were 2,450 otoliths collected. They will not be read until y and March so that the results will not be known until April. The cost of reading the otoliths is \$8. per reading for a total of \$19,600. There is just enough in the budget to cover this cost as we had budgeted \$13,000 for this in 2005, plus we had \$6,000 surplus from the previous year. There are no plans for the DFO to carry out another sockeye egg take in Owikeno Lake in 2006.

2. Early Marine Survival

This is the project headed by Dr. Rick Routledge from SFU. It is the third year that we have contributed to this project. The project focuses on demonstrating the relationship between plankton levels, water conditions and the size of sockeye smolts in Rivers Inlet. The objective is to develop a predictor model for early marine survival. We funded this project for \$49,000 in 2005.

3. Docee Fence

This is the third year that we have contributed to the Gwa'sala Nakwaxda'xw Nations capacity building co-management project at the Docee Fence.

4. Sensitive Habitat Survey

The Sensitive Habitat Survey for Owikeno Lake Basin is now finished and accessible on the web. Violet Komori and Don Chamberlain did a good job of putting the atlas together.

5. Owikeno Basin Coho DNA Baseline Sampling Project. –

The objective was to collect DNA information to build a baseline data for Coho stocks that spawn in tributaries of Oweekeno Lake. Four creeks were surveyed and 18 DNA samples obtained. Overall, collecting samples for the baseline will contribute to the final goal of stock-specific in-season abundance management. Samples could then be collected from any fishery and compared to the baseline in order to protect weak stocks and help in targeting more productive stocks.

The money for this project was originally earmarked for a Juvenile Abundance Survey in Owikeno Lake. Since this survey was to be done in the winter months of January to March, the PSF suggested that it would be best to use our 2006 budget for it, so the TAC chose this project to complete the 2005 budget.

Northern Boundary Fund.

The Pacific Salmon Commission is joint USA/Canadian body which provides funding for projects on enhancing salmon stocks of interest to both countries. After a series of conference calls the TAC agreed to submit the following sockeye proposals for funding to the Northern Boundary Fund:

1. Evaluation and development of juvenile sockeye abundance estimation methods in Owikeno Lake .
2. Evaluation and development of in-season abundance estimator using echo sounding in Rivers Inlet.
3. Continuation of evaluation of sockeye enhancement program This would consist of the construction of a stick fence on the Genesee Creek to get an accurate count of returning spawners. These numbers would be used as an index of returns to other streams.
4. Radio telemetry study of Rivers Inlet Sockeye to determine relative proportions of fish escaping to spawning areas

The only successful application was the echo sounding program for Rivers Inlet for \$55,000. The project will start in mid-July and involve DFO personnel working with some Wuikinuxv crew.

November Meeting on Abundance Targets

At our November meeting, we discussed the target numbers for next year. Steve Cox-Rogers, a DFO sockeye biologist, presented a model for calculating the biological escapement goals for both Owikeno and Long Lake. These were for Owikeno Lake:

Lower benchmark – 200,000 fish

Upper benchmark – 600,000 fish

The following benchmarks were decided for Smith Inlet Sockeye:

Upper benchmark - 100,000 fish

Lower benchmark – 25 – 30% of the upper benchmark

Below the lower benchmark, no fishing will occur. At 200,000, a 10% limited commercial harvest rate will be allowed. Between 200,000 to 600,000 fish a sliding harvest rate will be adopted. Any surplus above the upper benchmark will be allocated to the Total Annual Catch. Both Owikeno and Long Lake watersheds are considered conservation units for sockeye, the conservation units for chum and pinks would be much larger. DNA analysis for each species is used in determining conservation units. There is a PSARC paper being planned on conservation units.

Climate Change conference

The coordinator of RSSEPS made a presentation on the climate change factors that affect Rivers and Smith Inlets at a conference on climate change at the University of Victoria at the end of October. While it is clear that climate change factors are negatively impacting wild salmon stocks there was no concrete plan of action coming out of the conference.

Funding for 2006

The PSF has reduced funding for 2006 to a minimum amount for Coordination. The coordinator has the responsibility of raising funds for the 2006 projects. Before fund raising, we need to review our progress on our Recovery Plan and review our goals for the Society.

3. Discussion of 2005 Projects

Sandie informed us that because the lab which analyzes the otoliths had to be moved, the reading of the otoliths would be late – perhaps the end of April. Because the returns were higher to the Amback and the Inziana last year more otoliths were collected. Sandie said they would read the Inziana Creek ones first to see what the results would be and then read as many Amback ones as necessary and funds allow. There is no funding for an egg take this year.

Karl reported on the Machmell Channel. The channel is not working as planned. The River has now moved away from the intake to the channel in low water regimes. There are problems with silt plugging the intake. Very little water is going down the channel in the Fall only a trickle. Karl and DFO engineers made an attempt to increase the ground water into the channel with only moderate success. The problem is to have enough water to attract adult spawners at the right time. WFP had some extra funding for work on the channel but the window of opportunity has passed as WFP is planning on leaving the area. The question is who will take over responsibility for the channel. The Wuikinuxv have expressed an interest in the channel but will not take it on without an operating and maintenance budget. There is no existing water license. The project originally cost about \$750K. DFO will try and do some work this summer. It will not work as a spawning channel but it may work as a rearing channel if funds can be found to maintain it.

Rick Routledge reported on the research that he has been doing. The thesis on the Early Marine Survival research by Seana Buchanan is almost complete. Work on the analysis of the sediment cores from Long Lake and Owikeno Lake continues. The cores cover a time span record of two to three hundred years. There has been no ecological collapse identified in the core record. There was a reduction in juvenile sockeye in response to the commercial fishery which indicates a decline in nutrient levels in the lakes. Surprisingly there seemed to be no evidence that the fertilization of Long Lake increased production. Rick is proceeding with his research this year with funding from the Tula Foundation. He has hired one grad student to do plankton sampling work in the Inlets. He has asked RSSEPS to manage the contract with the PSF and the Tula Foundation.

Mike Rough reported on last year's sport fishery. The chinook catch was good last year but coho were a concern as numbers caught were lower than previous years. Julian said the DFO is not planning a commercial fishery in Rivers in 2006. Julian commented on the coho DNA baseline sampling project. Water levels were high which made collecting samples difficult. A total of 18 DNA samples were obtained from 3 streams, the Genesee, the Amback and the Meadowese. The information is now stored in a data base but in order to establish a distinct DNA profile 200 samples are necessary. The study recommends starting the survey earlier in the year.

4. Review of RSEPS Partnership Consensus

Doug McCorquodale expressed concerns about changes in RSSEPS that he was not comfortable with. These include: a reduction in the number of people attending meetings from the early days of the Society, and an imbalance of DFO personnel pushing a DFO agenda. Since there are only 3 organizations at the table namely the DFO, the GNN and

the Wuikinuxv then why do we need a Society? The First Nations can negotiate directly with DFO. It is not clear what value there is for GNN in remaining in the partnership. RSEPS was however instrumental in enabling the GNN to participate in the Docee Fence management.

Bruce commented that the partnership was not working for the Wuikinuxv as the DFO still made decisions outside of the partnership – for example the decision to not hold a commercial fishery in Rivers in 2006. He thought the Society might still have some value as a fund raising platform. He expressed his concern at the Juvenile ‘Survey which proceeded without any Wuikinuxv involvement. Colleen said we need to look at the goals of RSSEPS from the beginning of the group. We need to focus on the bigger picture as the Society seems to be in period of transition moving away from the intervention strategies to stock management.

Nigel commented that the group needed a broader vision, He said the group represented a huge social and intellectual capital asset which would be a pity to lose. He felt that there was lots of money available but the group has been too focused on individual projects and not the bigger picture. Colleen pointed out that the resources available to the GNN have not been there in the same measure as to the Wuikinuxv. The Society has worked as voice for the Central Coast for example in writing letters protesting oil and gas exploration. The Society could continue to be a voice for environmental concerns.

There has been a noticeable lack of interest on the part of the Province in the issue of Central Coast salmon. Bruce felt that there is need for continued research on marine survival. The Society could serve a co-management function but the attitude of the DFO would have to change. Nigel pointed out that the DFO have legal authority to manage the fishery and cannot divest it however the Society could be effective in policy development. Julian felt that fish management issues should be kept separate from conservation issues and dealt with in other negotiations. Doug felt that a leap of faith was necessary for First Nations to agree on continuing in the partnership. Nigel said it was a mistake to depend on a single funding source. Bruce said that there were not many funding agencies interested in central coast salmon.

Sharon pointed out that there are 2 basic problems. The first is the decision making problem with the DFO legally mandated to make the final decisions there is no basis for equal decision making. The second is that PSF funding has gone and other funding sources need to be identified. The solution to the first problem is a political one involving politicians and Chiefs. Julian agreed that since the change of DFO personnel from the Central Coast office to the North Coast office there has been a change of commitment to process by the DFO. Nigel suggested that we need to re-examine the original vision and scope of the Society and see if it still works for the First Nations.

Colleen asked for more time to review the options for the GNN. Bruce said we need to expand the original mandate. Nigel would like to see an ecosystem based model developed that incorporates all the values such as cultural and spiritual values not just commercial values. The vision is to link scientific models to ecosystem models so that the contribution of salmon to the whole is seen. He called for a visioning exercise to see if we want to support the larger view. The problem is to attract funders to this larger

vision. Bruce felt that there was still more work for RSSEPS to do especially in the area of marine survival research. Bruce was asked how the work of RSSEPS fitted into the work being done on the Great Bear Rainforest campaign. How does the work of the Society link to the work being done on the Marine Use Plan? The Sensitive Habitat Atlas has already provided the Wuikinuxv with a valuable resource data base. Sandie suggested that there may be a need to ground truth some of the data in the atlas.

Nigel pointed out that there are 2 basic exercises one is compiling data and the other is analyzing the data to see what the possible options are. An analytical framework is what is missing. RSSEPS should review its mandate and try to raise the profile of the group. Sandie said she found value in the Society as a network of colleagues who share their work and information. The question is now that the DFO has shifted responsibility for the Central Coast to the Prince Rupert office what is their attitude towards RSSEPS? The DFO staff from the Central Coast is supportive of RSSEPS but the senior management from the North Coast have not committed to it yet. No one has replace Gary Taccogna on the TAC or on the Management Committee yet. There is a need to clarify the DFO's role in the partnership. David agreed to write a letter to David Inerson and or Dave Peacock asking for some clarification on their role in RSSEPS. Does the DFO have the capacity to participate in community groups? Julian pointed out that we are still in a recovery mode and some of the stocks may still have poor returns in future years because marine survival is still an issue. Doug called for a review of the Recovery Plan and asked that it circulated to the new DFO members of the partnership. He insisted that we have deviated from it in for example the coho DNA project, The North Coast DFO have a different managerial style where stock assessment is very separate from fish management unlike in the Central Coast where there was more collaboration. We need to identify the benefits of the partnership to the DFO. Doug said that the GNN were open to continuing with the partnership if the goals were better defined and the GNN had more say in important management issues.

It was decided to write a letter to the DFO Senior Management in Prince Rupert to ask them to engage in a dialogue on their role in the partnership. It was also decided to get a quote from the Violet and Don on the costs of including the Smith Inlet sensitive habitat into the existing digital atlas. It was also decided to have another meeting at the end of April to do some strategic planning to determine the future activities of RSSEPS.

The meeting adjourned at 3:00 p.m.