



Amid Closure of B.C. Salmon Fisheries, Study Finds Feds Failed to Monitor Stocks

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Canada has failed to monitor and gather data on 50 per cent of all managed salmon populations on B.C.'s north and central coasts, according to a study released Monday in the Canadian Journal of Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences.

Researchers from Simon Fraser University found the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) is monitoring fewer streams now than before the introduction of a wild salmon policy in 2005 that was designed to assess the health of wild salmon populations and aid those deemed at risk.

“Our knowledge of salmon populations in B.C. is eroding,” study co-author and Simon Fraser University researcher [Michael Price](#) told DeSmog Canada. “And it’s really frustrating.”

A number of salmon fisheries, including the Fraser and Skeena River sockeye fisheries, [closed](#) due to low salmon runs this summer.

Price and co-researcher John Reynolds found that since the 1980s, annual counts of spawning streams have declined by 70 per cent.

“You can’t manage salmon populations if you don’t know how they’re doing,” Reynolds said.

The study, conducted in partnership with Raincoast Conservation Foundation biologists Misty MacDuffee and Andy Rosenberger, found 42 per cent of salmon populations considered threatened

would have improved had commercial fisheries been strategically reduced, study co-author and Simon Fraser University researcher Michael Price told DeSmog Canada.

Budget cuts to DFO, especially during the years of the Harper government, have played a role in poor management, Price said, but added it's about more than just money.

"They are not taking a strategic approach to salmon management. You can't just blame budget cuts."

Price said there was hope after the adoption of the wild salmon policy that things would be different.

"So I was surprised to see now how bad things have gotten particularly in terms of visits to spawning streams and just gathering basic information," he said.

Without new federal support, historical salmon population data is at risk of becoming irrelevant, Price added.

Salmon Fisheries Closed Across B.C.

The report comes at a time that several salmon fisheries have been closed due to low returns. Salmon fishing contributes about \$500 million and roughly 4000 full-time jobs to the B.C. economy.

In previous years, an estimated 4.5 million sockeye have returned to the Fraser watershed during spawning season. This year only about one-third of that is expected.

Price said some tests are performed to gauge the general size of returning salmon populations based on a daily catch plugged into a population formula.

This year those tests were used to hit pause on a few major commercial fisheries, which Price said will provide some relief to populations.

But much more detailed and consistent information is needed on specific "conservation units," which Price said can be made up of anywhere between one and 200 salmon populations.

"We show that 10 of 24 Conservation Units assessed as Red (Poor) would have improved in status had Canadian fisheries been reduced over the last decade," Price and Reynolds wrote in their study.

A more cautious approach to fisheries, which targets abundant populations while allowing vulnerable populations to recover, would help maintain commercial fisheries while protecting threatened fish, the study suggests.

"We need to assess the health of populations and act on those considered red, poor or threatened," Price said.

Price emphasized the answer doesn't necessarily lie in ending commercial or recreational fishing, but in targeting healthy populations while giving unhealthy populations time to rebound.

Climate Change 'Greatest Threat' to Future of Wild Salmon

Climate change is “arguably the greatest threat to the future of wild salmon,” the study states.

Price said warmer temperatures translate into earlier spring melts, longer ice-free periods on lakes, low water flow in rivers, high stream temperatures, disease and plankton blooms can all affect wild salmon health.

A [second study](#), also released Monday by researchers at the University of British Columbia, found warmer, less-oxygenated waters are expected to dramatically shrink the size of fish.

“Fish, as cold-blooded animals, cannot regulate their own body temperatures,” explains William Cheung, co-author of the study and associate professor at the Institute for Ocean and Fisheries and director of science for the Nippon Foundation-UBC Nereus Program.

“There is a point where the gills cannot supply enough oxygen for a larger body, so the fish just stops growing larger.”

Cheung and study lead author Daniel Pauly estimate fish will shrink 20 to 30 per cent if ocean temperatures continue to climb due to climate change.

Price said broad-reaching salmon conservation is the best insurance against climate change and the affects it will have on populations.

“With climate change we don’t know exactly what affects it will have on what populations, so the best insurance is in diversity and abundance. Some of those smaller populations today that we might deem insignificant may hold the genetic key that we’ll rely on in the future.”

Lack of Salmon Data ‘Problematic’ for Major Project Approvals

A lack of adequate baseline data is “problematic” when it comes to assessing the impact of major projects such as pipelines, salmon farms and LNG projects, Price said.

“How are we going to know whether a project is going to impact a given population if we don’t have basic information on how well that population is doing before a project came online?” he said.

Greg Knox, executive director at SkeenaWild Conservation Trust, said the federal government has put a lot of resources into supporting mining and oil and gas projects.

“It’s obvious they’re putting more effort into moving large scale development forward than assessing the impacts of development on wild salmon,” Knox said.

“Maybe it’s just easier not to know. But it does pose the question whether they do have any interest in protecting salmon and salmon habitat over large-scale projects.”

B.C. saw more progress on wild salmon policy implementation under the Harper government than so far under Trudeau, Knox said. “Under the Trudeau Liberals we’ve see a continuation of cuts for science and stock assessment and no resources towards implementing the wild salmon policy.”

He added much of the work of conservation groups, local communities and First Nations goes ignored by the federal government. “There is a lot of data out there they don’t incorporate and there is a lot of capacity in First Nations communities and citizen science that exists.”

Price said he believes local, place-based conservation and management is at the heart of effective salmon policy.

“It may seem daunting when you think of monitoring the nearly 3,000 spawning populations in B.C. and all of these streams,” he said.

DFO could partner with more with non-profits, local First Nations and academics and engage more in citizen science, Price said. We’ve had this paternal relationship with DFO for a long time now and it’s time for that to switch,” he said. “A more inclusive process would be a more healthy process for all.”

**Article updated August 23, 2017 at 10:37am PST to include mention of Raincoast Conservation Foundation's partnership in the study.*

Image: Adams River sockeye. Photo: A.S. Wright

Link: <https://www.desmog.ca/2017/08/21/amid-closure-b-c-salmon-fisheries-study-finds-feds-failed-monitor-stocks>