

Revisiting an intriguing theory

Pink salmon: Strip-mining the ocean

Editor's note: Pacific Fishing has reported on some of this research in the past. We think, however, that it's worth another look, especially in light of fish returns this past summer and growing concerns over global climate change.

Vast packs of pink salmon swarming into the ocean can starve out their cousins, such as sockeye.

That's because pinks eat early, eat often, and eat almost everything. Other salmon don't; they grow hungry, they grow less, some die.

That's the research of Greg Ruggerone of the Seattle-based Natural Resources Consultants Inc. For the last decade, he's looked at competition by pinks with other species of salmon, and he's found that none — even coho and chum — are immune, except that coho might occasionally dine on pink fry.

Although published in the past few years, some of Ruggerone's data go back to the 1930s, from what was then the Stalinist Soviet Union. Most impressive is his work with Russian pinks.

In a nutshell, "There is evidence that the significant shift in Kamchatka pink salmon abundance may have influenced the recent decline of Bristol Bay sockeye that began with the 1991 brood year." And, for a scholarly paper, that's about the most definitive phrase you'll ever get.

That's not to say pinks of other origins are more benign. Ruggerone reports on research showing pinks, from whichever source, affect other salmon they encounter in the blackness of the Pacific.

And where does that leave kings, sockeye, coho, and chum?

Hungry.

The primary return runs of pinks to the Russian Far East occur during odd years. From 1955 to 2000, the size of individual Bristol Bay sockeye, especially the females, was lower than normal when they met pink salmon on the high seas.

There were 22 percent fewer Bristol Bay sockeye returning from the ocean after interacting with pinks during odd years. The reduction was more pronounced on those sockeye that spent only two years in the ocean, rather than three-ocean fish.

Pinks, however, have shown some stunting, which some scientists lay to competition



PINK SALMON, the vacuum cleaners of the sea, roam up to 4,500 miles in the Pacific. A few pinks were around for the F/V Cora J, here hauling aboard a small catch of pink and chum salmon off Admiralty Island during an August opening in Southeast Alaska. Pinks were fetching 10 cents a pound, while chums brought in 30 cents. Klas Stolpe photo.

with other pinks.

Pinks' adaptability extends to the environment. The "ocean regime change" or

"climate shift" in the Pacific in the mid-1970s helped all species of salmon. But the

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Jet boat rescue saves three on Bristol Bay sandbar

July 12 dawned with blue skies and light winds in Bristol Bay, the perfect backdrop to a day of salmon fishing. But as boats, fully laden with sockeye, began heading back to the tenders, gusts of 60 knots and reduced visibility tore across the Bering Sea.

The west winds blew against the current of the Ugashik River, near Pilot Point in southeastern Bristol Bay along the Alaska Peninsula. The ebbing tide produced stacks of waves piling up 6-8 feet on the elongated sandbar in the mouth of the river. The F/V *Chaos* was blown into the bar and bottomed out near Pilot Point, in southeastern Bristol Bay.

As Edmonds, Wash., resident Don Martinson, captain of the *Shadow*, headed back

to the tender vessel *Far West Leader*, the call went out over his radio — “I need help.” It came from his long-time friend and experienced skipper of the *Chaos*, Brian Bennett of Bellingham, Wash. “What kind of help do you need?” Don asked him. “Well, we’re aground at the end of Smoky Point Bar. We’re swamped, and there’s water over the engine,” Brian replied, as if in a state of shock.

While water quickly filled up the boat, Brian and his crew donned their survival suits. By the time Pete Rockness of the *Rockin* arrived on scene, the *Chaos* had rolled on its side. Brian and his crew stayed on the capsized boat awaiting help.

Because of the shallow water near the bar, and the additional draft from thousands of

pounds of fish on the decks, other nearby vessels could not get in close enough to rescue them. While the skippers debated whether or not to launch onboard skiffs for rescue, Pete Rockness of Gig Harbor, Wash., piloted his jet boat in close enough for the rescue. With 18,000 lbs of fish on board, the *Rockin* still drew less water than the other boats because of its design. Pete was able to navigate the treacherous waters near the bar with the help of his sons.

While Pete stayed at the wheel, his sons were able to coax the crew of the *Chaos* into swimming the 100 feet over to the *Rockin*. Matt and Tor Rockness pulled the three exhausted men out of the water one at a time.

— Michael Edenfield.

PINKS MEET SOCKEYE, AND SOCKEYE TAKE AWAY THEIR LUNCH, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 7

population explosion served to bring other species closer to the pinks — and amplified the competition for food. The pinks won.

Change in the ocean regime shouldn’t be equated with global cli-

mate change that some scientists are predicting, said Ruggerone. In comparison, the regime change in the Pacific was a regional event.

Here’s the issue in a nutshell: When you catch a fish selling for 10 cents a pound at the tender, you’re actually catching some ocean protein taken away from sockeye and kings.

So, does it make sense to continue hatchery operations that pump 1.3 billion pinks into the North Pacific each year?

That’s for you to decide.

A lot of you are going to have something to say about this issue. Don’t be shy. Send your thoughts to editor@pacificfishing.com or 1710 South Norman St., Seattle, WA 98144.

We have posted a few of Greg Ruggerone’s scholarly papers on our web site. Go to www.pacificfishing.com.

WE “PREDICT” WHERE TO FISH

We decided to test-drive Greg Ruggerone’s theory in light of this past summer’s salmon returns in Alaska — specifically, the low average fish weight of Bristol Bay sockeye and the mysterious absence of pinks in Southeast. But first, the weasel words: Our test assumes that ...

- The known facts tell the whole story, which never happens.
- All other variables are equal, which they never are.
- Fish return forecasts are accurate, which is an impossibility.

Aside from that, we’ll bravely go where we never should have gone.

CONUNDRUM: The average weight of sockeye was lower in Bristol Bay this summer, and the total egg harvest was disappointing as well. Why?

Ruggerone says that reports, some of which appeared in *Pacific Fishing*, had a huge return of pinks to Russian rivers in 2005. But before they swarmed home, all those pinks were grazing next to this summer’s Bristol Bay sockeye. Pinks ate more than the sockeye. Sockeye didn’t grow as much as they should. But next summer’s return should be better.

And remember: Ruggerone disavows all of this, and you didn’t hear it from us, either. ■



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