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Op – Ed: Harris River Restoration is Good for Fish and People

By Rob Bosworth

For several years, a partnership including The Nature Conservancy and the U.S. Forest Service has been at work restoring salmon habitat on Prince of Wales Island. Salmon habitat in three watersheds – Sal Creek, Fubar Creek and Harris River – is healthier as a result.

We use large machinery during periods that are approved to do this work. Last month, commercial fishermen were understandably concerned when they saw back-hoes at work in the Harris River, as was reported in the Ketchikan Daily News. The strength of Alaska's fishery and many communities requires healthy spawning streams, and so an abundance of caution is appropriate.

While Harris River produces fine salmon runs, Forest Service studies show it has the capability to support more fish. This is why The Nature Conservancy and the U.S. Forest Service are restoring sections of salmon habitat on Harris River.

Restoring Harris River salmon habitat requires that we return some of the natural variety that disappeared in the 1960s, when most of the large trees along its banks were removed. Today's restoration includes carefully placing into a half-mile section of the stream more than 400 60-foot logs complete with root wads. Historically this would have happened naturally as large streamside trees grew, matured and eventually fell into the river.

It has now been forty years and the river's natural supply of woody debris still has not recovered. Each year the river channel has fewer tree trunks and half-buried snags – features that help salmon by keeping spawning gravels in place. Natural log jams create deep pools that act as nurseries for young salmon.

The habitat decline we've witnessed on Harris River is, unfortunately, not unique. We know from studying rivers throughout the Pacific Northwest that the Harris is following a familiar trajectory: diminished habitat quality leads to fewer fish. Our ongoing effort to replace the natural woody debris missing on the Harris will help stabilize and maintain fish habitat until the trees again grow near the stream, ensuring quality fish habitat and healthy fish stocks for the long term.

Work on the Harris River is carefully timed to avoid salmon runs. With our Forest Service partners, we took advantage of a 17-day work window designated by the Alaska Department of Fish & Game biologists. On a very limited basis, state and federal laws permit in-stream activity such as restoration, but only during salmon "safe windows" and only for very good reason. The window was designed to allow in-stream work with heavy equipment, after the young steelhead fry were out of the gravel and before pink salmon returned and began spawning.

This summer, pink salmon began showing up sooner than expected. To finish the in-stream work we and our contractor, S&S Contracting, worked long hours until the fish window closed. Fish passage was never blocked. We diverted the river's flow away from work sites with pumps equipped with water filters to maintain the best possible conditions for salmon. In the end we saw no fish mortality. We saw no spawning before the work was completed. All indications point to a successful habitat restoration.

However, we now know communication about the restoration has been incomplete. This winter we will be talking more directly with fishermen and other interested parties to better explain why and how we are restoring Harris River habitat. By better coordinating our efforts, we can work toward a healthier future for the Harris River fishery and the people who depend on it.

If you would like to learn more, visit [www.nature.org/alaska](http://www.nature.org/alaska). You are also welcome to contact me at The Nature Conservancy in Juneau at [rbosworth@tnc.org](mailto:rbosworth@tnc.org) or 907-586-8621.

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