

"Skipper" King, the 80-year old self-appointed guardian of the Goldstream salmon, worked hard with other conservationists to convince the people and mayor of Victoria

To save a salmon run

By JOHN DRISCOLL



Salmon watchers at the Goldstream Park Bridge.



The 14-pound coho hung for a frozen instant in the November afternoon, its scarlet body twisted in a desperate arc against the Goldstream River waterfall. Then the salmon fell again into the dark pool below the falls. The watchers on the bank waited.

"No wonder they're having trouble," said a young woman, pointing an accusing finger at a photographer with a flash camera, crouched close to the falls. "Every time one of them jumps it gets blinded."

The people of southern Vancouver Island are very protective about their salmon.

The coho flashed out of the water again and this time its lunge carried it to the top of the six-foot falls. Surging forward with a violent tail-swishing movement it crested the falls and moved wearily out of the current to rest.

The watchers seemed about to burst into applause.

At Goldstream, 11 miles north of Victoria, the last act in one of the most dramatic sequences in the



A Pacific salmon on his way to the spawning grounds at Goldstream.

animal kingdom was underway. Driven by an overwhelming urge, the salmon had to come home from the sea to spawn and die.

The same drama was being enacted in 1,300 British Columbia streams and rivers. The Goldstream spawning run, though small in comparison (it produces about 30,000 salmon) was unique because the drama here included thousands of people who had conducted their own struggle against a river of red tape and dry pools of apathy to enable the salmon to culminate their lives with a powerful, positive statement.

The exhausted coho couldn't know it but the water they rested in had until a few weeks earlier been destined for the water taps of Victoria homes.

Because that water flowed in Goldstream, people were voluntarily following instructions on how to prepare their food, how to brush their teeth, how long to stay in the shower, and even when to flush the toilet.

Cars were remaining unwashed, golf courses, gardens and ryes unwatered. And Mayor Courtney Haddock was nervously speculating that he was "the first mayor of Victoria that ever prayed for rain".

Downstream, Freeman "Skipper" King was dissecting a dead salmon, one of many along the edge of the stream. These were salmon that had completed the spawn, their battered bodies the toll of their exhausting struggle.

King, the 80-year-old, salty, self-appointed guardian of the Goldstream salmon run was in the centre of a group of children, half of them grimacing and "oooing" with nausea as he held up the salmon's heart, the other half demanding souvenirs.

It had been his idea to ask people to voluntarily save water to save the salmon.

Unheeding, a few feet away from the group, in a shallow pool, about 40 ghostly grey-white forms hovered above the gravel bottom.

King was combining his salmon anatomy lesson with one in bird-watching. He pointed to a huge blue heron sailing high above the stream, then to a kingfisher perched on a branch a few feet above the water.

"He's looking for young salmon to eat," he told the children. During the summers King works as a provincial parks naturalist at Goldstream. For the rest of the year he treks daily up and down the stream on his own time, mother-henning the spawners, roe and fry.

"I'm just like those salmon out there, just about spawned out," he said. "I do this because I believe in it, and in them," as he looked to where the children were running off to get a closer look at the kingfisher.

"If we can reach the kids, there's some hope we won't destroy our heritage."

He turned to where two shrieking gulls were bickering over a salmon carcass in the midst of a banquet. "I get bitter about those gulls some-



"Skipper" King gives a nature lesson to children at Goldstream.

times. They'll pick the eyes out of a salmon before it's even dead. Still, they're part of the cycle too. Those are flaucous gulls, by the way, not yet mature.

The children returned and King went back to his lesson, concluding it with a question and answer session in which he supplied both questions and answers, his voice rising in an exasperated chant.

"Why were salmon dying out in Saanich Inlet?"

"Because they couldn't get up Goldstream."

"And why couldn't they get up the stream?"

"Because there wasn't any water in it."

"Why wasn't there any water?"
"Because the water board would

not turn on the water, that's why."

"The water board finally turned on the water because the people told them to, because it was the right thing to do. And that's what you must always do, fight for what is right. If you stop doing that, you've had it."

There are those who wouldn't agree with Skipper King's version of the saving of the salmon, a story that began in mid-October, the driest October in 36 years in the Sooke watershed.

Salmon were massing in Saanich Inlet, an arm of the sea stretching into the mountainous southeast corner of Vancouver Island. By what scientists hypothesize as celestial navigation, the coho, spring and chum salmon had returned to the mouth of their natal stream, some

from more than a thousand miles away in the Pacific.

They were now relying on an amazingly acute sense of smell for the second phase of their journey, attempting to identify the particular odour of their stream. But scenting out Goldstream would have been useless, since it contained scarcely a trickle of water.

"Not enough to get a minnow up," said King.

King and other conservationists knew the situation was critical. Within three weeks the 6,000 spawning salmon bound for Goldstream would each discharge up to 30,000 eggs in salt water. The eggs would not hatch. King also knew there was a solution, one that had been used in the past.

The source of Goldstream is high in the Sooke watershed and connected by tunnel to a Greater Victoria Water Board reservoir. For ten years, since the water board had given the 700-acre Goldstream Park to the Province, water had been released from the reservoir as needed, for spawning, keeping the reeds wet and to ensure enough water for the coho fry that spend the first year of their three-year life span in the stream.

This year was different. The water board too had felt the effects of the dry cycle. Chief commissioner, Ron Upward, concerned primarily with the domestic supply for the board's 185,000 customers took a look at the dwindling domestic reserve and declared:

"We won't be releasing any water this year. This is mother nature at her worst, the second dry fall in a row. The need for domestic water must come before fish."

Upward explained that the release of water would result in water restrictions next summer and a loss of revenue to the water board of up to \$150,000. Until this public statement was made, not many people knew of the plight of the salmon. Officials of the federal fisheries department, responsible for stream levels for migrating fish, and provincial recreation and conservation officials were aware. For some time they had been meeting privately with the water board, requesting the release of 250-million gallons into the stream.

The water board, made up of elected officials of four greater Victoria municipalities and chaired by Victoria mayor Haddock had been told by their commissioner that there wasn't enough water available.

By tradition civil servants are, in public, tight-lipped men who have discovered it unwise to be drawn into a controversy, especially one involving the three levels of government. But there were others who knew about the problem and who were not so fettered.

One was King and another was Howard English, Victoria area farmer and ardent conversationist, a director of the B.C. Wildlife Federation.

Faced with the negative attitude of the water board and with time running out, King and English decided to take out advertisements asking people to voluntarily save water.

King, on radio and television, in newspapers and pamphlets asked people to put a brick in their toilet, flush only solids, clean teeth in a tumbler, peel vegetables without running water over them, spend less time in the shower and fix leaky faucets.

Upward, a practical man given to straight-forward opinions, doubted the save-water campaign was practical or that people would change water-use habits during the six week spawning period.

Victoria mayor, Courtenay Haddock, the reluctant saviour of the Goldstream salmon run.



"It might not be feasible to concentrate on a stream that is in the heart of a populated area where pollution could become a real problem," he said.

Haddock reiterated Upward's statement that "people come before fish."

The campaign to save the salmon was building now, fanned by public debate in the newspapers and radio hot-line programs. People were becoming indignant and the drama heightened with a report that salmon were already dying, their destiny unfulfilled, in Saanich Inlet.

Letters poured into Haddock's office as people were roused from apathy by the realization that the salmon run they had taken for granted all these years was in danger of being wiped out.

The public outcry was greater than that generated in the area in 1969 when the United States government announced that it was almost (but not quite) certain that nuclear testing on Amchitka Island in the Aleutians would not cause an earthquake down the sensitive San Andras fault along the west coast of North America. (Editor's Note: since this writing, and as

everyone knows, another test has been planned.)

Not even the announced plan, later abandoned, to ship enough nerve gas to kill everybody 50 times, back to the U.S. via the Strait of Juan de Fuca and within a few miles of Victoria, caused such a commotion. This hit closer to home. Most of the people in the area had made the 15-minute journey up the Malahat Drive, to watch the spectacle.

Anglers and marina operators were upset with the prospect of losing an estimated 4,000 coho that would result from this run, not to mention lost future generations. The coho is a superb game fish, attracting thousands of fishermen with thousands of dollars, to Vancouver Island each year.

Commercial fishermen, already having problems with gigantic Russian trawlers which literally bumped them off their fishing grounds, were not happy with the loss of a harvest estimated at \$250,000, from the Goldstream run.

Anti-pollution groups, outdoors clubs and ratepayers groups, usually associated with high-rise rezon-

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Gulls, during the final chapter of the Goldstream spawning run.



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ing battles, were rallying round the salmon.

At the height of the crisis the Victoria branch of the Community Planning Association of Canada, called a meeting. The C.P.A.C. is a non-political organization aimed at informing and involving the public in local issues.

Representatives of 20 organizations as well as interested citizens of all ages attended the meeting which, along with a lot of political name-calling, managed to agree to finance the advertising campaign to encourage householders to use less water, and to ask Haddock to recommend the release of the water.

Three days later King and English met with Haddock in the morning. That afternoon Haddock announced that the board would release enough water to save the salmon.

His recommendation to release 100 million gallons of water into Goldstream was adopted by the water board and on November 8 Goldstream was gurgling back to life.

There were 30,000 people at Gold-

stream that day, but only one salmon had made its way to the park area by dusk. Freeman King was kept busy, checking the stream level, directing traffic and assuring people that the salmon would indeed be coming.

"But we have to keep the pressure on or next summer those baby fry are gonna die," he reminded visitors.

In his office a week later Haddock talked of his stance during the crisis and of the pressure on him. Buoyed by favorable mail from across North America, he still seemed a somewhat reluctant saviour of the salmon.

"It's easy for everyone to say "save the salmon" but it's me in the hot seat in six months when we have to impose water restrictions. People forget quickly, you know."

He pointed out that he had recommended the release of less than half the amount of water requested by fisheries department officials.

"I was getting pressure left, right and centre. But I wasn't going to make a silly, impulsive decision. If this were private enterprise I'd take a chance but I can't gamble with the water supply of a large

city. We've got hospitals and factories here to consider."

He said when first approached he asked why the urgency to save 6,000 fish. "It was explained to me that these 6,000 fish represented millions of fry and that we could lose the stream forever.

Asked if the public pressure had been the deciding factor in his decision, Haddock paused for a long moment before replying. "We were getting information and we had to take everything into consideration. I believe we would have released the water anyway."

"Sure they would have," snorted King. "When I first went to the water board it was like butting my head against that alder over there."

King said he recognized that the city was in a tight situation and that there could be water restrictions next summer. "So maybe the lawns in the Uplands (Victoria's high-income district) won't be as green. The golf courses will be a little dryer. So what? The rains will come and the lawns will come back but the salmon won't."

For the last three weeks in November the save-water campaign was an official one. Victorians scrimped on water to the tune of 13

million gallons during that time, averaging a savings of more than three gallons per person per day.

The number of bricks placed in toilet tanks is not known, but in public, residents were water conscious. A golf course manager was forced to make a public apology after some overeager golfers convinced his staff to turn on the water sprinklers to wash snow off the greens.

As it turned out it's unlikely there'll be any restrictions next summer. The rains came back to the Sooke watershed, dumping 11 inches in the last three weeks of November.

Out at Goldstream Freeman King was faced with a new problem. The heavy rains continuing into December resulted in flow that threatened to wash away some of the later salmon eggs that had not time to adhere to the sand and gravel surrounding them.

King would fret over these eggs until February when they hatched. Then the chum fry would move out to sea in schools, the coho remaining behind in the pools. And the cycle would continue.

Ecologists are heartened by the

Goldstream story but aware that this was a skirmish in a much larger battle. The problem is one of attitude according to English who has served on the advisory committee to the federal fisheries department.

"People have a mixed up concept of water as a resource," he added. "What good does it do to have an automatic dish-washer if you don't have anything to put on your plate?"

"Fish are just not recognized as prime users of water. Legislation especially on the provincial level, is not designed to provide adequate protection for streams, trees or fish. It's antique and if it's not changed we're going to destroy our environment."

English is encouraged by the strong stand taken by fisheries minister Jack Davis, in specific reference to Goldstream. Two days after the water board had made its decision, Davis sent a letter to Haddock ordering the city to plan for provision of a minimum flow of water for spawning salmon and fry. "I must insist that you do so," Davis had stated.

Haddock insists that Davis has no authority under the Canadian Fish-

eries Act to make such an order. This conflict points up the morass of overlapping jurisdictions over waterways in B.C.

The federal government has responsibility over stream levels for migratory fish but it is the province that issues licences for logging and subdivisions, sometimes at creek-edge.

This summer, fisheries guardians moved thousands of fry from pools in danger of drying up to larger pools in the same stream. The federal government is also building dams to store water for fish but at the same time the province issues licences to permit domestic use of that water.

David Anderson, M.P. for Saanich-Esquimalt and chairman of the Commons environmental and renewable resources committee claims Canada is behind European countries in providing regulations to protect streams.

"In Switzerland a property owner can't even cut down a tree by a stream without permission. Here because of a lack of planning we destroy our natural resources and sometimes spend millions to renew what we have destroyed and could have saved."

The solution, conservationists believe, is tighter control over logging in watersheds, greater discrimination in issuing licences for domestic use of water and placing funds in the hands of local governments to implement preventative measures.

The biggest enemy is apathy, by government and the public. As C.P.A.C. director John DiCastri put it:

"Goldstream demonstrated what people pressure can do. Where politicians make the mistake is in dealing with generalities. As long as we hear jargon about "improving the quality of the environment" there won't be much response. You need a specific issue and here we had the issue."

