

BACKGROUND

Marine Stewardship Council certification of BC sockeye salmon fisheries

- The Marine Stewardship Council eco-label allows certified fisheries to brand themselves as a “sustainable” source of seafood. Fisheries voluntarily apply for certification, and they do so by hiring a for-profit company to carry out the assessment.
- All British Columbia commercial sockeye salmon fisheries applied for MSC certification in 2001 and were broken into four fisheries units for assessment (Fraser, Skeena, Barkley Sound, Nass).
- B.C. conservation organizations have provided input to these assessments, providing expertise on the sustainability of these fisheries and serious ongoing management problems.
- The final determination by the MSC recommended certification of all B.C. sockeye fisheries as sustainable. The David Suzuki Foundation, Watershed Watch Salmon Society and SkeenaWild Conservation Trust filed an objection to the certification of Fraser sockeye salmon fisheries as sustainable.
- The Fraser River sockeye fishery exploits 44 genetically distinct populations of sockeye salmon, each of which has evolved under a unique set of environmental and ecological conditions which govern its ability to withstand harvest and environmental change. Most of these genetically distinct populations migrate together through the same coastal areas at the same general time. They are indistinguishable from one another, and are all harvested in aptly-named “mixed-stock” fisheries. A few productive sockeye populations have been able to withstand relatively high harvest rates whereas many smaller populations have been driven to the edge of extinction and beyond. First Nations (aboriginal) people of the Fraser River, who harvested sockeye sustainably for thousands of years, now have difficulty catching enough sockeye to meet their families’ basic food needs.
- Two sockeye populations routinely caught by the Fraser River fishery (Cultus and Sakinaw Lakes) have been heavily overfished and are listed as critically endangered by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) since 2003.
- The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) grouped the Fraser River sockeye into 11 subpopulations and found that 6 are “vulnerable”, 3 are “endangered” and 1 is “critically endangered”. Overfishing was listed as a “key threat”.
- In the last 6 out of 11 years the Fraser River sockeye fishery has been closed due to poor returns.
- From 1999 to 2009, 70% of the pre-season forecasts have overestimated the actual return of sockeye. In years when fishing occurs, it is common for the fishery to harvest 20% of endangered sockeye populations such as Cultus and Sakinaw.
- The biological productivity of Fraser River sockeye is declining and is now at an all-time low, meaning that the populations are barely replacing themselves..
- Last year, nearly all Fraser River sockeye populations collapsed. Only 13% of the expected 10.5 million Fraser River sockeye returned to spawn. A judicial inquiry is underway investigating the collapse of Fraser sockeye and failures of their management.