

## **Gone Fishin' for Salmon**

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Vancouver, British Columbia -- Attention all sport fishermen: Hang your "gone fishin'" sign on the office door and head for British Columbia. Major fishing regulation changes are under way, and the sport fishing season, which started in April and basically runs through October, has been reaping the benefits.

As stocks of certain species of wild salmon, particularly coho and chinook, have dwindled, conservation has become a key concern. After endless research, negotiations and analysis, David Anderson, Canada's minister of fisheries and oceans, has implemented a 400 million Canadian dollar (US\$268 million) conservation program and found new ways to tackle the issues at hand. For the first time in the province's history, government officials are curtailing and regulating the commercial fishery drastically, while at the same time allocating somewhat looser regulations to the sport fishing industry.

Recent research indicated that the province's massive commercial fleet needed to be restructured to preserve many of the salmon runs. Over the years, it became increasingly obvious that as the numbers of coho and chinook diminished, the province's massive fleet couldn't continue to operate as it had for decades. In the past, the fishermen would harvest sockeyes and pinks, which are desirable for commercial purposes and still available abundantly, far out in the ocean, where the province's five species of salmon (chinook, coho, pink, sockeye and chum) swim together on what is known as the mixed stock highway. When harvesting there, the fishermen would net the less abundant cohos and chinooks in the process.

Because the fleet caught 93% of the overall harvests, Canada's Department of Fisheries and Oceans has decided to reduce the fleet by buying back commercial fishing licenses. Throughout the 1999 fishing season, the DFO will also be dictating where and when the commercial fishermen can catch their salmon. For example, to avoid harvesting on the mixed stock highway, commercial boats will now be fishing closer to the mouths of rivers, where the fish have naturally segregated themselves with their own species before they head up the river to spawn. For the 1999 commercial season, the department has also placed a complete moratorium on coho, which means that commercial boats aren't allowed to target the species or even catch it as a by-product. New labor-intensive fishing techniques are being implemented to help enforce the new regulations.

Although such drastic moves have caused serious waves throughout the province's commercial industry, it all bodes well for the recreational fishermen and the province's sport fishing industry.

Cohos and chinooks are very desirable sport catches. The chinook is prized for its massive size, which can often reach as much as 70 pounds. The cohos, although smaller, are fierce fighters. Historically, the sport fishing industry has harvested only a small share of the total catch annually (only about 5%) and in the process brought a higher revenue into the province than the commercial.

Those realities were hard to ignore, and, for the 1999 season, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans has given the recreational fishing sector complete priority to catch chinook and coho. Tom Bird, executive director of the nonprofit Sport Fishing Institute of British Columbia, was thrilled with the announcements. He said, "The outlook for sport fishing in the province is as strong as it has ever been, and the expectations for the next several years are very positive."

Despite such exciting predictions for the future, the province's savvy and conservation-minded sport fishing industry knows that conservation is also now at the top of the DFO's priority list and that salmon regulations could fluctuate from year to year depending on stock runs and natural phenomena. As a result, their businesses are evolving and diversifying in a number of ways. Visitors are reaping the benefits and getting more choices.

Fishing guides have been experimenting with saltwater fly fishing in the past few years, and the sport, which offers fly fishermen the chance to catch a salmon in ocean water, has taken off in coastal communities. Charter boat operators are now gearing up to target halibut, the enormous bottom fish that can tip the scales well beyond 300 pounds. And resorts and fishing lodges are celebrating the region's natural resources by entering the ecotourism arena.

One example is the 23-room Eagle Nook Ocean Wilderness Resort, located in Barkley Sound on the west coast of Vancouver Island. The resort's owner, Roger Francoeur, recently received a \$100,000 low-interest loan from the government. Although fabulous salmon fishing exists right in front of his lodge, Mr. Francoeur is using the money to expand his sea kayaking fleet and develop new adventure tours. He explained, "For many years, a lot of people here in coastal British Columbia thought that sport fishing was the only thing that would attract people to the area. What we realize now is that people come here for a lot of other reasons. We have an incredible rain forest, great wildlife viewing and sea kayaking. My research tells me that, in addition to great sport fishing, people are looking for active holidays and multisport tourism adventures."

Despite diversification efforts, many charter boat operators have been wrestling with the bounty, as 30- and 40-pound chinooks bite the line and give everyone a run for their money.