**I am a Sockeye Salmon – submission for the Cohen Commission**

 **by Celia Brauer September 2010**

 I am a Sockeye Salmon. I was born in the Horsefly River. My family, my relatives and my ancestors have travelled the waters of the Fraser River for thousands of years.

 I understand that today people are coming together to try and understand why every year, Sockeye Salmon are diminishing in number and why in 2009, very few of us came home. I can shed some light on this question if you would like to hear my point of view. But first I must take you on a journey through the history of my family and all the humans who have depended on them for millennia. Only through understanding this story and relationship will you start to realize why we are disappearing before your eyes.

Before a century and a half ago we moved in the tens of millions up and down the river – all the way up to the Rocky Mountains, Prince George and the Horsefly River where my family comes from. This year, 2010, you had a taste of what the old magnificent returns used to look like. We would go east to the Adam’s River, we travelled up the small and large tributaries of the mighty Fraser which drains one-quarter of British Columbia. In fact in the small area which is now the City of Vancouver there were once more than 50 streams that were packed with salmon fry every spring and choked with spawners every fall. In those days the Fraser River was called “Sto:lo” and the people who fished for salmon were the “original people”. They were fewer in number than the people today. They lived in great houses made of cedar and ate from the bounty of the land. They stood on the banks of the river and fished for us with spears and small nets. They paid us homage; they returned our bones to the river like we told them to so our ancestors’ spirit could be complete. They danced for us, told stories about us. They welcomed us into their lives and treated us with respect. And so we sacrificed some of our kin for their sustenance. We were glad to return to their rivers and give of ourselves so they could have plenty of fish for their feasts because they respected us. We lived together in balance, peace and mutual respect with the original people for many centuries. We sustained them, they sustained us.

Then about 150 years ago, things began to change. Newcomers arrived. They saw the river full of fish and so they caught us to sell to others. They had big boats and they would come up the Fraser River or sit at the mouth and take more and more fish as we were returning home in the fall. First they went after the Spring Salmon whose flesh was nice and oily. They would catch all of the fish in huge nets and when they sorted them out they would throw back those that didn’t suit them. The Sockeye were one of these throw-back fish. Many of my ancestors died this way and they were left to rot in the river, smelling up the whole place. After a decade or so the Spring Salmon numbers went down. Then some newcomers decided we were the next most tasty, so they came for us with even more gusto. They became more and more selfish - they took and took and took. Their catch kept growing, our numbers went down. It was devastating; nothing like this had ever happened before. No one could stop them! Many of the original people could not speak up in our defense because they too had been silenced and marginalized. Our sacred meat was chopped up. They took the choice bits, sold them for money and threw the rest away. They gave us nothing back. All we got was decreased numbers then in 1913 there was a disastrous slide up the Fraser River and it blocked our passage. If it had not been for some kind helpers, we might have died out completely. More decades went by and the Sockeye family, along with the Spring, Coho, Chum and Pink were being butchered by the millions and there was nothing anyone could do. We just all watched in horror. The numbers went down, down, down until we were afraid we would completely disappear.

At the same time there were many other things that happened close to the river to reduce our numbers. Many times we would come home to our streams and the water was gone, or it was full of garbage or logs and silt so there was nowhere to lay our eggs. Or all the surrounding vegetation would be gone and the stream would be too warm. We would move to another stream until that one would vanish as well and then we would move to another. The water also started filling up with strange smells and fluids and sand. These would choke up our gills. If we were lucky, we could swim away from this cloud to a cleaner place. If we weren’t, we would die. In the spring when the fry came all the way down the river to the ocean they would be particularly vulnerable to these smells and fluids because they were small and just finding their way. This interfered with their guidance system. It stressed them long before they entered the deep ocean where many more challenges waited. It also interfered with the sense of direction of the adult spawners returning home.

Some newcomers decided they would do something about this steep decline of fish numbers. But at that time they did not decide to reduce the fishing quotas and take all the poisons out of the water and disallow the loss of home.  They decided instead they would create new ways of making fish. So they consulted people they respected - the “scientists” and asked for some artificially methods of fish reproduction. The scientists did not disappoint. They took the female salmon, sliced open her belly, removed her eggs and put them in large tanks where a male salmon’s sperm could join with the eggs and create lots more baby salmon. When the fry were bigger, they would release these babies into the creeks and hope that this would bring back more salmon. They called these “hatcheries”. They felt they were helping nature. But this was not a real solution for the fish families. We wanted fewer people to catch fewer fish. We wanted some of our old homes back. And we wanted the water to be cleaner.

This was not to be. Numbers continued to go down because the new artificial fish could not bring back our homes, clean the waters and reduce fishing. In the meantime, some new challenges were created. When all was not going according to plan, the scientists and the people who would make money selling artificially-reproduced fish came together and decided that in order to increase the fish numbers, they would grow more salmon in pens in the ocean and not release them into the wild. They called these “fish farms”. But these net pens were open to the wild waters and when my relatives the wild fish would pass by these nets on our way to the open ocean, many diseases would be floating around in the water and they would infect our fry. So while their farm fish numbers increased, our wild fish numbers decreased. As well the ocean and river waters were heating up. It was becoming uncomfortably warm for us to swim in the water and some of the rivers we would return to would be dried up.

In the year 2009, very few of us returned and many are today searching for the answers to why this happened. But if we look back at the story I just told you, we can see the reasons very clearly. Some newcomers brought selfish habits to these lands. And these bad habits have infected the whole society. Now too many people want lots of salmon but they don’t want to give us back our wild homes. They don’t want to stop putting poisons in the water and they don’t want to clean what is already dirty. They don’t want to stop taking so many fish. They just want to make more fish in fish farms with open-nets and in hatcheries. They prefer making artificially-reproduced fish. I understand they are now growing genetically-modified fish in test tubes so they can grow bigger. Why would they do this? Wild fish would be happy to work together with people but they do not work with us. They do not sustain us and our lands. They do not dance for us, they do not tell stories about us. They do not treat our meat with respect. They do not think of us as sacred. They think of us as something to be bought and sold and eaten. They waste too much. They want it all their way. They give nothing back.

Everyone was very excited when this year, 2010 Sockeye had a miraculous increase in our homecoming numbers. Yet all is not well in the world of fish. For us it is very clear why the salmon and many other creatures in our oceans are steadily disappearing. In this new world, there are some very loud and strong and committed voices which speak with respect and call out for our health. They understand what is good for the wild salmon families. But there are not enough of these voices yet and there still is a very strong group of scientists and leaders and fish sellers – who prefer to be “in control” and think that creating artificially-reproduced fish is better than helping the health of the wild ones.

There are too many people who still live in a cloud. They believe that these scientists know it all and they will miraculously help them create salmon that will be cheap and easy. They do not realize it is not easy to create life artificially. It is much wiser to work together with the Creator who made life in the first place. They believe the fish sellers are doing a good job and doing nothing wrong for the wild fish. But these fish sellers are in the business of making fish for money – how can they truly be stewards? Others believe the rulers of the people - the government – should continue to be in charge of taking care of the health and safety of fish. How can they imagine this will work? This is a very disconnected way to have a relationship with a wild creature, especially one who lives underwater and spends much of its life not visible at all in the open ocean. This relationship has worked very poorly in the past and it will not work well in the future. There are too many people who want the fish to just appear when they want them – for sale on the store shelves so they can profit. They are not interested in the complex life of our salmon families and how the salmon that is sold in the store was cared for or how it was caught and converted into food.

Sockeye and many other fish are disappearing because not enough people have made fish welcome in their communities. Fish are only welcome if they bring money. How can fish be happy to return to a people and a home which does not welcome them, which gives them nothing back and expects everything? How long can this relationship last successfully? As you can see, it is not working well. You can see today that my relatives the Sockeye are not returning in great numbers. We are giving up. Those of us who are still left are being lost to disease from fish farms, we suffocate from poisons and lose our way, we are in waters that are too hot and we are stressed, our homes are covered over and filled in and we have nowhere to go. Or you take too many of us before we can come home to spawn. If you were welcomed in this way, would you return home?

If people want the sockeye to return, we suggest you stop employing experts and listening to scientists. Stop expecting to be guided by the newcomer’s government. There is only one expert and that is the salmon themselves in our wild environment. Give us our wild space back and we will return. Make us welcome once again. Give us a clear place in your lives and your prayers and we will come back. Open your hearts and you will hear us talking to you. We will guide you; we will help you restore this age-old relationship. Ask the advice of the original people who remember the story; it was not very long ago for them. Ask the people who already hear our voices – they will help you hear what we say. We can all work together to bring more fish back into our world for us all. Welcome us back like you really mean it and we will return. I promise.

For the Sockeye.

Celia Brauer is a co-founder of the False Creek Watershed Society and has worked for many years as a volunteer to educate the people of Vancouver about their lost streams history and present day issues for the Wild Pacific Salmon.