



Gitksan Watershed Authorities

2018 Food Fishery June 2018

Overview

This fishing season we aim to balance our concern for sustainability of Chinook and Sockeye populations with the implementation of our constitutionally guaranteed priority right to the fishery. The Skeena First Nations continue to work on having a collective approach in dealing with government on fisheries issues in order to make change. Skeena First Nations have been sharing information and updates from other fisheries, to ensure there is a focus on conservation as well as food fish needs in all territories. With that, the **Gitksan fishery will not be closed**, however **recommendations for gear restrictions** and target species have been put forward in this newsletter to aid in the protection of these key species for future generations.

2018 Forecast

Sockeye Forecast

The total Skeena Sockeye return is expected to be poor, with an uncertain pre-season forecasted return estimated by DFO at **645,000 Sockeye**, with an estimated range of 283,000 and 1.47 million. We will start to know better in-season estimates of the return around July 15th. Among added concerns about low returns is the much lower than average wild Sockeye numbers compared to enhanced Babine Sockeye numbers seen last year.

Chinook or Spring Salmon Forecast

The Chinook forecast, according to DFO, is Like Last Year (LLY), the worst on record (~35,000), with only half making it to spawning grounds. Canada does not have a reliable method of estimating returns;

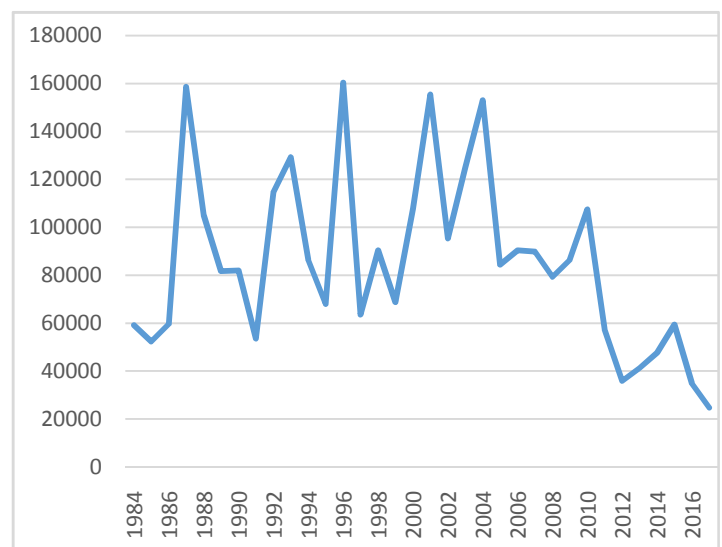
however, U.S. states like Alaska, Washington and Oregon are forecasting the runs to be less than last year returns. This leaves us to believe that Chinook returns to the Skeena will more than likely be poor, similar to or less than last year and **at risk for not meeting spawning needs**.

We have received some preliminary information from Alaska on how the Taku and Stikine Chinook stocks are doing.

“Catches are extremely poor on each river painting a very grim picture of the run for each stock. The 2018 preseason forecasts for the Taku and Stikine stocks are 4,700 and 6,900 large fish, respectively, and all indications are that these runs will fail to attain their respective escapement goals.”

We are seeing small Chinook being harvested by food fishers again this year on the coast and in-river. This trend continues from previous years as salmon are generally returning smaller at age indicating poor ocean conditions. Very few Chinook have been caught by First Nations in-river food fishers to date.

Recent Trends in Skeena Chinook – Population Declines





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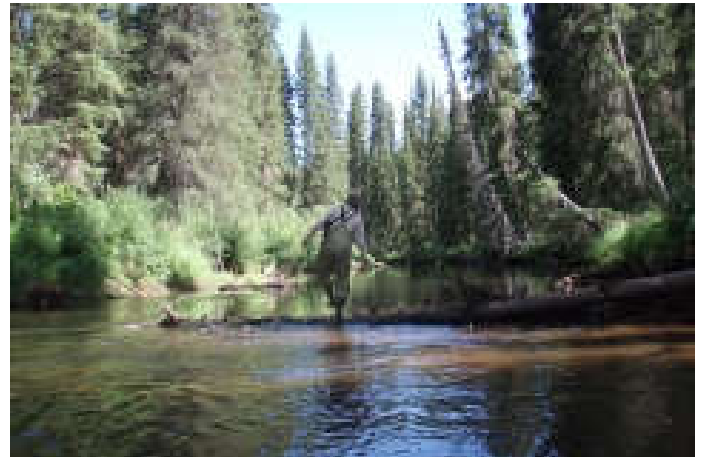
2018 Fishing Planning

Recommended Skeena Sockeye Fishing

Early Sockeye populations were observed to be in better numbers in 2017, perhaps in part due to reduced Sockeye fishing pressure, including in-river by First Nations.

The preliminary fishing plan of the First Nations is similar to 2017 with conservation and food fish needs top priorities. **The GWA recommends that the Gitksan do not target Sockeye, but instead fish with 7" or larger mesh web to target Chinook when the first Sockeye begin to appear in our fishery.** We urge the use of larger mesh until at least July 15, when the enhanced Babine Sockeye stocks (Pinkut & Fulton) begin to enter our territories, which we can potentially target given further notice closer to that date.

With this approach, we can secure some food fish earlier than in 2017 and keep an eye on the Tye Test Fishery in-season for indications of run strength for both species. The Chinook index is not a developed estimate tool as it is for Sockeye. Again, **we cannot state the total return of Sockeye with greater confidence until mid to late-July.** Until that point, reduced effort is recommended to promote enough early run wild Sockeye escapement to spawning grounds and help rebuild these stocks.



Chinook or Spring Salmon Fishing

As in 2017, there will be an increase in First Nations fisheries targeting Chinook, despite the total return predicted to be very low (~33,000). Last year, Gitksan harvested 3,254 Chinook, which was 10.6% of the total return and a third of the Chinook coming into the Gitksan territories. A reduced effort for all other sectors is being regulated by DFO to make room for conservation and First Nation harvests. **Recreational sector will remain closed** for any Chinook salmon fishing in the Skeena and Nass Rivers. Gitksan fishery for Chinook salmon will remain open, keeping in mind the preservation of these populations at risk of further depletion.

Preliminary fishing plans have been discussed with each Gitksan community to date to assist us in moving forward. For more information regarding 2018 fishing data and recommendations or any information provided in this newsletter, please contact us at **250 842-2213**.

For project updates on ongoing field work and research being done by GWA, please visit our website <http://gitksanwatershed.com/>