



Outdoor Recreation Council of British Columbia

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MEDIA RELEASE – 2018 BC Endangered Rivers List

Steelhead Rivers along with “Heart of the Fraser” top BC’s 2018 most endangered rivers list.

Waterways listed include the Fraser, Thompson, Chilcotin, Gold, Seymour, Cowichan, Peace and Kettle rivers.

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Leading British Columbia’s most endangered rivers in 2018 are a number of BC steelhead streams, as well as the stretch of the Fraser between Hope and Mission, widely referred to as the “Heart of the Fraser”.

Compiled every 2 years by the Outdoor Recreation Council of British Columbia (ORC) and its Endangered Rivers Committee, the Endangered Rivers list provides a current snapshot of the health of BC’s waterways and is based on nominations from ORC’s member organizations, resource professionals, outdoor recreation and conservation groups, as well as the general public.

A number of BC’s leading river, conservation and recreational fishing organizations submitted nominations, including the BC Federation of Fly Fishers, the BC Federation of Drift Fishers, the BC Conservation Foundation, the North Columbia Environmental Society, the Peace Valley Environment Association, the Rivershed Society of BC, Fraser River Discovery Centre, BC Spaces for Nature, Seymour Salmonid Society, and Watershed Watch Salmon Society.

Founded in 1976, the Outdoor Recreation Council of British Columbia (ORC) represents the interests of over 50 member groups, representing more than 100,000 individuals, as well as the general public, to promote and protect the outdoor recreation way of life in BC.

Steelhead-bearing rivers in trouble

Troubled steelhead rivers are a dominant force on this year’s list and most notably, the **Thompson** and **Chilcotin** rivers that have seen their world renowned Interior Fraser steelhead runs reduced to the brink of extinction. The Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) recently recommended an emergency listing of these fish under the Species at Risk Act (SARA). Only 57 steelhead returned to the Chilcotin this year; while only 177 made it back to the Thompson. The listing of these fish under SARA would

provide additional much needed protection for these fish and the decision now rests with the federal government.

ORC Rivers Chair and Order of Canada recipient, Mark Angelo, says "steelhead are symbolic of BC's great wild river heritage so we believe it's essential these fish be formally listed under SARA". In terms of actions, he added, "we must develop a much more selective chum salmon fishery that does not inadvertently kill endangered steelhead in the process while also addressing habitat issues on key steelhead spawning and rearing streams". ORC believes that, if we can't find a way to save Interior Fraser steelhead, then that won't bode well for the future of steelhead stocks anywhere.

Heart of the Fraser

Also high on this year's list is the "**Heart of the Fraser**", where the recent and extensive clearing of Herrling and Carey Islands, along with a corresponding private bridge proposal, is threatening the most productive salmon and sturgeon habitat in all of Canada. The excessive clear cutting of vegetation that has recently occurred has taken a severe toll on the river and destabilized and diminished key fisheries habitat. "Such extensive clear cutting to the water's edge has damaged one of the most productive stretches of river in our country", says Angelo. "There must be a greater effort to protect and restore these habitats", he added.

ORC recommends that the bridge not be approved and that governments turn their attention to exploring options that would enable riparian habitats to be reclaimed. In addition, ORC supports designating these and other nearby **Fraser River** islands as the first west coast Ecologically Sensitive Area for inclusion under the revised Fisheries Act.

Seymour River still being impacted by rock slide debris

The **Seymour River** in North Vancouver again makes the list because of the blockage to fish passage that occurred as a result of a massive 50,000 cubic meter rock slide in 2014. The slide prevents one of the region's rare summer steelhead runs, along with other species such as coho and pink salmon, from reaching the upper river. The Seymour Salmonid Society has done heroic work these last few years to restore passage by slowly blasting the slide and removing rock. However, funding is still required to properly finish the job in 2019 as well as to properly monitor the success of the effort.

Cowichan River

The **Cowichan River** on southern Vancouver Island near Duncan also makes the list as a result of the damage being done to fish habitat by the unstable Stoltz bluff that is depositing massive amounts of sediments into this heritage river, impacting salmon egg-fry survival for kilometers downstream. Also, in most summers, drought conditions including low flows and high water temperatures in the river adversely impact fish on a regular basis. On a positive note, pumps were recently installed at the weir on the river's top end so as to enable the release of more water into the lower river when needed, but many believe that, ultimately, the

weir will have to be raised. This would allow more water to be held back in wetter months for release into the lower river during drier summer months.

Gold River

The **Gold River** in central Vancouver Island is another river on this year's list where once prolific steelhead stocks have fallen off the cliff. Habitat impacts such as extensive logging, as well as potential impacts of fish farms could be to blame, but there is a need for more information and research to help explain why. The Gold epitomizes the lack of data that fisheries and river managers often have to work with.

Kettle River

The **Kettle River** in the southern interior also garnered attention from an array of threats including low summer flow related to the excessive extraction of water. While a watershed management plan has been developed to try and address these issues, problems persist with detailed implementation. This remains a key issue on the Kettle River and the Province continues to work toward the actual implementation of the *Water Sustainability Act* on streams faced with similar issues around excessive water extraction.

Peace River

And lastly, the **Peace River** in BC's northeast once again received a number of nominations as a result of the recent government decision to complete the already well advanced Site C dam. The BC Government's decision to proceed with the dam remains the subject of court challenges.

Next steps

"Many of the rivers highlighted this year are in need of habitat improvement and restoration projects, highlighting the need for **new funding mechanism** aimed at better safeguarding our waterways", said Angelo.

Climate change also remains a major silent threat affecting BC's rivers. Our rivers already face many risks including development pressure, urbanization, excessive extraction of water and pollution, yet climate change exacerbates these problems, and identifying feasible solutions is increasingly challenging. Equally important, changing climatic conditions could push more native fish species northward in search of cooler waters, reducing catches by significant margins. In order to protect our rivers, BC's leaders must take decisive action on climate change.

In terms of other waterways not among this year's most endangered waterways, it's important to note that this list is not meant to be all-inclusive and there are clearly other river issues that ORC will continue to follow. One such example is the current renegotiation of the **Columbia River Treaty**, which provides a special opportunity to improve ecosystem functioning and repair some of the damage done in past.

There are also positive events that have recently transpired, and ORC commends the commitment of individuals and groups across the province. For example, in 2017, BC Hydro removed the Salmon River Diversion facility located between Campbell River and Sayward, to provide unhindered fish passage for coho, chinook and steelhead. The dam, constructed in 1957 to 1958, was used to divert water from the Salmon River through a three kilometre canal system into Brewster Lake and eventually into the Lower Campbell Reservoir for power generation. Work to fully remove the facility and clean up the dam footprint was finished in October 2017, and salmon have already made it 50 kilometres up the river. This win for the environment was achieved after many years of advocacy by interested parties, and in particular, by Wei Wai Kum First Nation, K'omoks First Nation, and the Campbell River Salmon Foundation.

This year's list focuses on those river issues deemed most pressing at this point in time. "The endangered rivers release, now in its 24th edition and currently released every two years, helps create a greater awareness of the many threats that confront our waterways while also profiling key river issues", said Angelo.

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Endangered Rivers Committee

Mark Angelo, ORC's Rivers Chair and Chair Emeritus for the Rivers Institute of BCIT; Marvin Rosenau, instructor in the Fish Wildlife and Recreation Program (FWR) at BCIT; Ken Farquharson, founding member of Sierra Club of BC and the Outdoor Recreation Council; Roxanne Rousseau, Director, BC Marine Trail Network Association; Jeremy McCall, Executive Director, Outdoor Recreation Council.

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Photo caption – Mark Angelo releases a Seymour River steelhead that had to be captured and transported around a major rock slide. The plight of steelhead on many BC rivers is a major theme of the 2018 endangered rivers list.