



Nor'wester newsletter

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Snake River dams and orcas - the "debate" heats up

They say politics makes for strange bedfellows. In the last few years, orca activists and dam breaching activists began joint efforts to target the Snake River. Their efforts have now reached a fever pitch, capitalizing on grief over the recent losses to the Southern Resident Killer Whales (SRKW), three orca pods which are home based in Northwest waters. Now, a front-page *Seattle Times* article delivers extensive publicity for the activities of these dam breaching activists, while providing little to no mention of data and scientific findings released by NOAA, the agency responsible for the recovery of the species.

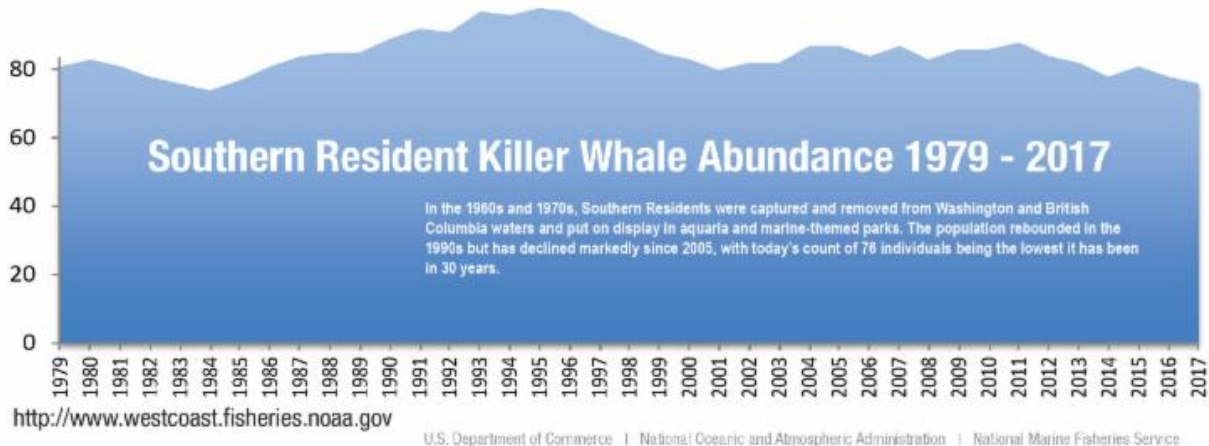
Dozens of orcas captured, with few left to produce future generations

The Southern Resident Killer Whales were dealt a catastrophic blow in the late 1960's and into the early 1970's, when [nearly 40 of these whales were captured in Puget Sound](#) and hauled away for display in aquariums. By the time this practice was outlawed, these pods had been reduced to just 67 whales. Today, NOAA says there are just 74 of these orcas remaining.

Scientists have voiced concerns about loss of genetic diversity, given how few orcas of reproductive age were left in these pods. Earlier this year, NOAA [released results of a genetic analysis](#) which revealed that just two male whales fathered more than half of the calves born since 1990. Researchers now have concerns whether inbreeding is contributing to the population's struggles.

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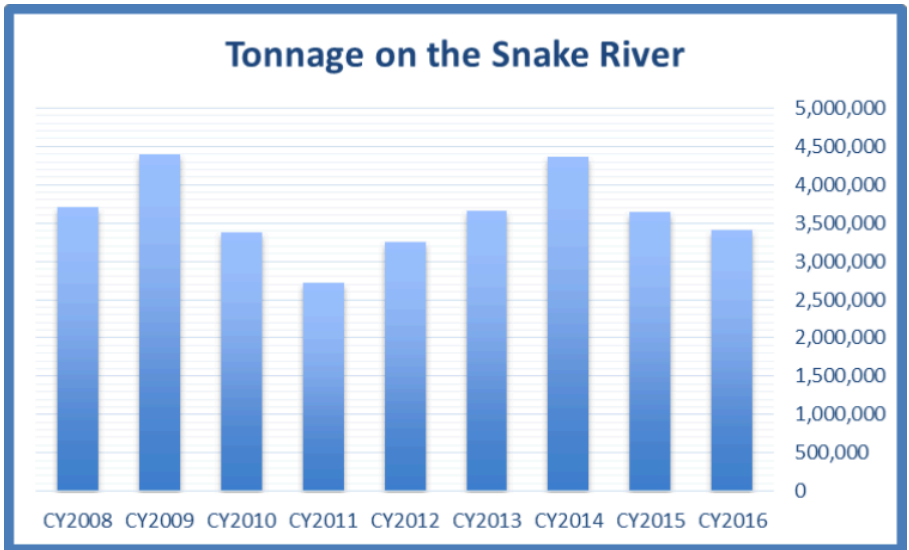
Orcas rely on many chinook runs; NOAA/WDFW highlight Puget Sound as top priority

In an article that is aimed at scrutinizing every detail of the Snake River dams, the *Seattle Times* devotes exactly one sentence to Puget Sound chinook. This is striking, given a [recent model by NOAA and the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife](#) that highlights the runs that are most important to these orcas. At the very top of the list: Puget Sound chinook salmon. Without question, all runs of chinook salmon from southeast Alaska to the Sacramento River are important to these three pods. However, singular focus on the Snake River runs is a dangerously myopic view of orca recovery.

Also missing in the article is any mention of the rebound these three orca pods experienced in the late 1980's to mid-1990's. This rebound occurred at a time of relatively low Chinook abundance from the Columbia and Snake Rivers. As Chinook abundance has increased from the Columbia and Snake Rivers in the last twenty years, these pods have actually declined and have continued to hover at low numbers.

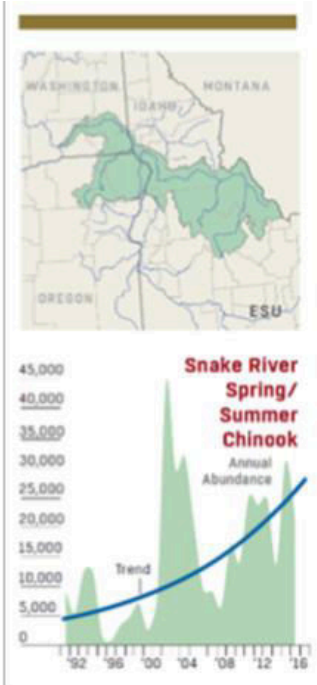
Tonnage on Snake River is remarkably stable

Dam breaching activists often claim that tonnage on the Snake River is in freefall. This is incorrect. Tonnage on the Snake is actually very consistent. The only low tonnage in recent years has occurred when the locks were closed for maintenance. These closures were done in a highly planned fashion, coordinated years in advance with our Northwest growers, shippers, ports, and states. Those closures took place in the winter (December-March) of 2010-2011 and 2016-2017. These planned federal investments in our inland river system, including at the Snake River dams, were at the direction of multiple Congresses who recognized the value of a safe, efficient, reliable barging system.



Snake River dams do not block fish

The Snake River dams are among the most advanced, fish-friendly projects in the entire country, and provide a balanced portfolio of energy and trade benefits that are vital to our region. They do not block access for endangered salmon runs. In fact, juvenile fish survival past each of these dams averages 97%, which is higher than what is seen in some undammed rivers. Major improvements in turbine design, optimized river flow, fish ladders, and habitat restoration have resulted in improvements to salmon returns.



Conclusion - there is no silver bullet for orcas

These four dams provide a convenient rallying cry for those who would claim there is one easy action that will help the orcas. But just like with salmon recovery, it is becoming evident that orca recovery will not occur with just one action in one part of the region, but the commitment of communities up and down the west coast of the United States and Canada, addressing every impact to orca health.

Protestors in orca costumes and signs hanging from freeway overpasses are clearly effective in garnering column inches. But as the decline of the SRKW pods has called into question [all of the ways](#) humans impact the environment, including vessel noise and contaminants, the simplistic "breach the dams to save the orcas" rallying cry is likely to do little to actually help these animals. The public spectacles which now take place at the [Southern Resident Killer Whale Task Force](#) are a terrific way to take attention away from what may be most helpful to the orcas - an "all of the above" approach, including attention to vessel noise and contaminants.

Northwest ports and navigation interests have always strongly supported robust salmon recovery efforts, including improvements to hydro, habitat, harvest, and hatcheries. The same multi-pronged approach will likely be necessary for orcas. We look forward to supporting solutions for the orcas that are scientifically sound and will provide real, measurable help for this iconic species now and in the future.

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