

What's Happened to Our World Famous Kenai River King Salmon

2011 Peninsula Clarion Opinion Piece

Most anglers on the Kenai are very concerned about the health of our Kenai River King salmon fishery. Most agree that there are fewer fish returning and the fish are smaller than ever before. Scientists tell us that the low numbers of King salmon are a widespread phenomena occurring throughout most of Alaska and probably caused by rearing conditions in our oceans, but the size of the fish is probably an in-river issue that has allot to do with selective harvest of larger fish over time.

The large "world famous" Kenai King has been much sought after for wall mounts, photo-ops, and general bragging rights among anglers. We have been extremely effective harvesters of these bigger fish. Through years of selective harvest we have changed the ratio of returning age classed fish and thus suffered a reduction in the overall quality of this great fishery.

We must remember that this fishery is only about 30 years in the making and the cause and affect of our zeal to harvest big Kenai Kings makes it incumbent on ourselves to try to fix what we have damaged. We have a large in-river commercial guiding component and an equal amount of private anglers vying for these fish. It is not hard to understand how the harvest potential could be damaging to these stocks.

On an average day in the last two weeks of July we probably have well over 500 boats on the river throughout the day. The second run creel survey data tells us that the average guide harvest this season was about 1 fish per trip and most likely that fish was less than 25 pounds. I would think it would become more and more difficult to entice return clients to the Kenai unless we can recover this fishery.

Is it to late to rectify this situation? Maybe not, but it's going to take sacrifices by all user groups and a commitment by the responsible State and Federal agencies to admit there is a problem and address the issues. I believe, with the current concern in the angling community, the time is right to come together for this common cause.

Can we continue applying this type of pressure to the resource and still further our cause for recovery of these stocks? Perhaps, if we change the manner in which we prosecute the fishery itself. Additionally, ADF&G is going to have to improve the way they enumerate these stocks so that we can have more confidence in the data as the season progresses. This year the late run sonar count was around 45,000, but after the season ended and the department considered the low test net figures combined with the low harvests in both the commercial and sport fisheries they adjusted that figure to around 28,000. Quite a disparity, and this figure is only a rough estimate. Nobody really knows for sure exactly how many fish actually entered the river or made it to the spawning grounds.

I would like to offer the following suggestions as ways to help this valued resource start to recover;

- **Insist that State and Federal agencies responsible for managing this resource develop and employ the most accurate field equipment to enumerate these stocks in both the mainstem and tributary waters.**
- **Revise the slot limit to 42in. –55in. and leave it in effect throughout the King season above the Soldotna Bridge.**
- **Apply the slot limit regulation to the PU fishery as well.**
- **Add a second drift boat day per week that would be open to both guided and unguided anglers to reduce outboard disturbance and turbid conditions associated with heavy powerboat use.**

If we fail to act soon we may further sacrifice the uniqueness of this great resource. We cannot rely on our agencies to do it for us. Their current mandates seem to be more about providing access and opportunity, and less about maintaining the quality of our fisheries. It is incumbent on us as anglers and conservationists to do so for the resource and future generations to enjoy.

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