

Sea Lions

at Bonneville Dam

The ongoing conflict between protected California sea lions and protected chinook salmon in the Columbia River.

Effects of Protection

Since its passage in 1972, the Marine Mammal Protection Act has helped California sea lions enjoy sustained annual population growth rates of 5 to 6%.



Damage to Salmon

Tribal fishers see more and more sea lion damage to the salmon they catch.



Columbia Basin residents have supported and invested in salmon recovery efforts for decades having developed subbasin plans to restore habitat, improve dam passage survival, reform hatchery programs, and reshape fisheries to improve the status of salmon. A number of California sea lions have learned to exploit an artificial situation at Bonneville Dam to disproportionately impact depressed salmon runs.

An endangered diet

Studies of scat samples collected in coastal waters and the Columbia River estuary indicate that salmon comprise 10 to 30 percent of the animals' diet. Additional studies show the percentage of salmon and steelhead in sea lions' diet increases as they move upriver.

Quick learners

In the last decade, sea lions have learned to prey on spring runs of threatened and endangered adult salmon as they attempt to pass through the dam's fish ladders. During that time, an average of over 3,745 salmon per year has been consumed in the tailrace of the dam. Sea lion predation on endangered spring chinook salmon at Bonneville Dam is rising. In 2014 California sea lions consumed 4,746 salmonids immediately below Bonneville



The Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 law prohibits, with certain exceptions, killing marine mammals in U.S. waters and by U.S. citizens on the high seas, and importing marine mammals and marine mammal products into the U.S.

Dam. Minimum predation estimates are based on daytime feeding observations. Actual consumption numbers are estimated at 20% of the returning run. The states of Washington and Oregon along with the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission have implemented hazing activities to disperse sea lions below the dam. CRITFC has secured funding under the Columbia Basin Fish Accords that will support hazing and abundance and predation estimation efforts until 2018.

Finding a solution

A coalition of tribal, federal & state representatives, NGO's, and independent scientists participate in the Pinniped Fishery Interaction Task Force. It evaluated the situation in 2007, 2010, and 2011. Each time the task force recommended removal. NOAA approved the states' application for removal authority. The proposed Endangered Salmon and Fisheries Predation Prevention Act would change the Marine Mammal Protection Act to allow tribal members to kill sea lions and harbor seals.



Steller Sea Lions

The predation of sturgeon by Steller sea lions at Bonneville Dam is significant. They are responsible for approximately 97% of sturgeon predation by sea lions.

April 16, 2007



In April 2007, C265 was relatively trim and fit. He was captured at Bonneville Dam and released in Astoria—a trip he has experienced many times since his first back in 2002.

May 21, 2007

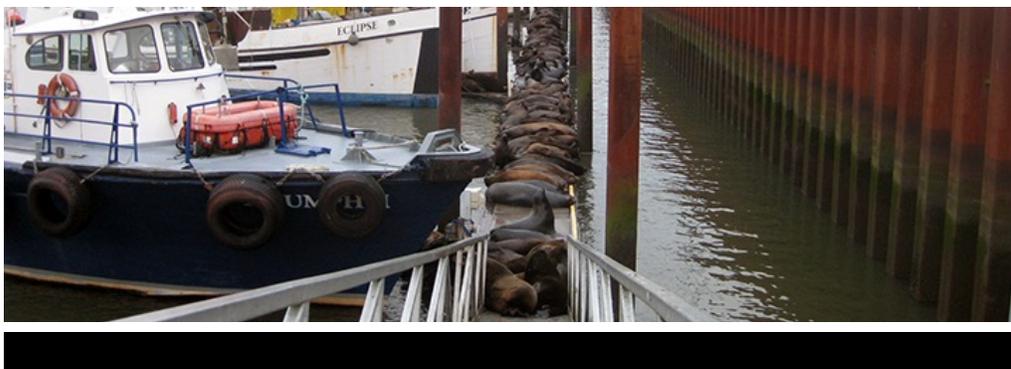


One month later, C265 was captured at Bonneville Dam again. His weight had exploded to over 1,000 lbs.—doubling in weight since he was captured in March, 2007.

Fueled by salmon



Sea lions eat less than half of the salmon they catch. Often they will take one or two bites out of them and leave the dead remains in their voracious search for the next fish.



< Sea lions crowd a walkway at a mooring basin in Astoria. Photo courtesy Northwest Power and Conservation Council.

Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission



The Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission (CRITFC) consists of the Nez Perce Tribe, Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation of Oregon, and the Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Indian Nation.

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Sea lion C697 was in the Bonneville Pool for 275 days. Trapped on February 5, 2010, C697 was relocated to the southern Oregon Coast. Only 19 days later, C697 had returned to Bonneville.