

Fraser River Salmon Situation—Canada's Position

Canadian Effort to Restrict Fishing—Establishment of Hatcheries to Assist in Building Up the Run—Need for Joint Action of Both Governments—Canadian Treaty Efforts.

At the Canadian Fisheries Convention held in the Hotel Vancouver, Vancouver, on June 3rd to 5th, Mr. John P. Babcock, Assistant to the British Columbia Commissioner of Fisheries, Victoria, read a paper on the Fraser River Salmon situation—Canada's position, which thoroughly establishes Canada's policy as one of conservation.

Mr. Babcock traces the history of the run of salmon to the Fraser River and the causes of the decline and then proceeds:

"The great sockeye salmon fishery of the Fraser River system has not been destroyed without efforts having been made by Canada to prevent it. Canada throughout has stood for conservation. She has put forth earnest and conscientious efforts to conserve the supply and to prevent depletion. Her record is clear and unmistakable. She failed because she did not have jurisdiction over the entire system. She alone could not provide adequate protection, but she did all that was possible under the circumstances. As already shown commercial fishing for sockeye salmon began in Canadian waters in 1876, under the general fishery regulations of the Dominion. In 1878 Canada passed an Order-in-Council providing that "Drifting with salmon nets shall be confined to tidal waters," and "that drift-nets for salmon shall not obstruct more than one-third of the width of any stream," and further that "fishing for salmon shall be discontinued from 8 a.m. Saturdays to midnight Sundays." All fishing in her waters has been under license and none but bona fide resident fishermen have been permitted to fish.

"In 1889 the Dominion fishery regulations for British Columbia were amended to provide that 'the Minister of Marine and Fisheries shall from time to time determine the number of boats, seines or nets or other fishing apparatus to be used in any waters of British Columbia,' and all the provisions of the regulations of 1878 were continued. In 1894 the order was further amended to include the provision that 'the meshes of nets for catching salmon other than spring salmon, in tidal waters shall not be less than 5¾ inches extension measure, and shall be used only between the first day of July and the twenty-fifth day of August, and between the twenty-fifth day of September and the thirty-first day of October.' Canada has maintained closed seasons in her waters ever since. In recent years the weekly closed time has been extended and the fishing limits further restricted.

"During the period that sockeye fishing was confined to Canadian waters alone, it is a matter of record that the catch did not in any one year produce a pack in excess of 300,000 cases, representing a catch of less than four million sockeyes, and that during that period Canada hatched and planted in the Fraser twenty-five millions of sockeye fry.

"Canada began the propagation of sockeye in the Fraser in 1885 with the establishment of a hatchery at Bon Accord. Between 1900 and 1907 Canada built five hatcheries on the Fraser having a capacity of one hundred and ten million sockeye eggs, and she has since built two auxiliary stations. The hatcheries built in 1901 at Shuswap and in 1903 at Seton Lake, have been closed since 1914, because a sufficient number of eggs to warrant operations could not be collected from the tributaries of those lakes. With the exception of the years of the big run the hatcheries on the Fraser have never been filled beyond thirty per cent. of their capacity since 1905, because eggs to fill them were unobtainable.

"Canada organized a patrol force for the Fraser in 1878 and her waters have been effectively policed every year since.

"Canada inaugurated a method for the inspection of the spawning area of the Fraser River basin in 1901, and has annually conducted such investigations every year since. Dr. C. H. Gilbert, of Stanford University, in one of his many valuable papers on the salmon fisheries of the Fraser, says of this work: 'No other sockeye stream has received such close and discriminating study. Annual inspection has been made of the spawning beds of the entire watershed, and predictions of the runs four years hence have been fearlessly made. It is a matter of record now consistently these prophecies have been fulfilled.'

"The reports from the spawning beds since 1901 have been the basis of Canada's contentions. Following the disclosures made in the reports from the spawning beds in 1902, 1903 and 1904, that there had been a great reduction in the numbers of sockeye that reached the beds in those years, and with the knowledge that the catches in those years were also far less than in the preceding four years, Canada laid the facts before the Governor of the State of Washington, and obtained the appointment of a joint commission to investigate conditions affecting the salmon fishery of the Fraser River system. That Commission, consisting of five representatives from the State of Washington and five from Canada, reported that the runs of sockeye to the system in the small years had been seriously depleted by excessive fishing and were in danger of being destroyed, and recommended that all fishing for sockeye in both State and Provincial waters be suspended during the years 1906 and 1908. It was believed by the Commissioners that by prohibiting fishing in those years, the runs four years later would be restored to their former proportions. Canada accepted the finding of that commission and at once passed an Order-in-Council prohibiting sockeye fishing in 1906 and 1908, provided the State of Washington passed a similar Act prohibiting fishing in her waters. A bill to that effect was rejected by the Washington Legislature in 1906. Consequently Canada recalled her order, and fishing was conducted in both those years with renewed vigor and with disastrous effect. The catches were smaller and the spawning beds less seeded.

"Following the failure of the State of Washington to adopt the measure, Canada turned for help to the Federal Government at Washington, D.C., and secured the appointment in 1907 of an international commission to enquire into conditions in the Fraser River system. After a year of investigation that commission unanimously recommended, as necessary to prevent further depletion, the adoption of joint and uniform regulations restricting fishing. A treaty embodying its recommendations was drawn and signed in Washington in 1908, by Great Britain for Canada and by the President of the United States. Canada at once approved the treaty. The United States Senate rejected it. Therefore fishing was continued as before and, although the amount of gear was greatly increased, the catches in the small years continued to decrease, and the reports from the spawning beds grew even more alarming.

"The progressive decline in the catch in the small years, and the disastrous effect of the blockade in the Fraser channel at Hell's Gate in 1913, caused Canada to again renew her overtures to the United States Government for the adoption of remedial measures. In 1917 Canada and the United States again created a joint International Fishery Commission to deal with the subject. Following an extended investigation that commission, like the commissions of 1906 and 1908, unanimously found that the situation was critical, and recommended joint action on the part of Canada and the United States. Subsequently a treaty was signed in Washington, D.C., in 1919. Canada at once approved the treaty. That treaty now awaits the action of the Senate of the United States.