



Siuslaw National Forest Fun Facts

May 28, 2008

Fisheries on the Siuslaw

“The salmon were so thick you could have walked across their backs and not gotten your feet wet.”

We have all heard that line, or similar lines when we hear about the historic salmon runs, and maybe they were like that in places. During the late 1800's various studies estimate the total number of coho salmon returning to streams and rivers that originate on the Siuslaw National Forest to be well over 1 million adults. The seemingly endless bounty of the salmon drew settlers to the mouths of the major rivers along the Forest from the Nestucca River near Hebo to the Lower Umpqua near Reedsport.

Salmon were brought to canneries that were established on many of the rivers and then packed aboard sailing ships bound primarily for San Francisco.

Commercial fishing was carried out mainly by gill nets, although seines and troll fishing were also used. Extensive harvest of the adult salmon continued until the 1990's.



During this same period, logging efforts increased dramatically. Since there were few roads present in the upper portions of the watersheds, creeks and rivers were the only means of getting the logs to the mills efficiently. To assist the movement of the logs to the mills, loggers would conduct “log drives” during spring freshets, with some using splash dams.

Logs were stockpiled behind the dams and then when a big rain storm came, the loggers would blow up the dam and the resulting

flood would move the logs, and anything else present in the creek, down to the main river. To make sure the logs would move down stream during the log drives the loggers would clear the stream as noted in this quote: “At the same time the Phelps boys were blasting and removing obstructions until they were satisfied the creek (Indian Creek) was in good condition for driving.” Consequently, many of the coastal streams on the Siuslaw that received this treatment were scoured down to bedrock and fish habitat in those streams and creeks suffered.



Clear cut logging without buffers to protect the salmon streams continued until the 1970's and 1980's. Stream cleanout of large wood intensified after the flood of 1964. All of these impacts together kept the salmon populations on a downward long-term trend

Adult salmon returns had steadily decreased since the “Good Ole Days” until recent small gains in the early 2000's. Average adult returns of coho salmon over the last decade for those same rivers that originate on the Siuslaw National Forest are approximately 32,000 fish or 2.8 % of the historic population. Fishery biologists on the Forest strongly believe that recent watershed restoration efforts that have occurred across the disciplines will provide the strongholds of habitat that will allow these native salmon runs to improve. Patience will be required to allow our restoration efforts to become fully effective as we wait for the return of productive ocean conditions.