



Craig Medred

A HOME FOR READERS AND THINKERS

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NEWS

Good bad news?

BY CRAIGMEDRED ON MAY 31, 2017 • (20 COMMENTS)



The Copper River commercial salmon fishery ended Tuesday almost 2,000 Chinook over (<http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=commercialbyareapws.harvestsummary>) the 5,000-salmon threshold the Alaska Department of Fish and Game set as the acceptable harvest for 2017, and the fishing season has only begun.

Steve Moffitt was at the time reported to be hiking somewhere along the Appalachian Trail on the East Coast of North America some 4,500 miles southeast of the tiny port, community of Cordova on the West Coast not far from the mouth of the Copper.

Who the hell is Steve Moffitt?

He's the commercial fisheries biologist who penned a bombshell forecast calling for the return of but 29,000 king salmon, as Alaskans most often call Chinook, to the Copper River this year. He then promptly retired, leaving behind what has now become Alaska's most watched fishery for a number of reasons:

1. Copper River king and sockeye salmon are the 49th state's most valuable fish. The threat of scarcity has made them only more valuable. **Undercurrent News**, an industry trade publication, labeled 2017 prices "ridiculous." It reported headed and gutted kings going for \$20 to \$25 per pound in Seattle.
2. The Copper supports the first big run of kings to hit fresh water in Alaska and thus offers an early indication of what

sort of returns might be expected elsewhere in a state where the biggest of the five species of Pacific salmon has been struggling for years for unknown reasons.

3. The politics of Alaska salmon allocation is always contentious and has only become more so since the state ordered in-river sport and personal-use fisheries for kings closed on the basis of Moffitt's forecast, restricted subsistence fishermen to only two kings for the season, and said it planned to split the allowable harvest between the commercial and subsistence fisheries with the former getting 3,500 of a 5,000-fish harvest limit, later 4,000, only to have any idea of a limit vanish beneath the volume of the actual catch.
4. And if all of that weren't enough, the issue is swimming toward federal waters at a time when President Donald Trump's new Secretary of the Interior, Ryan Zinke, is on his first Alaska tour. A federal law unique to the 49th state gives rural Alaskans a subsistence priority on the harvest of fish and wildlife. Federal officials only days ago announced they were taking over management of king salmon on the lower and middle Kuskowim River in Western Alaska. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service "has to take over the fishery in times of low abundance to ensure that local people get subsistence priority," KYUK in Bethel reported.

Moffitt set the Copper king run at low abundance just before he left Cordova. Best to get out of Dodge when what has been going so good for so long starts to look like it might go bad, though it's possible things aren't going as bad as they might look.

More on that later.

Years of experience

Moffitt spent most of his professional career as a fisheries research biologist in the small community at the south entrance to Prince William Sound watching catches of **Alaska's most iconic salmon brand** (<https://craigmedred.news/2017/05/20/golden-fish/>) grow and grow and grow.

Copper River harvests that never topped 1 million in the decades prior to 1981 reached close to 2.1 million by 2014.

“The sockeye salmon harvest of 2.07 million fish was more than 1.5 times the previous 10-year harvest average of 1.32 million sockeye salmon,” **the Alaska Department of Fish and Game that year reported.**

(https://www.adfg.alaska.gov/static/fishing/pdfs/fishsummaries/salmon_summary_copper_river_pws_2014.pdf) “The overall commercial sockeye salmon harvest from the Copper River District was the third largest harvest in the history of the fishery.”

There were hints of a problem by then.

“The total commercial Chinook salmon harvest in 2014 was 9,630, below the 10-year (2004-2013) average harvest of 21,200,” the state noted, but the next year, 2015, marked an apparent turn around. **The commercial catch of Chinook climbed back up to 22,500 – despite a dismal preseason forecast – and the sockeye catch came in at 1.75 million, still well above the 10-year average.**

(<http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/FedAidPDFs/FMR17-17.pdf>)

And then came the disaster of 2016 with its harvest of 1.62 million sockeye, which was good; a catch of 13,100 Chinook, which was well below the 10-year average; and a failure to

meet spawning goals in a management disaster of epic proportions.

Not only did the state fail to meet the minimum, the post-season estimate of Chinook on the spawning beds was only about half of the desired 22,000 – potentially a big blow to future returns.

(<http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/static/applications/dcfnewsrelease/761189371.pdf>)

In the wake of this disaster, Moffitt, who'd been monitoring Copper River/Prince William Sound salmon fisheries for decades, read the tea leaves for 2017 (fisheries management is far from an exact science) and forecast a return of 1.8 million sockeye – low, but still big enough to provide for a harvest of more than 1 million fish after spawning needs were met – and those 29,000 Chinook.

As soon as the forecast came out, both fishermen and fishery managers knew they had a problem. Copper River Chinook are largely by-catch in the sockeye fishery. It is impossible to catch the latter without catching some of the former.

Still, Fish and Game biologists figured they could hold the harvest down with time and area restrictions on the more than 500 drift gillnetters permitted to fish the ocean off the mouth of the Copper.

As it turns out, they couldn't. From the first opening of the fishery on May 18 through Monday, more kings than expected were caught.

A good thing?

The big catches aren't necessarily bad. They could be a harbinger of a much larger than forecast return of kings. Moffitt's forecasts have missed before. His 2015 forecast of 35,500 was only about three-fifths of the eventual return of 56,174. On the other hand, the 2014 return was only 57 percent of the forecast return, and the 2016 return was only 46 percent of the forecast.

None of which is making the fisheries management job easier for the people who followed in Moffitt's footsteps.

The situation is simpler for commercial fishermen. They are convinced the large, early catches of Chinook are a clear sign the run this year is much larger than Moffitt predicted.

In the short-term, of course, they only stand to gain from that conclusion. The stronger the run, the more fishing time they are given. The more fishing time they are given, the more fish they catch. The more fish they catch, the more money they make.

Bigger catches might mean smaller runs in the future because of low numbers of spawners, but if you've got boat payments to make to stay in business, this year matters a lot more than next year.

So far, state fisheries biologists have reluctantly gone along with the argument that the big catches equal more than expected numbers of fish.

Harvest information "continues to provide a preliminary indication of above anticipated king salmon abundance," **managers said in a Saturday press release announcing the Monday, commercial fishery opening.**

(<http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/static/applications/dcfnewsrelease/783600189.pdf>)

But fishery managers have closed areas where the most kings are traditionally caught, and they've shortened fishing periods to try to protect those fish.

The closures, some fisherman argue, have made the fishery more dangerous and in one case potentially deadly.

(<https://wordpress.com/post/craigmedred.news/82842>) Meanwhile, the growing king catch has heightened tensions between commercial fishermen and in-river salmon harvesters.

Fish fight

The 2,000-king catch on Monday underlined the Jekyll and Hyde nature of the fishery.

State managers argue they need to keep upriver fisheries tightly restricted or totally closed to protect every fish because of the weak run while justifying continued and sizeable harvests in the commercial catch off the mouth of the river by citing that "preliminary indication of above anticipated king salmon abundance."

The seeming hypocrisy doesn't look good to in-river users.

As subsistence fisherman Mike Tinker from Fairbanks noted in a weekend letter to Commissioner of Fish and Game Sam Cotten, the increased catch in the commercial fishery "now far exceeds the number that would have been 'saved'" by the in-river restrictions.

Tinker asked Cotten to at least relax a standard that will require subsistence fishwheels be "closely attended" whenever running so that kings can be safely released unharmed. Subsistence

fishermen consider the regulation onerous given they might catch only a few kings per day, if that.

“In my family, the elders fish so the younger family can stay on the job. The restrictions from the EO (emergency order restriction) will make it impossible to catch our fish,” Tinker wrote. ” Recall, the average subsistence permit catches 60 fish a year. Sockeye may enter the river in pulses but by the time they maneuver through the steep fast water canyons and get up into the Copper Basin where the fishwheels are located they are stretched out into a thin line. We catch them a few a day and mostly at night. This is not the Yukon where even at Eagle (near the Canadian border) a fishwheel can catch 3,000 chum in a week.”

There have been ongoing talks about relaxing in-river regulations, according to people involved in the discussions at Fish and Game. But there are dangers there as well.

If Moffitt’s forecast is right, the king run has already been overfished in the commercial fishery, and there is no way to avoid overfishing it more in order to maintain a commercial catch of plentiful sockeye salmon.

If this is the actual case – or if Moffitt’s forecast is actually low as it has been in three out of the last four years – allowing in-river fisheries to kill even more kings would make a bad situation worse.

And the biggest problem of all is that fisheries managers really don’t know what they have for a return. **A sonar counter that can’t tell a sockeye from a Chinook took a big tick up on Friday when more than 38,000 fish hit the river.**

(<https://www.adfg.alaska.gov/sf/FishCounts/index.cfm?>

[ADFG=main.displayResults&COUNTLOCATIONID=39&SpeciesID=420](#))

Some took that as a sign a lot of fish were going to escape into the Copper because of the so far limited fishing – only 43 hours in four openings since May 18. The expectation was that numbers would just keep going up, but instead they started falling and kept falling.

The Monday count was back down to 14,556, which was within about a thousand fish of the perfect-world scenario of 13,447 for the day. Likewise, some king salmon counting fish wheels upstream from the sonar, which had started ticking upward the day after the elevated sonar counts, began tracking downward. (<http://eyak.fishscan.com/Summary/DailySummary.aspx>)

Neither the sonar nor the fish wheels provide a solid account of how many kings are entering the river, but they do provide hints at run strength. The hints, unfortunately, made it harder, not easier, to sort this puzzle.

Somewhere on the Appalachian Trail, Moffitt has to be happy he isn't in Cordova.



 20 replies »

“Steve Moffitt was at the time reported to be hiking somewhere along the Appalachian Trail ”

[Reply](#)

somewhere on a tuffit
retired biologist Moffitt
ponders his 401K...

the blue chips are in
the tenders contend
the kings we surely did slay!

★ (https://craigmedred.news/2017/05/31/good-bad-news/?like_comment=8213&_wpnonce=3e8ac2c0a1)

Like

Craig, that early in the season the counter would be more than 5% IMO. Reply

My observation, along with others, is that a lot more kings would have been caught on the inside of the bars than caught outside them. Those that would have been caught are as good as in the river yet many have not yet reached the sonar counter. Occasionally a large upriver sockeye run comes early and hits the counter for your crazy high numbers but those usually come along with a large red catch, too. There doesn't seem to be a large over escapement of reds, as yet IMO.

Certainly low water in the river could mean some kings are holding inside and waiting to enter but essentially they have also escaped the commercial fleet (due to inside closure), yet as has been pointed out elsewhere still have to avoid some upriver fishing to be escaped spawners.

★ (https://craigmedred.news/2017/05/31/good-bad-news/?like_comment=8199&_wpnonce=22cdd73c88)

Like

Bill – i'd tend to agree, but we don't know. it would guess more kings, too. i don't, however, think this should be a guessing game. the data supports you on the inside/outside observation. who knows what's in the river. i really did expect to see a Tuesday number trending upward given how little time the commercial fleet had fished, and instead it went down from Monday. i'm just thankful i'm not the one charged with making the calls on this fishery. Reply

★ (https://craigmedred.news/2017/05/31/good-bad-news/?like_comment=8208&_wpnonce=88373540c2)

Like

Well there is certainly reason for getting more information to this manager to be able to make these tough calls.

With the State cutting budgets, fishery management will probably take some hits. Just imagine the upcoming seine fisheries should the State have to lay off their staff July 1.

★ (https://craigmedred.news/2017/05/31/good-bad-news/?like_comment=8210&_wpnonce=d85d944183)

Like

now you write that Mike Tinker, "MIGHT" only be able to catch a few fish a day? Explain then how it is that the NVE Baird camp fishwheel has already caught and tagged over 400 Kings as of last week. Look for yourself... fishscan.com provides daily data. You know, Data, that stuff that should be used to make educated, scientific, management decisions.

★ (https://craigmedred.news/2017/05/31/good-bad-news/?like_comment=8192&_wpnonce=42dfb3ce20)

Like

if you read the Tinker quote, it's pretty clear he's way up river. fish get a lot harder to catch when they are dispersed. i think most fishermen understand that, Kurt. the Baird fish wheel does well because it's at a choke point where fish concentrate.

★ (https://craigmedred.news/2017/05/31/good-bad-news/?like_comment=8194&_wpnonce=18eaea27a2)

Like

How can copper river kings be considered "by-catch"? currently represents 1/4 or 25% of commercial fishes income? seems to me that commercial fish is targeting them, because it is significant to their bottom line. So should they use the term "by-catch", or is more correct to say targeted?

★ (https://craigmedred.news/2017/05/31/good-bad-news/?like_comment=8170&_wpnonce=ad1f2efe2f)

Like

They (kings) are not by-catch, however king mesh g Reply
been outlawed in order to reduce the targeted king catch.
Some fishermen still target kings with red gear by fishing
inside or on outside beaches where those kings tangle up in
the gear. In the early 80s, the fishery was held with only
king gear allowed because of a poor anticipated sockeye
run-that could clearly be done again IMO.

★ (https://craigmedred.news/2017/05/31/good-bad-news/?like_comment=8171&_wpnonce=4df441ae1c)

Like

ah yes, the old bycatch debate. here's the original N(Reply
definition: "Bycatch – Fish other than the primary target
species that are caught incidental to the harvest of the
primary species." when we're catching 20 to 30 sockeye per
Chinook, you'd have to say sockeye are the primary target
species. granted, there's a question as to whether kings are
"incidental" to that catch or targeted by some fishermen, but
most fishermen insist when you talk to them that they're
NOT targeting kings. that's why the term bycatch was used,
but people can legitimately debate it at length.

★ (https://craigmedred.news/2017/05/31/good-bad-news/?like_comment=8196&_wpnonce=bd52adf806)

Like

Yet Craig, 1 king to 20 to 30 reds. the one king nets (no
pun intended) on average \$200.00 and 25 reds(average of
20-30 reds) nets \$162.50. What would you go after as a
target species?

★ (https://craigmedred.news/2017/05/31/good-bad-news/?like_comment=8201&_wpnonce=3f5230fde6)

Like

allen: see the reply to Bill Yankee.

Reply

★ (https://craigmedred.news/2017/05/31/good-bad-news/?like_comment=8197&_wpnonce=cb281a4b48)

Like

i already know the common answers. yet that is why the com.fish guys have two guys one their side of the net coming in with dips nets to make sure no kings fall back in the water as the kings untangle themselves,

★ (https://craigmedred.news/2017/05/31/good-bad-news/?like_comment=8204&_wpnonce=ce09559f07)

Like

Craig,

Reply

I received a reply from Mark Somerville, area management biologist, for the upper Copper River. Mark stated, that the department will review all available run strength data (including info from the commercial harvest tomorrow), to evaluate the chinook run, on Friday June 2nd.

If available data, indicate larger chinook run, than forecast, management can act quickly to allow increased opportunity, for upriver user groups, to partake in chinook abundance surplus. Let us all hope this happens.

★ (https://craigmedred.news/2017/05/31/good-bad-news/?like_comment=8167&_wpnonce=f9fef5d0c4)

Liked by [1 person](#) (#)

Craig,

Reply

I have been a commercial fisher on the Copper River/Prince William Sound, since 1977.

The ADF&G 2017 preseason forecast was only a forecast. It ranged from a low of 5K-55K chinook total run. The Sports division over-reacted on March 6th, and instituted a retention

ban on chinooks for both sports & personal use fisheries on the upper CR. The State authorized subsistence fishwheels, were also restricted to two chinooks, per family for the season. The commercial drift fleet has been the most restricted by time and area, since I have started fishing.

These restrictions were put in place, due to providing chinook conservation, based on the preason forecast.

It is very apparent, with the commercial harvest, sonar escapement & the NVE fishwheel capture and tagged project, that chinook abundance is far greater than the top end of the forecast. As a result, 30-40K chinook will most likely reach the spawning grounds this summer.

I sent an email, on Monday, to the ADF&G commissioner, the director of the Sport's division & other departmental staff, asking for the retention ban to be rescinded. All user groups, on the upper CR, have the right to share in the chinook abundance. I have not yet received a reply. I will forward you that email, if you send me your contact info.

The harvest of chinook, by the commercial fleet, would have been much smaller, if the forecast of 29K was correct. The restrictions placed on the commercial fleet, this season, would have assured that. In four restrictive commercial fish openers, we have harvested over 7K chinook, which in my view, shows that this chinook return is close to a 55-60K plus run. If we had been allowed more time and area, our harvest would have been far greater.

On another note: The good news going forward, is that local department managers, have received the latest sonar equipment, which will be able to differentiate between chinooks and sockeyes, as they swim past the two Miles Lake sonars, starting next spring. We will finally, for the 1st time,

know how many chinooks, have passed on their way upriver. In-season data, has always been the number one priority & the most accurate data, will finally be available next year. Knowing what fish are in the river, helps the department, make sound management decisions, based on the sustainability of our salmon runs.

★ (https://craigmedred.news/2017/05/31/good-bad-news/?like_comment=8165&_wpnonce=2468f32cb8)

Like

James – you can always email me at craigmedred@gmail.com (mailto:craigmedred@gmail.com). don't count on that sonar quite yet. they are working on it. but if the Kenai River is any indication, it's will take a couple years or more to work all the kinks out. as for the rest, i think every sensible Alaskans hopes you're right. the harvest of the fleet "should" have been much smaller if the forecast of 29,000 was correct, but there is this little issue of "fleet efficiency" which has bit more than a few fisheries managers in the ass. the harvests this year, despite the shorter periods, look a lot like the harvests last year, and as we all know that didn't work out so well.

Reply

★ (https://craigmedred.news/2017/05/31/good-bad-news/?like_comment=8166&_wpnonce=e2058e00da)

Like

"..the harvests this year, despite the shorter periods, look a lot like the harvests last year" The problem with this comment, Craig, is that the fishery is not the same as last year! The inside closure this year essentially means that those fish that have gotten through the bars are already in the river and cannot be a future part of the commercial catch. Many have commented on these issues that more

kings would have been caught inside than those caught outside suggesting something more than 7000 kings are already in the river-big question is how many more? James Mykland above suggests it is many more and he does have much local experience and knowledge of Copper River king salmon. At any rate, my money is on James' feeling about this king run and your comparison between this and last year is clearly comparing apples and oranges IMO.

★ (https://craigmedred.news/2017/05/31/good-bad-news/?like_comment=8168&_wpnonce=1e5b498591)

Like

thanks Bill. But i was pointing out the term “by-catch” Reply
it is regularly with the copper river kings. as in this article
and many others to include the Department. ” Copper River
Chinook are largely by-catch in the sockeye fishery”.

★ (https://craigmedred.news/2017/05/31/good-bad-news/?like_comment=8182&_wpnonce=feccf67fff)

Like

I think the term “largely” allows them some lee-way, here
Al. Clearly the fishery, in total, is managed for sockeyes
as the numbers are so much in their favor but should the
red run falter you can bet the Dept. would attempt to
manage for kings IMO (just as they did in the early 80s.
And that year, there were some reds caught in the king
gear even with no low waters allowed-they wanted as
many reds in the river as they could get.

★ (https://craigmedred.news/2017/05/31/good-bad-news/?like_comment=8185&_wpnonce=ca04ae6565)

Like

What we have here is a failure to communicate.

Commercial fisheries on the Copper River will remain open, no matter if kings or sockeyes “falter”, and there is no scenario where both runs would “falter” at the same time. So it will never totally close, just operate under a “conservative” management.

All fisheries are equal, some fisheries are just more equal than others....

★ (https://craigmedred.news/2017/05/31/good-bad-news/?like_comment=8190&_wpnonce=b16d2d5361)

Like

tangerines and lemons, Bill; tangerines and lemons. none of us know. if we take the sonar count as of yesterday, judge it 95 percent sockeye as the state has argued and do the math, you get about 7,500 kings up the river. 7,000 caught; 7,500 escaped. that looks a lot like last year. makes me really, really hope that Mykland is right. the problem, as always, is that once the fish are caught, you can't put them back in the river. managers have tough calls to make here. and the whole picture this year is confusing. when the sonar started taking off days ago with so little fishing having gone on, i expected to see crazy high numbers, but instead the daily counts started falling and kept falling. go figure. low water?

★ (https://craigmedred.news/2017/05/31/good-bad-news/?like_comment=8193&_wpnonce=e549eeb13c)

Like