MARK BEERE

I've got a map of northwestern British Columbia here at my desk. I've been looking at it—this representation of space—almost my whole life. As a kid, it was a place for dreams, imagination...of the specific and the mysterious: of hundred-pound salmon and forty-pound steelhead and the wilderness they lived in and the people who spoke about them in whispers. Later, it was where my mind passed the time while sitting in a Vancouver classroom, until I could strap my bikes to a '71 Datsun and start driving. Then, it became a place I went to each summer, and never really came back from.

I went to University of British Columbia and studied zoology, focusing on fisheries. I went to work for the UBC Fisheries Reseach Section and worked on a variety of projects, including a steelhead stock assessment project on Vancouver Island. A few years later, I heard a position had opened in Smithers. I didn't want to believe the rumor was true; it was too close to the dream. I was afraid to put my name in the hat because it would have been too heartbreaking if it didn't work out. But I did, and it did. I got the call from Bob Hooton. He said, "Beere, pack your bags. You're going to Smithers." Halloween Day, 1988, I dressed up as a fish biologist and that's how it all began. Twenty-five years later, I look at this map and brood about what this will be in another twenty-five years.

Geographically, we're nestled in this special place. The watershed is big enough and diverse enough that it has been protected from the worst of anthropogenic change. To the south, industry and the metropolis of Vancouver and other population centers affect rivers such as the Fraser.

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And yet, the Skeena is not as far north as rivers like the Stikine, the Taku, the Alsek, the Nass–fantastic places, but where biological and climatic extremes limit salmon productivity by comparison.

It's such a magical system, with its own rhythm—the annual cycles of oolichan pushing into the river, and then halibut coming in from the deep spawning grounds to their shallower foraging grounds, and the river's flooding starts to recede and the big-bodied spring salmon arrive, followed by the other Pacific salmon species. As that pattern unfolds, the details are so far beyond comprehension. We just scratch the surface of the how and the why.

The region is so vast. The watershed is big and often turbid, particularly when salmon are spawning. Counting them is hard. The Skeena has one of the best wild steelhead populations on the globe, but our population assessment is limited to a coastal electric counter on the Kloiya River, the counting weir in the upper Sustut, the Didson sonar in the Kitwanga, and the Tyee Test Fishery—a conventional gillnetter—at the mouth of the Skeena. We also get information from anglers, particularly angling guides who report their success on the bodies of water they fish. But that's the extent of our knowledge, interpreted by three provincial and half a dozen federal fish biologists for an area 330 kilometers square.

During the run, we don't know how our measurements are related—does the Tyee test fishery at the mouth of the Skeena work? Does correlating the number of sockeye at the Babine counting fence to the number of fish caught per hour at Tyee represent the reality? What about steelhead, coho, and pinks? The truth is we learn a lot about

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the run after it is over. We know "well, there was a lot last year, and not as much this year." The air-water interface is so mysterious—what is going on under there? In that mystery are so many opportunities for wonderment and so many challenges for management.

Whenever people ask me what we need to manage the resource, I answer that we need more information and more humility in its application. With uncertainty, you should have more precaution, but precaution on behalf of… what? It depends on the perspective. That's the challenge in fisheries management: conflict often isn't about the fish, it is about the value the fish represents.

Only one thing can adjust, and it isn't the fish to human expectations! But adjustments are hard for people. So, we try to look after the resource while providing as wide a range of opportunities, including harvest, as we can.

A father once complained to me that new restrictions would prevent his kids from fishing. His family has always liked to go camping, and catch and eat a fish. But with new regulations, they couldn't. It's difficult to satisfyingly respond to that father because his story of families and fish allows for two outcomes: he's disappointed or, fearfully, they're extinct.

It's a problem of expectations driving the experience. I've met fishermen who heard stories about catching twelve fish in one day on the Skeena, and who catch three beautiful wild steelhead—fish that might be 12 years old and that have swum to Japan and back three times—but they are disappointed. I met another guy who doesn't think any fish should be

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hooked and dragged around by the lip. I know another who just wants to catch one fish a year for his family's Thanksgiving. And I know still others who don't even fish, but just want to live here because the fish are here.

We understand fish through a frame of human conceit. People look for patterns that justify a certain argument—usually for access to more fish in a given year—but they often see what they want to see rather than what's there.

This is only a problem in the context of an economic model that demands certainty where it doesn't exist. The current model, like with timber and minerals and restaurants, favors the lowest value version—there is very little expression of terminal value in the region. I've heard it said from representatives of industry that the way to add value to sockeye salmon is to stuff them in a can, as opposed to trying to cater to the fresh fish market with a fish that was cared for meticulously, from sea to plate.

If the high-volume, low-value approach is "optimizing" the product—the sole purpose—the price we all pay is interception, by-catch, quality, and arguably ethics—because an animal that's eight or nine years old might get dumped overboard dead because it won't bring as much money in the market as a target species with the right color and consistency of flesh.

These questions of value are at the heart of the ongoing debates. My own version of wilderness was so obscured by my experiences that when I came here I had to restructure how I was looking at things. My fear is that many people aren't familiar with the specifics of the Skeena.

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And how do you value something you haven't seen before, and don't necessarily understand? How many people are going to be concerned about protecting the small populations of wild sockeye salmon over having a larger, more stable income from enhancement or certain kinds of fishing or a mine or power generation project? These are all legitimate concerns, legitimate values…they just aren't easily compatible.

As we're developing more and more of this northwestern part of the Province, I can only hope we'll have the same opportunities when my two young boys are my age. I hope so. I hope there's enough appreciation of the watershed and its intrinsic value to endow support for maintaining its natural function.

The growing international interest in the Skeena is inspiring for me because I've seen how we've thrown millions of dollars at different watersheds in North America, trying to rebuild salmon and steelhead populations, and it hasn't worked very well. The spotlight on northwestern British Columbia, and the Skeena in particular, is appropriate because we still have a relatively intact watershed. My hope is that this will elevate the watershed and others like it to the extent that the values associated with that integrity of natural function will make it to the tables, where we make decisions about where we should go in the future. ○