

CHAPTER 29

A strategy for recovery planning in the Pacific Northwest US

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There is a long history of cooperation between the United States and Canada on the management and conservation of Pacific salmon. Our two countries have worked in cooperation over the years – on fishing access agreements in the 1970s, the removal of a landslide in the Fraser River to help restore that run of salmon, and the Pacific Salmon Treaty, to name just a few.

Recovery Planning for Pacific Salmon

I will discuss recovery planning for Pacific salmon under the U.S. Endangered Species Act. It is a subject that is both embarrassing and exhilarating to describe. It is embarrassing because our first listings of Pacific salmon were in 1991 and, as of this moment, there are no recovery plans in place for Pacific salmon. We did issue a proposed recovery plan, in 1995, for Snake River salmon. That plan was never finalized because of widespread and strident public objection to the plan and the controversy that surrounded it. As a result of the controversy, we decided to re-think our approach and that is what I would like to discuss here. Fred Kircheis (Chapter 28) is correct in saying that the Act does require us to develop a recovery plan; however, there is no deadline established in the Act and there really is no forcing mechanism. The recovery plan itself has no regulatory force or authority and does not compel anyone to do anything. In that sense, it is more of an inspirational type of document which provides guidance for those who would like to recover a species. This makes it a little harder to get people excited about working on a recovery plan. Notwithstanding that fact, we have seen a lot of enthusiasm in the Pacific Northwest.

Our approach to recovery planning for Pacific salmon needed to take into account the reality that salmon are different. Unlike a lot of endangered species, salmon are everywhere - their complex life cycle takes them through many habitats from small headwater streams through agricultural valleys and estuaries to the ocean and back. They travel through forests, suburbs, and cities and are just about everywhere that moving water is present in the Northwest. Consequently, salmon listings under the ESA affect a lot of people. Everything we do on the land ultimately affects the water directly or indirectly to some extent. Timber harvesting, road building, farming, and many other activities affect the water. The combination of salmon being everywhere, and just about everything that humans do having an affect on them, means that a lot of people's lives are touched by any effort to recover salmon.

We had to think about the fact that there were going to be a lot of people who would need to be involved or who, at least, would be affected and would have to be considered in a recovery planning effort. Another difference between recovery planning for Pacific salmon and many other species is that, in the Pacific Northwest, people care about salmon. Northwesterners like the idea that there are salmon in our rivers which represents living in a healthy and productive place. They view salmon as an “icon” of the Northwest. That interest in recovering salmon affected our thinking about how to approach recovery planning.

Recovery Plan Goals

As with all recovery plans, we wanted to ensure that our plans for Pacific salmon were supported by good science that would make them more likely to receive public approval and more likely to work. A plan needs to be not just scientifically credible but also implementable and it should promote confidence that people will actually be able to do what is needed in order to recover the species. To be implementable, a plan must be specific and it must be acceptable to the public as well as to the stakeholders. The stakeholders are people who are directly affected by ESA or salmon, either because they are going to be regulated as a result of recovery efforts, or they are going to benefit from the recovery of the species.

Approach: science and people

I mentioned that we did issue a draft recovery plan for Snake River salmon in 1995, which was developed in the classic way that had been done in the past. A blue ribbon panel of scientists was assembled and questioned on problems and potential solutions. Public hearings were conducted, the panel talked to other scientists, and a plan was written. The problem was that so many people were affected by the actions that needed to be taken, and so many people had invested long periods of time in trying to solve the problem, that they were not really interested in being told by a panel of experts what needed to be done. They felt they had not actually participated in the development of solutions.

Therefore, we decided to try something novel, which was to split the two main tasks involved in recovery planning and have different groups of people with different expertise working on the two tasks. This would involve credentialed scientists, who know and understand the threats, and another group of policy makers and stakeholders who would determine what actions could be taken to address the threats. For the credentialed scientists we looked for independent scientists who were then nominated and selected to sit on the science panel. The science panel was questioned as to what viability looks like and to describe what a viable salmon population would look like, which would then provide us with the biological goals.

On the other hand, we asked the policy teams to select members from within their own groups. I mentioned previously that everyone in the Northwest cares about salmon and, because of that, there were many efforts underway long before we arrived on the scene with the Endangered Species listing. There were a lot of state and tribal efforts and many local groups and watershed councils that had been involved in salmon recovery planning for a number of years. We looked for those existing efforts and for those existing groups and we invited them to take on the task of recovery planning. We offered assistance by providing a science team to look at the science, to help describe viability, and to help them judge whether proposed actions would be sufficient for recovery planning, and where the most value might be. We advised that if they developed a plan that in our judgment (and the judgment of the science team) would achieve the viability goals, then we would adopt that as our recovery plan and publish it in the federal register for public comment.

Recovery Domains



Figure 29.1. Scale recovery domains.

Figure 29.1 displays the scale of what we are trying to do. We have listed salmon on the west coast by groupings - basically population groupings that share a common evolutionary lineage. This map shows what those groupings are - in some cases, we have lumped them together. For example, the interior Columbia includes the Snake River, Upper Columbia and Mid-Columbia components, each of which is different. The idea was to try to organize, at least as a first attempt on scale, the effort along the lines that biologically matched how the species organized themselves. It is obvious, from looking at the map, and as Fred Kircheis pointed out (Chapter 28), that it does not exactly line up with political boundaries. There are complexities, in terms of determining the political entities and tribes involved in the recovery planning effort and they tend to be more compact and do not tend to cross fish boundaries quite as much, which adds another layer of complexity to the planning effort.

Roles

When dealing with such a complex effort, and when asking someone else to do what is essentially our job, which is to develop recovery plans, it is essential to be clear about what needs to be done, who is responsible, and what the expectations are. For example, the Science Teams are led by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) because that is our area of expertise. That is not to say that there are not other entities with scientific expertise. Our science teams include experts from state fish and wildlife agencies, from tribes, local governments and academia. I mentioned before that the members are selected by a science panel and, to a large and sometimes very frustrating extent, these teams are independent. The members of the teams are not supposed to represent the group that they come from and are only meant to be giving us their best scientific advice.

The Planning Teams, on the other hand, are led by others. Leadership varies from region to region. In some places the teams are being led by tribes, and in other cases by states, such as in the Columbia Basin, where the Power Planning Council has taken on a role in leading sub-basin planning or recovery planning. These are representational and people are expected to come and represent their interests. The idea is that input into the recovery planning is provided from all of these various participating groups and

not just government entities and agencies. Watershed councils have an important role to play in the planning process.

Responsibilities

I mentioned that we listed Pacific salmon by groups of populations that share an evolutionary lineage. The first task of the technical teams has been to identify the population structure for each of these listed units. That identification tells us which populations inhabit a particular area. We try to look for planning groups that line up with those populations – this generally works, although not always. For the most part, watershed councils have more than one population in their area and, for the most part, the populations do not spread across different watershed councils or planning areas. We have also asked the Technical Recovery Teams to set viability goals. When we talk about viability goals, we are not just talking numbers or abundance of fish, but we are also looking at productivity, distribution and diversity to determine whether a given population or a population group is viable. The Technical Recovery Teams also interact with the Planning Teams, providing advice and feedback on actions that can be taken to address threats to salmon and steelhead populations and how much we might expect to get out of those actions in terms of recovery.

The Planning Teams set ‘broad sense’ recovery goals. Referring back to the observation that people care about recovering salmon, one of the reasons they care is because they want to catch them. If there is a population at minimum viability, in many years there will not be a harvestable surplus. Many of the locally self-appointed recovery teams, in setting their recovery goals have set goals higher than the minimum viability goals because they want to have harvestable naturally producing fish. That is what is meant by ‘broad sense’ recovery goals. The Endangered Species Act itself does not really have the authority to compel actions that will provide for a harvestable surplus but where planning groups want that to be part of their goal we encourage it.

The Planning Teams are also asked to assess threats and evaluate how current programs meet those threats. Assessing threats is a technical exercise and involves a back and forth between the Technical Teams and the Planning Teams. In some cases, the Planning Teams have actually hired consultants to conduct the threat assessments. Any credible recovery plan will need to include that assessment along with an evaluation of how well the current programs meet the threats. The Planning Teams need to identify specific actions required beyond those that exist in current programs and, finally, they need to develop schedules for carrying out actions and funding plans to determine how those actions will be funded.

Progress

The first report on progress is that we do not have recovery plans available as yet. We do have Technical Recovery Teams established in all areas, at least in the Pacific Northwest. There is one area in California where a Technical Recovery Team has not been established. In Puget Sound and the Lower Columbia and Upper Willamette regions, we have completed the population identification and the preliminary viability goals analysis. These are available for the Planning Teams to use and for the public to look at and comment on. There are a lot of different planning efforts underway. Some are quite sophisticated, well-funded, well-organized and at an advanced stage while some are still trying to establish themselves. Puget Sound is probably the most advanced, in part, because local business leaders decided it was good for business to have healthy salmon populations and started leading the effort four to five years ago.

The Power Planning Council is also a unique entity in the Columbia Basin in that they have jurisdiction over a very broad area and they have used that authority, and their ability to allocate ratepayer funds for power generation, to promote sub-basin planning. In the Columbia Basin quite a bit of progress has been made and it is a fairly well-organized effort. In Oregon and Washington, in particular, there are State laws in place anointing watershed councils to take on certain types of planning activities. There are planning

entities in those two states that we have partnered with in trying to develop recovery plans for individual populations of listed fish.

Conclusion

Keeping in mind that we are trying to be optimistic and the observation of Fred Kircheis (Chapter 28) that “productivity is an inverse relationship to the size of the group”, there are certainly days that we wonder about this ‘monster’ we have created. As I mentioned, there are people who approach us saying we have asked them to do our job. They wonder where the money, resources and guidance are to do the job and what exactly the job is. We do not have the answers to all of those questions. Part of our answer is to ask whether people in the states, counties and watersheds would rather do the planning themselves or have us do it. It is a big job and requires a lot of resources and people are trying to determine how to fund that type of effort. What is most encouraging about the entire effort, although we do not have Evolutionary Significant Unit (ESU) recovery plans to show for it, is that we are starting to see watershed plans and sub-basin plans dealing with individual populations. These small-scale planning efforts ultimately are the building blocks of a full-scale recovery plan.

Going back to the observations from the beginning that salmon are everywhere and that everything we do on the land and water affects salmon, I am persuaded that laws and regulations such as the Endangered Species Act, by themselves, will not recover or prevent the continued decline of species like Pacific salmon. It really is the struggle for the hearts and minds of the people from the area that is critical. What is best about the efforts being undertaken in the Northwest, aside from the theoretical idea that when there is a plan it is more likely to be implemented because people will become involved, is that people are much more aware than they were before. They are much more aware that so many things they do affect salmon and the streams they live in. I see people every day being far more conscientious in their farming practices, timber practices, and road maintenance practices. Most people want to do the right thing for salmon, and if they are shown how to do it, they are willing to do it. I am encouraged by the amount of progress that we have seen in changed habits, if not in the publication of formal recovery plans.

