



Emergency rules for the winter 2020/2021 steelhead season prohibit the use of bait, require the release of all rainbows, and ban fishing from a boat. The idea is to provide sanctuary areas within the river to increase survival.

HORIZONS

COLE LEISHMAN - PHOTO

STEELHEAD ON THE BRINK

THE WEST END OF THE OLYMPIC PENINSULA IS A WILD PLACE, HOME TO THE NATION'S ONLY TEMPERATE RAINFORESTS AND STEEP MOUNTAINS RISING SHARPLY FROM THE PACIFIC COAST. IT'S LACED WITH A VAST NETWORK OF WATERSHEDS FED BY GLACIERS AND NEARLY INCESSANT RAIN. THE RIVERS ARE DYNAMIC AND POWERFUL AND DESTROY DRIFT BOATS EVERY WINTER. THEY CAN SWELL TO MASSIVE VOLUMES, OFTEN CARVING NEW CHANNELS AFTER LARGE STORMS EACH YEAR, AND MOVING GIANT FALLEN TREES AROUND WITH EASE. THEY ARE INCREDIBLE WATERSHEDS, AND THE LARGE, BRAWNY STEELHEAD THAT EVOLVED WITH THESE VOLATILE RIVERS ARE EQUALLY ASTOUNDING.

NEW CONSERVATION RULES FOR THE OLYMPIC PENINSULA

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WITH GREGORY FITZ

As a youth led by a steelhead-obsessed uncle, it was on the Olympic Peninsula that I became a steelhead angler. I still fish these rivers today, though not as much as I once did. Today if I'm on the coast, it is often to fish with my son, a young man falling hard for these chrome fish just as the opportunity to chase them risks finally slipping away. The OP is also the place where my conservation ethic was born.

That moment of introspection is etched forever in my mind and has guided my advocacy for wild steelhead and their home waters ever since. I'd hooked and landed a bright winter hen on the Sol Duc River, one of the forks of the Quillayute system, only a few

miles from the ocean. As I tailed her, I suddenly hesitated before lifting her onto the bank. She was a powerful fish and had jumped and run multiple times before tiring. Her eye was downcast, the eye of a fighter, and there wasn't a blemish anywhere on her body. The fish was beautiful, and I was struck by a profound realization: Interacting as an angler with these wild animals was one of the true joys of my life. Why would I kill something I love this much?

I let her go. As she swam away, I was overwhelmed by the privilege of the moment. That fish came to define my ethos as a conservation-minded angler. In many ways, all of my work since then has been an effort to encourage a similar introspection



BOBBY FOSTER - PHOTO

Wild steelhead populations are at all-time lows in the rivers of the Olympic Peninsula. Tribal commercial harvest, generations of sport-fishing harvest, and poor ocean survival conditions have added up over the years to create a perfect storm on rivers such as the Hoh, Humptulips, Queets, Upper Quinault, Bogachiel, and Sol Duc rivers.

among my fellow anglers.

This insight, and the recognition that anglers must take responsibility for the conservation and restoration of our last wild steelhead, is precisely what is needed now for Olympic Peninsula rivers.

NO SANCTUARY

My uncle taught me to catch steelhead with level-wind reels and casting rods. We drift fished with pencil lead and Okie Drifters or cast spoons and spinners. Later, I started fly fishing and spent the majority of my life swinging flies for steelhead. To this day, I still prefer to swing flies with a single-hand rod, but I have been known to run a jig and a float when fishing with old friends and family members who still prefer to fish with gear.

In my youth, the Olympic Peninsula was an isolated, quiet place. Steelhead were still relatively plentiful across Washington and anglers rarely traveled very far from their home rivers to fish.

Most anglers fished from the bank. Boats were rare, heavy, and made of aluminum or wood. Usually, only guides owned them. They pulled plugs and drift fished, occasionally stopping to chuck spoons at a particularly good run.

Wading anglers mostly fished gear, too, but a handful of dedicated anglers swung flies with homemade sink tips. Syd Glasso developed his beautiful Spey flies on these waters, Dick Wentworth fished here, and later, Doug Rose and Trey Combs wrote extensively about the Olympic Peninsula's wild steelhead rivers.

Angling on the OP has evolved over my lifetime. Anglers today are much more efficient predators than ever before—and there are many more of us. When the wild winter steelhead fisheries in Puget Sound finally collapsed 20 years ago, many guides and anglers shifted their attention to the OP's relatively stable steelhead populations. Steelhead, once a regional obsession, became a prestige fish, and anglers and guides began traveling to the

OP to fish from farther and farther away. Fishing travel agencies added the OP to their roster of destinations.

These anglers come armed with better gear and better technology. Online flow gauges tell us from the comfort of our homes when it's the best time to fish. Internet forums and instructional books and videos shorten learning curves. Spey rods allow sinking lines to be thrown farther and more frequently. Our raingear, waders, and insulating layers allow fishing in cold, miserable conditions. Sophisticated indicator techniques now allow fly anglers to probe deep holding water previously accessible only with conventional tackle.

Perhaps more than anything, the ubiquitous inflatable raft has changed the OP fisheries the most. These nimble boats can travel sections of rivers a drift boat can't, especially in high or low water conditions. Anglers, often guides, can use the raft to float long sections of rivers each day, dropping beads and egg patterns into

every nook and cranny along the way. They catch large numbers of fish, especially late in the season when steelhead have staged throughout the rivers.

Today, except for flood events, there is nearly no remaining sanctuary for resting steelhead anywhere on OP rivers. The fish that do return get pounded, often being caught multiple times throughout the season. This stress takes an immense toll on fish, something catch-and-release anglers are often slow to admit, especially in the scramble to get a good photo for their social media account.

AT A CROSSROADS

Wild steelhead populations are now on the brink across much of the OP. Years of unrelenting abuse have combined with an explosion of new angling pressure to create a perfect storm. The mighty Hoh often has fewer than 3,000 fish returning each winter, and has missed spawning goals many times in the last decade. In the winter of 2020/2021, the Humptulips and Queets rivers are both projected to miss spawning goals again, with the Upper Quinault and Hoh expected to barely meet their goals. The Bogachiel has often missed its modest spawning goals in recent years. In 2016, fishery managers believe, only 700 steelhead returned there. The Sol Duc and Calawah rivers, often considered bright spots due to relatively stable steelhead numbers, are still far below past returns.

These rivers, while more popular than ever, are hovering near dismal fish counts that could soon require listing under the Endangered Species Act if we don't act now. The WDFW's recent emergency angling rules change is an effort to prevent this from happening. Hopefully it is also indicative of a new generation of fishery managers willing to take consequential steps for wild steelhead conservation. [See sidebar "A Winter Wake-up Call" on page 15. THE EDITOR.]

For generations, Washington anglers killed nearly every winter steelhead they caught. Tens of thousands were killed on OP rivers alone. When the Wild Steelhead Coalition was formed 20 years ago, we immediately fought to prevent wild steelhead from being harvested by Washington sport fishers. We gained ground, with decreases from 30 fish each year per angler allowed, to five fish in 2002, to only one in 2004 until eventually in 2016, only five years ago, Washington finally implemented catch-and-release-only



BRIAN BENNETT - PHOTO

A WINTER WAKE-UP CALL

In December 2020, the Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife (WDFW) announced emergency conservation rules governing the winter steelhead season on the state's coastal and Olympic Peninsula watersheds, including famous rivers like the Hoh, Bogachiel, and Sol Duc.

The new rules prohibit bait, require single-point barbless hooks, require the release of rainbow trout to protect juvenile steelhead, closed the season earlier than usual, and most controversially, banned fishing from boats and rafts (although they can still be used for transportation) up and down the coast. The Queets, which is administered by the National Park Service, missed its spawning escapement four years in a row and closed to all fishing February 1.

It was a shocking turn of events that immediately escalated into bitter arguments among anglers about the state of the fisheries, complaints about the broad application of the rules, accusations that Spey anglers were being prioritized by WDFW over other gear types, and angry recriminations from many guides and outfitters that their business models were being upended without warning. The usual voices took to social media to blame tribal netting, call for endless plants of hatchery fish, and decry the WDFW for unfairly punishing sport anglers.

WDFW defended their rule changes with years of creel survey data showing that anglers fishing from boats catch five times as many steelhead as wading anglers and explained that the rule was a compromise designed to allow some fishing opportunities instead of closing the rivers completely for the winter season, the only other option fishery managers believed would guarantee more fish would reach the spawning gravel by Spring.

Many anglers were caught off-guard by the rule changes and news that many rivers on the coast were missing spawning requirements or experiencing long-term, and severe, declines in the numbers of wild steelhead returning each winter. This confusion is understandable because a vast network of shops, outfitters, companies, and social media accounts are dedicated to selling the perception of healthy steelhead runs on the Olympic Peninsula. These platforms rarely acknowledge the fact that these rivers are struggling, especially during recent years of warm, unproductive conditions in the Pacific, but anyone paying attention knows better.

For years, the Wild Steelhead Coalition has been ringing alarm bells and fighting for conservation based management of coastal rivers. Biologists like Dick Burge and John McMillan have been raising hell about downward population trends and potential collapse of wild steelhead for more than a decade. Filmmaker Shane Anderson has made compelling films warning us all of the heartbreaking loss of wild steelhead in these incredible watersheds. Ask anglers returning to the Olympic Peninsula each winter and they'll tell you the same story: Every year there are more anglers, more boats, more guides, but fewer and fewer fish.

Something had to give after years of status quo and lack of oversight. In December 2020, reality finally caught up with the cycles of hype that had failed to admit the deeply troubling status of the Olympic Peninsula's steelhead fisheries.



ED SOZINHO - PHOTO

The good news for Olympic Peninsula rivers is that the habitat is intact. Most of the rivers run within or originate in Olympic National Park, and if we allow adequate numbers of wild steelhead to spawn, these precious fish will survive and possibly rebound.

regulations for wild steelhead. It took 15 years of fighting to win this important regulation, with many guide organizations, vocal sportsmen, and sometimes the WDFW, working against it.

Today it isn't even legal to lift a wild steelhead out of the water in Washington. The Wild Steelhead Coalition introduced and fought to implement this rule to reduce accidental angling mortality in catch-and-release fisheries.

Commercial harvest continues on OP rivers. The 1974 Boldt Decision confirmed tribal treaty rights to half of the fish estimated to return each season above spawning goals. It remains a contentious issue. Tribal rights to harvest fish are undeniable, but gillnets' impacts on fragile winter steelhead populations can be substantial, especially when preseason estimates of fish returns turn out wrong. Anglers are quick to blame these commercial fisheries for declines, but are often less comfortable admitting the massive impact of unlimited catch-and-release angling occurring all season long, not to mention decades of sport angler harvest. In recent years, many tribes have reduced their

netting schedules and invested in habitat restoration projects out of conservation concerns. This winter, preseason commitments to reduced harvest were made by some tribal co-managers to echo the emergency restrictions required of sport anglers by the state.

Poor ocean survival during recent warm years in the Pacific, predation by sea lions and other pinnipeds, and generations of haphazard hatchery practices also all contribute to the suppression of wild steelhead numbers on the Olympic Peninsula. These factors compound with dangerously low numbers of returning fish, angling impact, and commercial harvest to create a precarious situation for wild steelhead.

In my lifetime, I've watched wild steelhead populations slip into Endangered Species status throughout the Pacific Northwest. My beloved steelhead streams in Washington's Hood Canal have closed due to low returns, and my friends and I formed the Wild Steelhead Coalition when the Puget Sound fisheries collapsed two decades ago. I don't want to see the same thing happen to Olympic Peninsula rivers. No one

should, especially those of us who grew up fishing these waters, but it is the trajectory we are on unless we change course now.

Fortunately, we still have an opportunity to act before it is too late. In fact, it is one of the very best remaining chances we have to get restoration correct. High-quality, intact habitat remains throughout Olympic Peninsula watersheds, and much of it is permanently protected within the boundaries of the Olympic National Park.

There are still some incredible fish returning to these rivers each year. The Olympic Peninsula is a place where anglers, working together with tribes, conservationists, and fishery managers, can learn the lessons of the past and truly get things right. If we act with restraint now, and make the hard decisions and sacrifices required, there is still time to restore wild steelhead. For many of us, no other option is acceptable. —

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