

Ecotrust Looks To Economics To Save Environment

Rob Manning | September 16, 2008 | Portland, OR

Over the last twenty years, the number of imperiled fish species in the U.S. has nearly doubled. From about 360 species to 700.

Those numbers come from the latest report from the U.S. Geological Survey. It's one of the strongest indictments of efforts to save threatened fish, such as Northwest salmon.

Rob Manning reports on one organization's attempts to rescue salmon, by going beyond traditional battle lines.

Of the hundreds of imperiled species, almost 40 of them are native to the Northwest. That's despite years of recovery efforts. But a similar area in southern Alaska, has only six.

RJ Kopchak: "My name is RJ Kopchak, and I have been living, working, and fishing out of the Copper River for the last 35 years."

Alaska's Copper River drains an area the size of western Oregon, but conditions there are far better for salmon. Sure, there are fewer people, but logging and mining are still threats. Kopchak says the Copper River has thrived because the fishing industry bought into conservation.

RJ Kopchak: "The more that they realized that the value of those fish was based on the productivity of the landscape, we ended up with a new awareness of the connectivity between the lower river, where the commercial harvest occurs, and the upper river, the headwaters, where the habitat is maintained that provides for that robust salmon stock."

Spencer Beebe: "I think we're moving beyond an era of jobs vs. the environment, where it's all about investment."

That's Spencer Beebe, an economist and forester. He founded Ecotrust in the early 1990's. Its goal was to use economic forces, rather than lawsuits and lobbying, to achieve environmental goals.

Beebe says the Copper River's success reflects what's possible with collaboration.

Spencer Beebe: "Without a healthy environment, we don't have a healthy human community, or a human economy."

The economic and environmental marriage is already underway. Ecotrust estimates that green investment funds have quadrupled in the last decade, to nearly \$3 trillion.

Beebe says spending priorities need another look.

He prefers to take that look from the cockpit of his airplane.

Spencer Beebe: "It's overcast from between 1000 and 2000 feet. Pretty solid marine layer all the way along the coast of Oregon and Washington."

Beebe works the controls of his Cessna airplane high above the Columbia, traveling west.

Spencer Beebe: "We've put a huge investment in the Columbia River. But in some ways, I think if you did a cost-benefit analysis, a similar investment, in the coastal streams, where you don't have dams, you don't have irrigation, you in fact could do an enormous amount with a very modest investment, and I think a much bigger return of fish to the streams."

It's not that the coastal streams are in good shape. They face threats primarily from logging. By contrast, the problems on the Columbia come from federal dams and farms.

Spencer Beebe's Cessna finds a break in the clouds over the Washington Coast Range just big enough to spot a recent landslide.

Spencer Beebe: "Here's a stream, a tributary to the Chehalis system, which is full of sediment. There's a landslide on the left, steep slope, with a lot of soil going into the river, you can see it coming all the way off of there. And then, look at that stream bottom. That's all fresh sediment, coming off of these slopes and this logging. Which is not the way to produce salmon, and salmon habitat."

Beebe says landslides can cut off habitat. And timber plantations send fewer nutrients into the streams for salmon, compared with older,

complex forests.

Spencer Beebe: “I want to be really careful about not being critical of the industry.”

You wouldn’t hear that concern from the environmental groups that regularly fight timber companies before judges and lawmakers. But Ecotrust is negotiating with timber companies, sometimes over sensitive land transactions.

So Spencer Beebe is tactful as he points out a swath of forest.

Spencer Beebe: “[There are] different ways of doing things to meet different purposes. This is private, this is managed against some pretty tough state regulatory standards ... but it doesn’t mean it all works out really well.”

Beebe doesn’t have a problem with regulations - he has a problem with the idea that regulations will recover salmon on their own.

Spencer Beebe: “The regulatory regime has been, has developed largely to prevent bad stuff to happen, and I think the challenge to policy makers is to think about the positive incentives we can give to ranchers, farmers, fishermen, loggers, to increase the range of benefits available to them.”

The biggest incentive that forest managers could see in the near future might not come from salmon recovery. Instead, timber companies could get money to let trees stand to help offset global warming.

Beebe is optimistic that the world is coming around to Ecotrust’s economic approach, seventeen years after its foundation.

Spencer Beebe: “In some funny way, we can have it all. We just can’t have it all right now, everywhere.”

And by “everywhere” Beebe doesn’t mean everywhere he can see from his airplane cockpit.

He means every place salmon swim - from California to Siberia.

In fact, Ecotrust plans to publish a wide-ranging study of salmon populations next year, looking out across the Pacific Ocean.

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