**Shuswap salmon heroes**

By Jim Cooperman

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Over the last six years, the Fraser Salmon and Watershed Program (FSWP) helped fund hundreds of projects within the greater Fraser River basin, including many in the Shuswap. The program was a collaborative effort, funded by the province of B.C.’s Living Rivers Trust Fund and the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans and delivered by the Pacific Salmon Foundation and the Fraser Basin Council. Altogether, nearly $20-million was invested into efforts to restore streambanks, support education, assist with watershed planning initiatives and foster a variety of community stewardship initiatives.

At the program’s wind-up workshop in Kamloops, we learned more details about many of the projects and shared information about our experiences. One of the studies ongoing in the Shuswap is the one led by Agriculture Canada to develop a cost-benefit analysis for irrigation in the Salmon River watershed, which is one of nine underway across Canada. Through the use of soil moisture sensors and weather stations, this study is already showing that using these tools can reduce wasteful irrigation and save farmers money, thus providing more water for fish during the fall when the river is at its lowest level.

Some of the information presented was, however, somewhat disturbing. Thousands of dollars and many years of work went into developing a watershed plan for the Nicola that is now shelved with little chance of being implemented. And along the banks of the Nicola River, dairy farmers who had recently purchased properties have ripped out the riparian vegetation that had been planted thanks to expensive and time-consuming restoration efforts.

But for the Shuswap, it was all good news. One of the organizations that has received high levels of funding has been the Salmon Roundtable. Many thousands of dollars have been dedicated toward restoration efforts that have resulted in many kilometres of river edge planted with shrubs and trees as well as extensive fencing to prevent livestock from further destabilizing the riverbanks and fouling the water. The last grant helped fund a review that showed the effectiveness of these restoration efforts.

Another key recipient of FSWP funding has been the Shuswap Lake Integrated Planning Process (SLIPP), an award-winning project that is now being implemented. Already, SLIPP is showing results, including improved cooperation amongst all the government agencies involved in watershed stewardship, lake foreshore mapping and better compliance and enforcement.

Near the close of the workshop, two “Salmon Hero” awards were presented to individuals in the Thompson region that have shown exceptional leadership in the field of salmon habitat stewardship. Both awards, that included cheques for $2,500, went to project leaders in the Shuswap. Tom Minor and Gay Jewitt accepted one of the awards for the Lumby based, Whitevalley Community Resource Centre, which has been very active with restoration efforts, youth education and improving local awareness about the importance of habitat conservation.

Over the past 13 years, the Whitevalley Centre has organized extensive habitat enhancement, streambank restoration and riparian fencing projects that have involved many in the community including young people. They have received funding from BC Hydro, DFO, Forest Renewal BC and many other agencies and programs. They plan to use half of their award money to fund more riparian plantings and for any needed repair work on existing fencing. The other half will go towards their current primary project, to see a fish ladder built at the Wilsey Dam to allow migrating salmon to reach the upper Shuswap River watershed.

The second award went to Neil Brookes, with the Kingfisher Interpretive Centre, that operates a fish hatchery as well as a key learning centre for students from throughout the Shuswap. In accepting his award, Neil explained his ”actions speak louder than words” motivating philosophy based on salmon being a keystone species that help indicate the health of the ecosystem. Over the many years of the Centre’s operations, thousands of students have learned about salmon and he now sees their children returning to learn again.

One of the more recent strategies used by the Centre has been to “think outside the box” by working collaboratively with other sectors including art, theatre, music and business groups. Neil plans to use the award money to fund another outdoor interpretive program for young people next season, which is the major focus for the Kingfisher Centre.

Although there was a sense of sadness that the program has reached the end of its funding, there was also some optimism that despite the federal government’s budget cutting measures and emphasis on spending more for the military and prisons, another funding program will eventually emerge. Certainly, devoting tax dollars towards salmon stewardship and education projects is money well spent that will produce dividends for future generations. Learn more at www.thinksalmon.com.