

Spotlight on Species

Okanagan Chinook Salmon

The South Okanagan Similkameen valleys are home to two major river systems, the Similkameen River and the Okanagan River. These rivers are part of the Columbia River system that flows to the Pacific Ocean at Astoria, Oregon. The Chinook Salmon is one of the seven species of salmon that is native to North America.



Artwork by Ron Hall

A Salmon Story

Snk'lip (coyote) was the animal person chosen by the creator to make our land ready and safe for "the people to be". He had many hard tasks to solve but the creator knew that because he was cunning and a trickster, he was the animal person for the job. One of his many tasks was to bring salmon to all the rivers. There were no salmon in the rivers because two animal person women had blocked the big river that flowed into the mighty big waters of salt. That dam was near where Dales, Oregon is now. **Snk'lip** went down the river to this dam and broke it. He asked all of the fish to follow him up the big river and as he came to each clean fresh water river that flowed into the big river, he would deliver the fish up that river. He decreed that the fish that he brought would feed the land and the people. There are several kinds of salmon and chinook salmon is one of them. There are many **chaptikwl** legends of **snk'lip** as he brought the salmon to the rivers and not enough room to tell it all here. Also, there is a museum along the Columbia River in Wenatchee Washington that has a special display about how **snk'lip** brought the salmon to the people. This is a short version of a longer and more detailed **chaptikwl** legend that is part to the En'owkin Centre Library Archives.

Richard Armstrong
Traditional Ecological
Knowledge Keeper
Traditional Ecological
Knowledge Program
En'owkin Centre

Characteristics:

Known as Ntitix (king salmon) by the aboriginal Okanagan peoples, this type of Chinook salmon is the only anadromous Chinook that return to Canada. An anadromous fish is one that migrates from salt water to spawn in fresh water. The Okanagan chinook uses the Okanagan River Basin as its fresh-water spawning ground.

The Okanagan chinook is distinguished from other salmon species by its large size, small black spots on the tail fin, black gums at the base of the teeth in the lower jaw and the large number of digestive sacs.



Photo by A. Michael Bezener - One Wild Earth Photography

Biology, Migration and Spawning:

Adult anadromous Okanagan chinook migrate from the Pacific Ocean, up the Columbia River and into Osoyoos Lake and the Okanagan River. The accessible portion of the Okanagan River ends at the McIntyre Dam (see map), and spawning occurs between the dam and Osoyoos Lake. During migration, anadromous adults may hold in the Okanagan River at Osoyoos Lake until spawning temperatures are favourable. Temperatures need to be approximately 10 to 14 degrees celcius. The chinook enter the Okanagan River in June/July and likely hold until spawning in October. Peak spawning occurs generally in the third week of October.

Fry rear in the Okanagan River and/or Osoyoos Lake for a period ranging from weeks to a year or more. Those migrating to the ocean probably exit Osoyoos Lake during April and May or in early July. The ocean phase of their life ranges from one to three years with adults returning primarily as four to five year olds. Some Okanagan Chinook appear not to migrate but instead come to maturity in Osoyoos Lake.

Population

The historic population of the Okanagan chinook was large in size and supported a significant food and trade fishery by the native Okanagan peoples.

The current population of anadromous individuals is known to be approximately five to twenty-five adults. It is hard to estimate the population size of those that mature in freshwater.

Threats

- Loss of access to habitat upstream of McIntyre Dam
- Water quality issues in spawning and rearing habitats
- Invasive species of aquatic fish and plants in Osoyoos Lake
- Losses of migrating juveniles and adults to injury and predation at the mainstem dams and impoundments

What is being done to help the Okanagan chinook

The Okanagan Nation Alliance Fisheries Department and the Osoyoos Indian Band are monitoring and collecting information on the Okanagan Chinook. Information such as escapement numbers (number of adults that have returned to spawn), biological information (age, sex, weight, length, DNA), interactions with other species in Osoyoos Lake and habitat surveys. All this information is being collected to better understand the Chinook and its requirements so that a recovery plan can be made for this species.

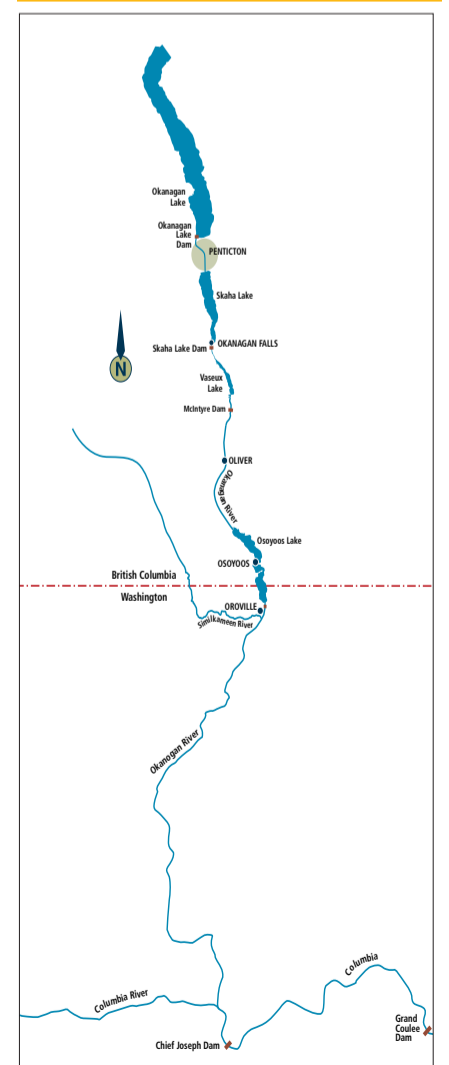
What you can do

- ✓ Protect rivers, streams and estuaries from pollution and introduction of invasive aquatic plant and animal species
- ✓ Maintain riparian vegetation. See the Riparian Area Regulation.
- ✓ Learn more about conservation efforts to protect this and other endangered and threatened species. Visit www.soscp.org
- ✓ Learn more about local plant and animal species from conservation groups, Ministry of Environment and local First Nations.
- ✓ Come to BC Rivers Day on Sept. 27.

Latin name: *Oncorhynchus tshawytscha*

(Okanagan population)

Conservation status: Federally listed as Threatened and provincially **BLUE** listed. Under consideration for addition to the Species At Risk Act.



The Chinook salmon migratory route winds up the Columbia River in Washington State and into Canada through the Okanagan River system.