

# Dad's day on the Russian River

by Rick Johnston



*Fisherman in close proximity at the Russian River. Photo by USFWS.*

Ouch!!! That really hurt! I had been hoping to get through Father's Day with no injuries and a shred of dignity. I figured that taking the family fishing at the Russian River was a relatively safe and problem-free undertaking, but.... I had just made the beginner error of putting too much pressure on a southbound sockeye salmon. The line gave way below the sinker and the one-ounce weight became a slingshot projectile, hitting me on the ankle. Being a hockey player for 40 years, I'm no stranger to a sharp blow on the ankle, but that weight really smarted. I could only imagine what it would have done to an eye or face. Every year the Central Peninsula Hospital becomes an unplanned tourist stop for "Combat Fishing" casualties. I should have known better, having observed fishermen with salmon fishing wounds for over twenty five years and having performed more than a few stream-side surgeries on fisherman who refused medical attention in lieu of continuing to fish: "Just push it through and snip the barb!"

Fishing in really crowded situations...so-called "combat fishing"... is a cultural phenomenon mostly

unique to salmon streams where fish, people, and wildlife share a common real estate for a few brief weeks. Most of us were probably taught to fish in slightly more solitary situations, where neighboring fisherman are unwelcome. Approaching another's fishing spot closer than 100 yards would be down right unthinkable. I got my first exposure to Russian River combat fishing while working for Chugach National Forest in 1976. The Kenai-Russian River confluence was the craziest thing I had ever seen, and I swore I would never fish there. In those days most people didn't know how to fish for red salmon. A veteran Alaska Department of Fish and Game befriended me, and with a vow of secrecy he agreed to show me how to fish for sockeyes. I became perhaps the fourth or fifth person to not cast for sockeyes, but to dabble a fly by fly rod and therefore increase my success.

It had not been that many years since fresh water snagging had become illegal or that fishing with single hook flies had been implemented. The technique of dabbling one's line close to shore without casting was known only to a very few persons. No one at the Kenai-Russian River confluence used this technique. Most preferred to cast their fly way off shore. "The further the cast, the bigger the fish," a tourist from Nebraska once told me. Today, any second-day Russian River veteran will tell you, "... the only thing you'll catch that way is an unlucky gull traveling overhead."

In those days everyone seemed to be slow learners and though the catch per hour ratio was much less than that of today's highly efficient experts, it was still the most productive legal fishing around. Russian River and it's confluence with the Kenai River had been one of the most productive wild salmon harvest locations in Alaska and North America since the 1950's, and it remains so today. Until relatively recently almost everyone believed that sockeye salmon could only be caught legally (in the mouth) at the Russian River. Fisherman would wait until one of the two Russian River runs reached the Russian River confluence before the fishing frenzy began. At that time the belief that sockeyes could only be caught at the Russian served to enhance the mystique and the fishing pressure.

As fishing techniques and run size improved though the 1980's, fisherman discovered that for the second and larger salmon run, the main stream Kenai River was also a productive place to bank fish for sockeyes. Hard-core combat fisherman learned to follow the second run from several-less-than-secret locations on the mid-Kenai River all the way to the Russian as the salmon moved upstream.

Shoulder-to-shoulder fishing brings fishermen together in very tight quarters for a common purpose. In many ways it is not unlike the situation at the McNeil River Brown Bear Sanctuary where bears that would not otherwise be caught dead so close to so many other bears set caution and normal social distance aside in the interest of maximizing their salmon catch. I've seen the most finicky wilderness recreationists loose all crowd inhibitions in the interest of catching a limit of Russian River salmon. Kind of like me on Father's Day being at the Russian River, when I own all kinds of equipment capable of transporting me into the backcountry far from the maddening crowds. But, on that particular day the salmon were in at the Russian, and I was on a mission.

There are all sorts of interesting social and behavioral interactions occurring at south-central Alaska combat fisheries. Persons that otherwise wouldn't give their neighbor the time of day turn into good Samaritans with a ready dip net for a netless stranger. Others who are generally social and friendly react like solitary grumpy brown bears that encounter a crowd of bears fishing at McNeil River. Persons who ordinarily wouldn't dream of littering, discard monofilament line in the river like sowing grass seed. Or the guy I saw drinking a beer, who set it down and then got dragged downriver by an eight-pound sockeye. The fish got away, and so did the beer can. About 20 salmon got away near where we were fishing, but so did a dozen beer cans.

On my Father's Day fishing expedition, a foreign-speaking lady of apparent northern European origin was fishing just downstream and caught five salmon to my one salmon. I was beginning to feel more like the mean bear than the Samaritan. My six-year-old daughter kept asking why, a storied ranger like myself who according to my stories had practically invented the Russian River fishing technique, couldn't catch as many fish as the lady downstream had caught.

This brings up another thing about Russian River fishing; despite long term experience or knowledge about catching sockeyes, if you haven't got your fish-

ing mo jo working, you might as well go home. My dad on a Father's Day long ago said, "You have to hold your mouth just right when you fish, son." Staying focused yet indifferent to time and space is essential for Russian River fishing, as is reducing distractions like kids and fishing companions who lack patience and would rather be somewhere else. A Zen master would probably make a good Russian River salmon fisherman, if it weren't for the clubbing part.

The phenomena of taking maximum advantage of a renewable salmon resource including harvesting a bunch of salmon in a short period of time is nothing new, but probably just as frenzied today as it was historically. Archeologist has documented numerous periods of early native encampments and salmon harvest at the Kenai-Russian River confluence.

Social scientists, recreation managers and biologist have been trying to manage and understand combat fishing for about as long as I've been familiar with the Russian. Much like present biologists, early state biologists focused mostly on insuring salmon spawning escapement in order to insure the future of the run.

The Sportfish Division of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game has been actively involved in counting escapement and "managing" the fishing effort since the early 1960's. Emergency openings and closures based on stream counts and escapement projections are their primary tools. Kenai Refuge involvement began somewhat reluctantly with public safety and regulatory concerns. The early Russian River Ferry was the first recreational special use permit on the Refuge and certain instances of trespass construction on Refuge lands at the confluence were among the first documented law enforcement actions on the newly established game range.

Basic access and permit issues in the 1950's gave way to housekeeping (refuse disposal), campground maintenance, public safety, and wildlife conflict concerns as crowds increased in the 1960's after the opening of the Sterling highway from Anchorage.

As crowds continued to increase and the term "combat fishing" was coined, managers wondered out loud if such socially dense fishing was appropriate on a National Wildlife Refuge. Managers were caught between wanting to maintain a certain quality experience and providing opportunity to all that sought it. One recreational staffer even proposed mandatory numbered stations (posts) along the riverbank to insure quality control spacing for fisherman. State fisheries biologists seeking maximum opportunity (har-

vest) were often not on the same page with Refuge staff who were more concerned with where such crowds fit into the concept of a National Wildlife Refuge.

In the 1980's the concept of streamside social engineering gave way to more pragmatic concerns, such as reasonable limits on parking area, conflict reduction (like controls on upper river motorboats), litter reduction, and resource protection. Management since the 1990's has focused on further refinement on previous visitor management strategies and the establishment of professional concession contract. Bank protection, habitat protection and bear-human conflict reduction will probably be the next major concerns. There is still much to achieve in reducing brown bear-fisherman conflicts at Russian River. Annually, there are several near misses and incidents between bears and fisherman, even on the lower portion of the Russian River. On one hand, the 30,000 plus anglers annually seem collectively too important to displace for a few hungry bears, yet on the other hand...it is a National Wildlife Refuge and any loss of prime feeding areas can be significant.

For the average fisherman, the behind-the-scenes fisheries management, escapement, wildlife, crowding, litter, public safety, and budget issues associated with the Russian River are of little concern. Like me on Father's Day, it's enough to think about, just try-

ing to out fish European visitors and keep a one-ounce weight from hitting important body parts.

And what of the crowds and the future of Russian River fishing? Then and now there has been what social scientists refer to as "invasion displacement." In other words, whenever the combat fishing experience and crowding reaches an individual's limit, there is always one.... perhaps two more newcomers with more crowd-tolerance to take the displaced person's spot. Thus goes the never-ending cycle of happy crowds and departing unhappy ex-fishermen. When I first arrived at Kenai National Wildlife, for example, I met several persons that said that they had reached their limit at the Russian about 1969; "It's too crowded for me," they said. And now each era has people saying the same thing with the crowds each year increasing. Some people from international big cities like New York, Tokyo or Berlin may never reach the "too crowded" situation. Then again desperate persons like me on Dad's Day who have no shame will probably always sneak a trip or two in semi-annually.

*Rick Johnston is a Ranger/Pilot at Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. For more information about the Refuge, visit the headquarters on Ski Hill Road in Soldotna, call 262-7021 or see the website at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.*