

Keeping bears and people apart on the Russian River

by Bobbie Jo Skibo

Anyone who knows the Kenai Peninsula can tell you that the rivers and lakes give life to world-class salmon runs, which represent the ecological integrity and economic vitality of the entire region. They will also tell you that within the Kenai watershed one of the most highly visited sockeye salmon fishing destinations is the Kenai and Russian River confluence area. Archeological studies and oral history in the area also show that native Alaskans and early settlers used this ideal location for catching salmon for over 9000 years.

Today, the Russian River continues to sustain indigenous cultures, the modern Kenai economy, quality recreational experiences, and a diversity of fish and wildlife species. Unfortunately, the Russian River area has also become synonymous with negative human/bear interactions, widespread streambank erosion, irresponsible angling, and “combat fishing” where tens of thousands of anglers compete for space along the banks of the rivers.

The Russian and Kenai River area is like two worlds in one. Some visitors are drawn to the Russian River fishery to experience the solitude of fly fishing for rainbow trout through the upper stretch of the clear waters, while others come prepared for “combat fishing” at the confluence in hopes of catching their limits and not a hook in the eye. The Russian River can provide a pristine esthetic experience for visitors most of the year but during the two major runs of sockeye salmon in early June and early July, the river experiences a flood of visitors and wildlife all seeking the abundant food source.

For the 2007 season, the Russian River fishery opened on June 11th and anglers were anxious to head out to catch their first sockeye salmon of the season. The difference with this season wasn't the abundance of fish because fishing has been steady and successful. Instead the difference has been the presence of agency staff who are taking a proactive approach to protecting the natural and cultural resources in order to minimize risks associated with negative human/bear interactions.

Agency staff from the USDA Forest Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have been out on the river more-or-less seven days a week educating anglers and

enforcing state and federal regulations. During this season, the message that you will hear when a federal officer or volunteer contacts you is about responsible handling of human-generated attractants when visiting bear country.

What is a human-generated attractant? Well, to give you a bit more background, the Russian River is similar to the rest of the Kenai Peninsula in that brown and black bears inhabit the area. The bears visit the river searching for food for themselves and their young. Unfortunately, the food sources they often find are backpacks, coolers full of lunches, and other stashes of food or beverages. These food sources are often left unattended on the banks while the anglers are catching their limits.

In addition to the food and beverages that anglers bring to the river, the most abundant and readily available human-generated food source for bears during June and July is filleted fish carcasses. When carcasses are thrown into the river, they pile up and create a concentrated food source which is irresistible to some bears. The filleted carcasses collect at river bends, in slow moving eddies, and get hung up on monofilament line in the river.

These are the main human-generated food sources that begin the process of wild bears associating people with food, which can lead to human-bear conflicts. Bears are being lured to the Russian River for an easy meal which usually starts with carcasses and graduates to a backpack or cooler for dessert. In order to keep bears wild and anglers safe, this cycle must be broken.

In 2006 federal land managers issued the *Russian River Possession/Storage of Food Items* emergency order which prohibited “possessing or storing any food or refuse further than three feet from the person along the Russian River Angler's Trail developed recreation area and banks of the Russian River.” The order has gained a lot of support from many responsible anglers and will continue to be in effect throughout the 2007 summer season. In laymen's terms, this means that if you have any food, beverages, or smelly stuff with you while fishing, it has to be kept within three feet of you at all times. Many anglers are simply keeping

their backpacks on and keeping bulky stuff like coolers in the car. While most anglers are supportive and complying with the regulation, others are simply not getting it. So far, a total of four tickets have been issued to irresponsible anglers. Throughout the second run, federal officers will continue to educate anglers but will also write more tickets if needed.

In addition to the regulation described above, education regarding disposal of filleted fish carcasses will be a priority topic that you are sure to hear about.

What can you do with filleted fish carcasses? We call it, "Stop, Chop, and Throw." Stop and immediately cut the gills to bleed your fish into the water. This will minimize fish blood on trails and river banks. After filleting, chop up your fish carcasses into small pieces. Finally, throw the small pieces into fast moving currents so they move easily downstream instead of piling up along the river.

Anglers are also doing their part by throwing carcasses back into the river which have washed up onto shore after another angler failed to Stop, Chop, and Throw.

While talking with anglers along the Russian River over the first sockeye run, I was pleased with the response regarding the food storage regulation, but have been disappointed that many anglers are not taking the carcass issue as seriously. The anglers who are doing the right thing are also disappointed in other anglers and often say something like, "Thanks, I have fished here for many years and want to do what is best for the bears and the people, so that's why I support the new regulations and approaches put in place this year." To those anglers who are doing the "right thing," I say Thank you and keep up the good work, and don't be afraid to educate your fellow anglers.

Bobbie Jo Skibo is working as the Russian River Interagency Coordinator while she completes a Master's Degree in Natural Resource Management and Policy from the University of Denver. Bobbie Jo has extensive experience working on diverse conservation and natural resource issues affecting the Kenai Peninsula. Previous Refuge Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.