



## The Oregonian

### One man's urgent fight to save salmon

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In the fall of its 37th year, the battered old drift boat careens off a submerged rock and spins sideways in the current.

Directly below is the fast-moving chute that will launch us into a stretch of water so pocked with rocks it's known as the Mine Field.

"Isn't this just great," says the 61-year-old at the helm, a firm smile gripping the corners of this mouth.

With a heavy yank of the oars, he halts the spin and pulls the boat to a virtual stop before gently dropping it into the lurching, choppy waters below.

At each new challenge the low-flowing river throws up, Jim Martin leans heavily on the patience learned through 40 years of running and fishing the biggest rivers in the West.

The choppy pieces of rock-strewn white water are the main reason that on a perfect slate-gray October day, ours is the only boat on a five-mile stretch of river full of migrating fish.

Martin has lured me out on the Clackamas to talk about his plan for saving Oregon's wild salmon. Of course, even if you've never baited a hook, you'd be crazy not to drift a river with this man as your guide.

The man who was picked by then-Gov. John Kitzhaber to lead Oregon's plan to save the wild coho is retired now, working as a conservation consultant for a leading fishing tackle company and teaching a little.

Even in retirement, the Oregon native can't stand on the sidelines as fish populations drop amid the paralysis of a state bureaucracy that has failed to settle the ongoing squabbles over commercial and sport fish allocations.

Talk of salmon is never far away as Martin rows from one spectacular fishing hole to another, stopping the boat as if parallel parking, then backing beneath a low ceiling of branches so our lines can drift 50 feet downstream, where steelhead and coho lurk in the shadows.

Time and time again, he positions the boat so my line has no choice but to drift into the heart of the river's best fishing spots. Upper Paradise. Lower Paradise. And most important of all: Dog Creek Hole, where a stunning 3-foot-long chinook takes the line and rises to the surface before being released to complete her final journey.

Later we watched as a pair of chinook danced along a shallow gravel bar. Then the female sat low in water and hollowed out a nest. It's a ritual that's more stunning every time you witness it, one Martin is more determined than ever to preserve.

The plan from Martin and three other fish biologists calls for a five-year pilot program that would increase the number of smolts from Oregon and Washington hatcheries to be planted in "terminal" coastal hatcheries, places like Youngs Bay at Astoria.

There, all the returning fish can be harvested, Martin says, instead of clogging main-stem fishing arteries like the Columbia with hatchery fish that compete with wild salmon.

Martin says the purpose of the plan is to preserve wild runs and the sportfishing industry without reducing the commercial harvest.

Already, some in the commercial fishing industry are rejecting the plan. And state leaders, he says, are wary of the plan.

Why? "Because it's not what we're doing now," Martin said. "It's what I call the tyranny of the status quo."

Yet, now more ever, he's unwilling to give up. Even a man who has spent his life studying the life cycles of fish can learn new lessons about the march of time.

Earlier this fall, his wife, Carolyn, nearly died after an illness that left her in intensive care for 14 days. "It reminded me," Martin said, "you can't wait to make a difference. The way time works, you have to do the important things right now."

And so after a day that started before first light, after eight hours rowing five miles of heavy water, instead of easing back to his quiet Mulino home, Martin waves goodbye and rolls off toward a night meeting to push his plan to save the salmon.

Andy Parker: 503-294-5945; [daparker@news.oregonian.com](mailto:daparker@news.oregonian.com)

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