

SKAGIT RIVER ANGLING
(comments and concerns)

presented to

Skagit Environmental Endowment Commission

by

Skagit Anglers

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Introduction

The purpose of this brief is to provide the Skagit Environmental Endowment Commission with the views of the Skagit Anglers on river angling in the Canadian portion of the Skagit watershed.

We are a growing group of anglers who fish the Skagit River and place a high value on the experience. Our group was formed in 1980 with the immediate purpose of opposing the high Ross dam and its potential for flooding an additional 15 kilometers of river. Our purpose was also to monitor Skagit watershed management and to provide the angler's viewpoint on this process. Since the 1982 Seattle/B.C. agreement to forego high Ross dam, our group has been inactive. Currently we are working to re-establish and enlarge our membership.

The brief explains what we value about Skagit angling, the unique qualities of the Skagit fishing, our concerns for the future of Skagit angling and how we perceive our role in Skagit watershed management.

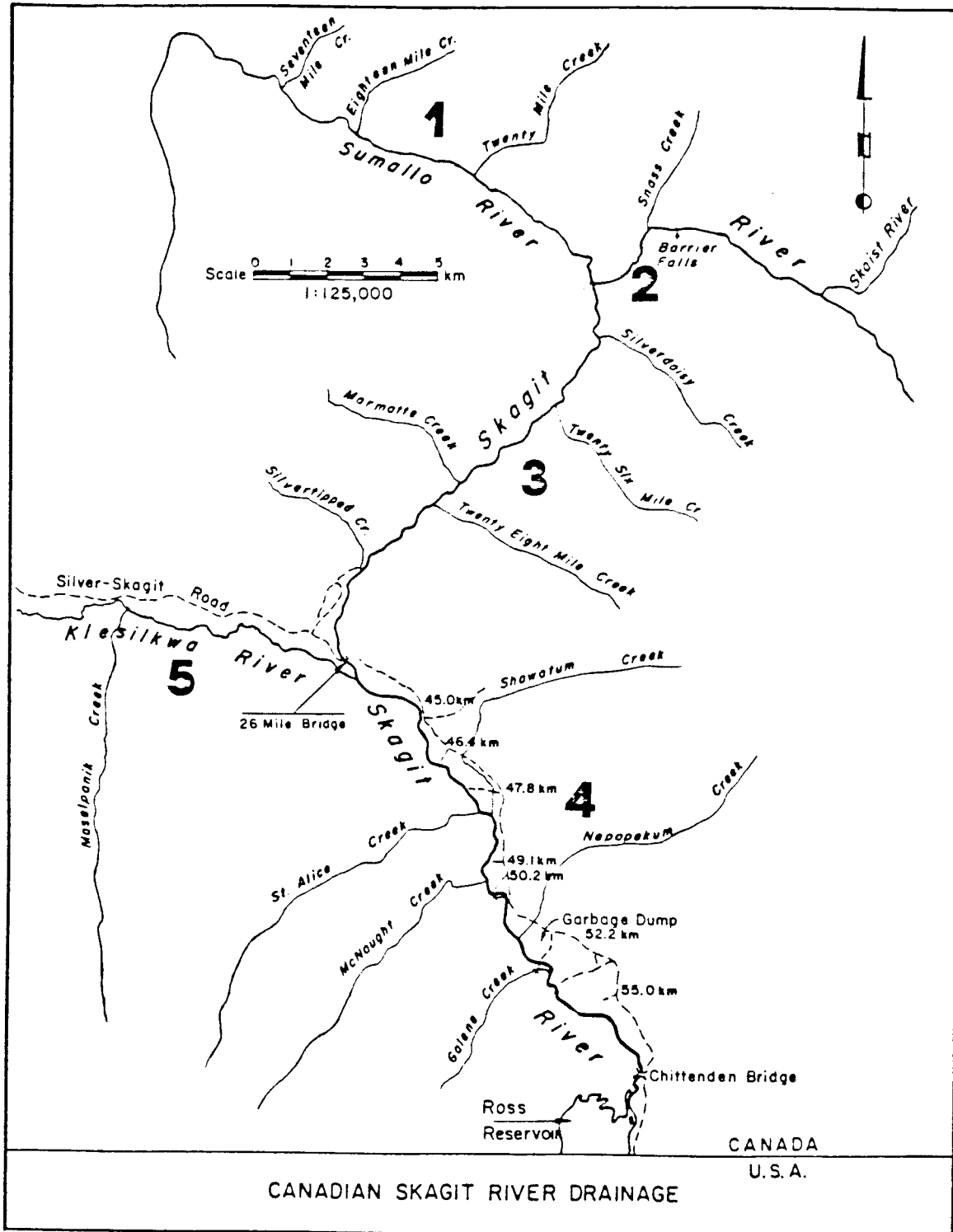
What Anglers Value

The Skagit watershed offers a variety of tributary and mainstem angling opportunities and experiences (figure 1). An angler can choose to fish the Sumallo River, the Skagit Bluffs section of the upper Skagit, the "upper" Skagit between Sumallo River and "26 mile Bridge", the lower Skagit below the bridge to Ross Lake, and the Klesilkwa River. Each area offers its own distinct experience which is the product of stream physical character, species of fish present, angler access and angler use.

The mainstem of the Skagit, from the Sumallo River down to Ross Lake, is most preferred by anglers. The characteristics of Skagit angling that anglers value most highly are found within this section. These characteristics are:

- 1) A summertime fishery - Fishing on this stream occurs mostly between late June and October when the river is dropping and warming. Floods are uncommon and the weather is often more pleasant than in the coastal Lower Mainland. Summer stream fisheries for trout near Vancouver are rare.
- 2) Reasonable access/minimal crowding - The closeness of the Skagit to Vancouver (a two hour drive) makes the river a very reasonable day's outing. Access to specific fishing waters on the river can be gained by driving to a number of river bank points, by easy hiking along primitive river bank trails or by wading sections of the stream. Access to many river locations has been difficult enough to ensure uncrowded fishing conditions.
- 3) Good fishing success/variety of species - Dolly Varden Char (9 to 4.5 kg/10 lbs.), rainbow trout (average length 30-40 cm/ 12" to 14"), and a few brook "trout" char are available to anglers. Rainbows are the most numerous species and the most popular with anglers. The Skagit River, in past years, has

**FIGURE 1 — skagit river
fishing areas**



1. Sumallo River
2. Upper Skagit River (Skagit Bluffs)
3. Middle Skagit River
4. Lower Skagit River
5. Klesilkwa River

provided excellent catch success for these fish. The proportion of larger trout in the catch (greater than 35 cm or 14 inches) has been quite exceptional for the region. No other summer stream fisheries near Vancouver, and only a few of the lake fisheries, have offered this level of success for larger trout.

- 4) Good condition of the Fishery - Stream habitats for fish in the Skagit River watershed are in excellent condition. Unlike most other watersheds near Vancouver, the Skagit has had minimal impacts from potentially destructive land uses (mining, logging, urbanization, etc.).

While fish habitat is intact, recent fisheries studies are suggesting that the fish stocks themselves may be depressed. This is possibly the result of overharvest of fish in Ross Reservoir and the Skagit River. We feel that proper management strategies can correct this condition.

- 5) Skagit River fish are 'wild' - No hatchery introductions of trout or char are made to this system. Populations of fish within the watershed are naturally reproducing. We feel that this is the most economical, sensible and desirable condition for a fishery like the Skagit. Wild fish frequently have an aesthetic appeal to anglers that cannot be matched by hatchery products.

- 6) Superb stream fishing characteristics - Waters of the Skagit River are excellent for most methods of angling. Open riffles, runs and pools provide sufficient room for casting, and create interesting and enjoyable conditions for wading. Wading allows the river angler to reach more water and provides an additional challenge. Natural log accumulations and fallen trees provide holding places for trout and sites to angle.

Many Skagit River anglers fly fish, and the river is highly regarded for its unusually good populations of aquatic insects which 'hatch' throughout the spring to fall period. The Skagit River is the best stream in the region for fly anglers to practice the art of matching artificial flies to food items on which trout are feeding.

- 7) Aesthetics - The Skagit angling experience relies heavily on intangible things like: mountain vistas; forested mountain slopes; giant cottonwoods, birds, beavers, bears; chocolate lillies; and "alone-ness". While the Skagit River is not a true wilderness, the right circumstances give the angler a sense of wilderness that is becoming more difficult to achieve so close to cities.

Rare Status of the Skagit River and Its Fishery

The Skagit River, with its variety of attributes, is a rare commodity within the region of the Lower Mainland and south-western B.C.. We feel that the Skagit cannot be viewed in isolation, but must be considered in this larger regional contest. Stream fishing within the region occurs almost exclusively on streams with sea-run fish, where habitat has been lost and fish stocks are in decline. Stream fishing primarily occurs in the harsh and unpredictable conditions of fall, winter and early spring, and chances for catching a fish are low.

In the appendix, we compare the Skagit watershed to five other streams with summer trout fisheries within a 250 km (150 mile) radius of Vancouver. The comparison is done using a number of characteristics which we feel are important in a stream trout fishery.

The Skagit River is ranked particularly high for its accessibility (close to home, yet not too accessible), aesthetics, fish size and

numbers, few habitat and pollution problems, and its potential for environmental protection. We feel this last characteristic is particularly important. The majority of the Skagit watershed is within class 'A' provincial park, provincial recreation area, and crown land. Private holdings are minimal. Under these circumstances, the Skagit Fishery management on many other region watersheds is uncertain, due to complex land status and uses, and past loss of fish habitat.

While this analysis is subjective, we feel that it fairly shows the uncommon and valuable status of the Skagit fishery - particularly for residents of Vancouver and the lower mainland.

Concerns About the Future of Skagit River Angling

We are very concerned about the future of angling on the Skagit River. Specifically, we have two major questions:

- 1) Can Skagit River fish stocks, with all their interesting and valuable features, be maintained or even improved?

Lower Mainland human populations will surge. Angling is rapidly increasing in popularity. Demand for all kinds of recreation in the Skagit (including angling) will be great. Management of the Skagit fishery is very complex, especially since the international Ross Reservoir fishery may strongly influence what happens in the river. Increased land use activities in the Skagit watershed, including changes for recreation, will potentially have a detrimental effect on fish habitat and fish.

- 2) Can the Skagit River "angling experience" be maintained?

As mentioned in our previous question, human pressures and demands will make it very difficult to maintain this experience.

Management of recreational access to the river will "make" or "break" the experience. River aesthetics will be influenced by other users, and changes near or in the river.

Maintenance of fish stocks and the angling values, within a larger land use management scheme, will be extremely challenging. We wonder if traditional methods of achieving preservation of delicate biological and social values will work in the Skagit watershed.

A positive point is the special endowment fund available to assist Skagit watershed management and the high international profile the area will have. These features potentially can work to better ensure proper management.

Recommendations

There are several recommendations that we feel are appropriate to make at this time:

- 1) An adequate understanding of the Skagit River/Ross Lake fishery is essential so that Washington and British Columbia fishery agencies are able to manage it in a manner that will preserve the values that we have previously outlined. This may require extensive baseline studies that should be assisted by the endowment fund.
- 2) An understanding of the inter-relationship of angling and other forms of recreation is essential. Other recreation uses can potentially conflict with angling (ie. canoeing, trail development, campsite development). A grasp of the overall recreation picture will aid planning and help to avoid conflicts. Again, baseline studies are required and should receive assistance from the endowment fund.

- 3) A Skagit watershed management plan should be developed.
- 4) A formal and permanent advisory committee should be established. This committee would include appropriate government agencies and the public.
- 5) Skagit anglers should have formal input to the management process. We feel this is important, as angling is (and will likely remain) a major recreational use in the watershed.

APPENDIX

TABLE 1 - A Comparison of Summer Trout Streams Within
a 250 km (150 Mile) Radius of Vancouver, B.C.

Stream/Fishery	STREAM CHARACTERISTIC								
	Angler Access	Wilderness Aesthetics	Fish Size	Fish Numbers	Potential for Environment Protection	Lack of Past Habitat or Pollution Problems	Present Angler Use	Potential for Angler Use	Total Score (mean)
1. Skeptic River	9	8	8	8	7	8	6	7	61 (7.6)
2. Upper Cheakamus River	9	6	3	3	4	5	4	3	37 (4.6)
3. Cowichan River	5	8	9	7	5	6	6	9	55 (6.9)
4. Thompson River	5	7	10	7	4	5	2	8	50 (6.0)
5. Nicola River	4	7	4	3	4	5	2	6	35 (4.4)
6. Similkameen River	6	7	2	2	4	5	4	3	33 (4.1)

RATING -- 1 (very poor) ——— 10 (exceptional)

SOME DETAIL ON STREAM CHARACTERISTICS USED IN TABLE 1

Characteristic	Detail
Angler Access	From the Vancouver or Lower Mainland area. On the stream, access can be too easy causing crowding. Ideally, a stream should have areas easily accessible and other areas more difficult to reach. Huge rivers, i.e. Thompson, may have parallel roads and trails but river size discourages fishing.
Wilderness Aesthetics	Difficult to rate because different anglers have different tastes. Ratings done considering that most anglers enjoy a wilderness feeling on the stream.
Fish (Size & Numbers)	Anglers have a good appreciation of what these streams offer. The perfect stream fishery provides unlimited numbers of huge fish. The poor stream has only small numbers of tiny fish.
Potential for Environment Protection	The ideal is a watershed that is completely undeveloped, where land status allows control over land uses that will affect the fishery.
Lack of Past Habitat/ Pollution Problems	Most streams have complex land status and uses. Often these uses have degraded biological or aesthetic aspects of the stream. Use on private land can be difficult to control. Private land can also prevent angler use of sections of a stream.
Present Angler Use	Magnitude of use (i.e. light - heavy) is easily determined. Actual figures for angler use are rarely available.
Potential for Angler Use	Many factors determine future capability, i.e. number of kilometers of river bank, total surface area, access conditions, ability of fish population withstand use. Big streams can often accommodate more anglers than small streams.

figure — summer trout streams within 250 km
of Vancouver, B.C.

