

"E-fishing with the state Department of Fish and Wildlife"

by Dallas Cross
Fish Journal Column
Issaquah Press
Published 31 December 2009

In my youth there were two dates of special significance--the opening day of fishing and the opening day of hunting. For fishing the state rules were succinctly described on a couple of pages. There was the usual opening day for stream fishing; the main rivers and large lakes were open all year. Special dates were set to fish for salt water fish returning to the streams. The dates did not change once they were announced. All in all, it was quite simple, with catch limits and fishing gear remaining the same throughout the season.

Then, most of the fish and game personnel employed by the state were in the field, raising fish and birds, creating habitat and enforcing the regulations. My own summer job was to plant and maintain refuges for upland game. A small administrative staff supported the field and printed the regulations. So when you found time to go fishing you could plan far ahead. Everyone knew the rules and the only decision was where to go and whether the weather and fishing would be good. But good times they were a changing.

During fish story times, my friends almost always broach the subject of how to abide by regulations. Being legal is now complicated, because the regulations are frequently changed by the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.

More than often friends state that they cannot plan long term trips to fish, crab or clam because of the numerous openings, closings and limit modifications made by the department. Some have confided that the fishing rules are so complicated that they are fearful of breaking one and so they don't bother to plan an outing. Department officials acknowledge this confusion by regularly issuing cautions to check their internet site for emergency rule changes before fishing.

To get a measure of this problem I subscribed to the email service of the department where among general announcements for planning, and of the capture of a few poachers, they list the rule changes and corrections.

This is what I observed during twelve months: There were 28 errors reported in the official fishing rules pamphlet issued at the beginning of the year. One correction of a limit for steelhead as actually being one instead of two, brought up the mental image of a stream side citation and a lawyer pointing out the error in court with this public mea culpa being published as a consequence.

Mid-season rule announcements are numerous. Changes were made for allowed fishing gear types, seasonal and regional openings and closures, catch limits and legal size modifications. There were 13 changes for saltwater fish (mostly sturgeon), 18 changes for salmon and steelhead, 7 changes for freshwater fish and 17 changes for shellfish (mostly crab and clams)--a total of 55 changes. This averages slightly more than one rule change per week.

One of the more interesting changes was the issuance of a two-day a week closure for pink salmon sport fishing on the Puyallup River. It seems there was a building conflict between American Indians and sportsmen over fishing territory. Evidently the department decided to cool things down before a minor civil uprising escalated.

Another rule change was to allow the use of two rods while fishing in fresh water. Previously this was a violation but now you may prepay the penalty by purchasing a second rod stamp for an additional \$24.50.

State officials have required the department to cut back its budget and this has taken a toll on the hatchery workers and enforcement agents. I have been told the department has cut field personnel proportionally more than for administrative and research staff. The recent emphasis for the public to report poachers on a hotline probably reflects an increasing deficit in field enforcement personnel.

While acknowledging the budget restrictions in these financial times, I reflect on the many millions of federal dollars collected from excise

taxes on fishing and recreational goods and equipment in Washington state. We don't see these taxes at the retail level but they are levied and go to the federal treasury. Every year millions are returned to Washington, some as grants but a large portion is deposited into the state general fund, neither earmarked for conservation nor budgeted in support of recreation.

So to fish with the department and pretend there will be a game warden around, you should only plan day to day, engage a wildlife lawyer to interpret regulations, hire a Sherpa bearer to carry them, and use a Blackberry communication device to get the latest changes while on the way to the river. Because the expense for this is recreationally related, I'm sure it will now be subject to the federal excise tax which will go to the state's general fund helping to pay for its current financial shortfall in social services.

Reach Dallas Cross at FishJournal@aol.com. View previous articles at www.FishJournal.org. Comment on this column at www.issaquahpress.com