

Salmon event catches songwriter's imagination; Vanier Park celebration remembers First Nation tradition, laments depleted fish stock

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Some of Arlette Alcock's most vivid childhood memories are of the trips to the nearby river she made with her parents in Salmo, a small town near Trail in the Kootenays.

"I remember seeing the salmon in the river, and it was like the old cliché. There were so many, you could walk across a moving mass of it."

The singer, recipient of a Songwriter of the Year nod from the Native-E Music Awards held this month in Albuquerque, N.M., performs at this weekend's Salmon Celebration--Remembering Our History, Celebrating the Living Sept. 28 at Vanier Park.

Besides Alcock and other musical acts, including Fraser Union, the False Creek Watershed Society production features a parade, dancing, fish hats, boat building, and stilt walking. Most of all, the celebration--now in its fifth year--is an occasion for people to gather and talk salmon.

"Musqueam Creek is the last remaining wild salmon stream in Vancouver," said Salmon Celebration organizer Celia Brauer.

"One has been redone in Spanish Banks, and the Aquarium did one--you can do these pocket streams."

But the original 57 streams that once crisscrossed Vancouver are gone, she said.

"There used to be more salmon than there are people today. Now we have to work on our human resources, and try to help them understand what the situation is in the hinterland and in our urban reality."

The reasons for their disappearance are many, believes Brauer, from continuous over-fishing to rising water temperatures to pollution from fish farms and even human medication. "Our medications go into the water and affect the fry," said Brauer.

Colin Campbell, the Marine Campaign Coordinator for the Sierra Club, said the environmental group no longer has an active salmon campaign. But he's aware of the problems.

The main problem with the salmon fisheries in B.C. is the off-shore mixed-stock fishery, said Campbell.

"Some runs are extremely abundant, but they swim with others that are not. We scoop up way more of the rare ones than the common ones, and hundreds of streams have lost genetically distinct races of fish."

Selective fishing, fishing them in the streams, is the best solution, said Campbell.

These are the kinds of messages Brauer is hoping the Salmon Celebration will get through, not just to adults, but to children as well. The event features a variety of kid-friendly activities, including crafts and stilt-walking.

"When kids are shown these things, they do connect the dots, but you have to take the time to understand why fish are disappearing, and what we can do about it," said Brauer. "Everybody can do something. Obviously we want to be pushing our government and businesses to take the lead, which isn't easy, and public pressure is the main thing that changes that."

Alcock, who wrote a song called "I Dreamt I Was a Salmon" for the occasion, said the Salmon Celebration is a chance to remind ourselves of what's been, and is being, lost.

"It's a sad thing," said Alcock, "because children will never get to see what I saw as a child--the river filled with salmon."

Those trips with her parents and brother were like mythic journeys. "My parents wanted us to see it so badly. Of course, I didn't know what it was at the time, it was just something we did with our parents."

Alcock, a grandmother, added, "I don't want it ever to be in my lifetime where I say to my granddaughter, 'This is a salmon. We used to eat them. They used to swim in the ocean.'"

For more info, visit www.falsecreekwatershed.org.

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