Why is fishing so difficult in Puget Sound?

I am often asked why fishing is so difficult in Puget Sound, especially by those newly moved to the area. Why are the Washington Sport Fishing Rules over 100 pages long? Why is it so difficult to figure out where to fish, how to fish, what can be fished for, and when you can fish for it? Why does it seem like every fish, crab and shrimp you catch has to be accounted for? There are lots of reasons including the fact that there are a lot fewer fish in Puget Sound than there used to be and a lot more people fishing here. But another part of the reason has to do with the history of fishing in the Pacific Northwest.

Long before Washington was settled, many Indian tribes fished Puget Sound. The main diet of the native Indians of the Pacific Northwest was salmon, and salmon had a central place in the social, economic and spiritual lives of the people. When the first European explorers arrived in the late seventeen hundreds, they found strong, wealthy, civilized tribes coexisting with abundant marine life.

In 1846, Great Britian and the United States signed a treaty giving the United States full jurisdiction over the Pacific Northwest. An 1853 bill created the territory of Washington. Isaac Stevens became the first governor and Commissioner of Indian affairs of the new territory. Manifest Destiny was in full swing in the Northwest, but homesteading could not be allowed unless the tribes ceded their land to the United States by treaty. Governor Stevens rapidly signed 5 treaties with dozens of Puget Sound tribes, relegating them to small reservations, but promising them access and fishing rights to all their usual and accustomed fishing areas.

By 1877 a formal salmon canning industry had started on Puget Sound and by 1889 the Washington State Legislature created the Washington Department of Fisheries to regulate commercial harvest as overfishing concerns grew. Gasoline-powered boats, hydropower dams, pollution and urban sprawl continued to depress native fish populations through the mid-20th century. For years the state of Washington had disregarded the Stevens' treaties and insisted it could impose its fishing regulations on the tribes under the guise of conservation. Tribal fishermen were persecuted and arrested.

Drawing on the civil rights battles of the time, Native tribes in the 1960s engaged in a civil disobedience campaign known as the "Fish Wars." Several tribes brought in attorneys and with U.S. attorneys, filed U.S. v. Washington on behalf of the tribes. The result was the landmark 1974 Bolt Decision, which re-affirmed the rights of American Indian tribes in the state of Washington to co-manage and continue to harvest salmon and other fish under the terms of the treaties with the U.S. government. Puget Sound harvests were to be divided 50/50 between native and non-native fishermen. The Rafeedie Decision of 1994 similarly affirmed that western Washington treaty tribes have the right to 50 percent of the natural shellfish harvest in their traditional fishing areas.

To implement this decision, the tribes and the state meet regularly to co-manage the fisheries. First, various methods are used to predict the total harvest of each fish and shellfish species for the season. The tribes apportion their 50 percent among the distinct tribes and each tribe then divides their quota among subsistence and commercial fishing. Similarly, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife divides their quota among the thirteen marine areas in Puget Sound and then between recreational and commercial fishing. There is always tension, and occasionally, litigation between competing groups. This complicated division of the fisheries, along with conservation of endangered salmon species, helps explain much of the regulation of fishing in Puget Sound.

Our organization helps local fishermen understand and support our precious fisheries. Puget Sound Anglers North Olympic Peninsula is a 200 plus member organization centered in Sequim whose purpose is to organize and fund educational events and learning that promotes stewardship, conservation, camaraderie, safety and enjoyment of local fisheries. Members volunteer at the Dungeness Hatchery, and on various halibut, salmon, shrimp and crab advisory boards. In conjunction with the city of Sequim, the club hosts the popular Sequim Kids Fishing Day. Scholarships are given to students majoring in marine studies. Monthly meetings, open to the public, are held at the Elks Lodge in Sequim the third Wednesday of each month, and showcase speakers from Washington Fish and Wildlife, marine biologists, tackle vendors, and local professional fishermen. Our website is www.psanopc.org.