**Lackey, RobertT.2009.SalmoninWesternNorthAmerica: Historical Context. *In*: Encyclopedia of Earth. Eds. Cutler J. Cleveland (Washington, DC, Environmental Information Coalition, National Council for Science and the Environment).**

1820 — With the arrival of trappers in the region in the early 19th century, a systematic, intense harvest of beavers began. Large numbers of beaver can considerably alter the aquatic environment, in most cases improving salmon rearing habitat. As beaver populations declined, many salmon runs were adversely affected. As competition intensified between the United States and Great Britain for control of the Pacific Northwest, the British Hudson’s Bay Company adopted a policy of leaving no beaver in the watersheds they trapped, because without beavers, the American fur trappers (and settlers) would be less likely to come to the Pacific Northwest. The overall effect on West Coast salmon of nearly extirpating beaver is unknown, but it was likely great.

1848 — The most visible milestone in the two-century decline of wild salmon occurred with the discovery of gold in California. By 1849, the decline started in earnest and was widely reported in the newspapers of the day. By the 1850s, excessive harvest and the impacts of mining activities had decimated salmon in streams in and surrounding the California Central Valley. In response, there were regulations restricting some fishing and mining practices. Later, there were calls for the creation of salmon hatcheries to provide supplemental stocking to overcome the devastating effects of mining operations.

1870 — In the Central Valley of California, after a 30 year decline in salmon runs, supplemental stocking from hatcheries was widely viewed as the solution to declining salmon runs. By 1900, stocking from hatcheries had largely won out over preserving or restoring natural habitat as the preferred recovery strategy. Today, hatchery bashing is common in salmon policy debates, and hatcheries often are characterized as the nemesis of restoring wild salmon runs.

1905 — The mantra “reclaim the Klamath Basin” (along the Oregon/California border) reflected the values and priorities of the day. Creating productive farmland by irrigation was the public policy goal. In the competition between societal priorities, irrigated agriculture won out over salmon. Over the next several decades, millions of dollars were spent to develop an elaborate system of dams and canals in the Klamath Basin (and elsewhere). Now, at least for the Klamath Basin, based on regional and national polling data, society ranks salmon above agriculture for use of scarce water.

1933 — The mantra “put people to work” dominated the political landscape as people debated how to counter the effects of the Great Depression. Massive public works projects, such the high dams of the Columbia Basin and elsewhere, were built even though the anticipated and ruinous effect on wild salmon was understood. A single dam, the Grand Coulee, completely and permanently blocked a quarter of the Columbia Basin to migratory salmon, a thousand miles of the mainstem river lost to salmon in a single action. We knew precisely what would happen to those runs of wild salmon. The Depression and public works projects won out over salmon.

1942 — The posters adorning many public buildings proclaimed “America — the Arsenal of Democracy.” Warplanes were needed in great quantities and in the shortest possible time. Thus, electrical generation in the Pacific Northwest was greatly increased to supply the voracious appetites of aluminum smelters. The hydro-power was there; the war-time demand for aluminum was acute; the public support was near universal. Turbines, operating at maximum capacity seven days per week, 24 hours per day, for four years, chewed up salmon at devastating rates. It was a war for survival and bombers won out over salmon.

1948 — Widespread floods caused disastrous effects across the region, and politicians heeded the public’s call for protection. Many flood control dams were built in Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and British Columbia. Society collectively demanded that human life and property be protected from uncontrolled river discharges. Flood control won out over wild salmon. Perhaps society’s priorities have changed because now when a major Pacific Northwest flood occurs, such as the 1996 Oregon flood, it brings few appeals for constructing additional dams.

1960 – The technology for cheap, effective home and commercial air conditioning developed rapidly after World War II. By 1960, the indirect effect on salmon of widespread adoption of air conditioning was clear: (1) greatly increased demand for electricity; and (2) increased overall regional population growth because previously undesirable areas became, with the advent of air conditioning, more desirable places to live. Much of the West Coast is hot during summer months, thus air conditioners found a receptive market. Many people today cannot imagine living without the comfortable temperatures provided by home and office air conditioners. Directly relevant to salmon runs, electricity demand is now high for both winter and summer, necessitating more generating capacity and transmission lines.

1991 — The first salmon “distinct population segment” was listed under terms of the Endangered Species Act. With this action, the policy debate shifted away from restoring salmon runs in order to support fishing, to protecting salmon runs from extinction, two very different policy objectives. A century ago no one cared much whether a salmon started life in a hatchery or in a stream. Now, hatchery-produced salmon are not the restoration solution, they are part of the restoration problem, at least according to many.

2001 — Just a decade later, a severe drought, combined with ongoing California blackouts, provoked the U.S. Bonneville Power Administration to declare a power emergency, abandon previously agreed upon interagency salmon flow release targets, and generate electricity using water reserved to help salmon migrate. In one of the most striking recent barometers of competing societal priorities, electricity won out over salmon, and with scant public opposition. Not one of these public policy decisions made over the past 200 years was inherently good or bad. Each simply reflected the priorities or legal interpretations of the time, coupled with a strong dose of optimism that we could have our cake and eat it too.

As the history reveals, however, it is unrealistic to consider salmon recovery as anything but one element, often a minor element, in a constellation of competing societal policy preferences. It appears that most people are willing to sacrifice wild salmon to achieve a suite of other priorities.