

A SMALL VICTORY ON PUGET SOUND

A retired fisherman and a vacationing longliner take the 32-foot gillnetter Bryan out of mothballs and fill the hold with sockeye.

BY JENNIFER KARUZA

Pacific Northwest commercial salmon fishermen have an undoubtedly hard go of it. We all feel the pain of fishermen forced into early retirement because of catch reductions, poor prices and the rising cost of just maintaining a boat. We feel a collective sting of regret when we pass by commercial boats in the harbors with For Sale signs hung in their galley windows.

But commercial fishing isn't over in this corner of the world; and if one looks closely enough, there are modest and grand successes alike to be celebrated. This past summer shaped one humble Pacific Northwest fishing victory, a triumphant little tale of a fisherman and a gillnet boat, both of which came out of retirement to fish the 2001 Puget Sound salmon season in Bellingham Bay.

Sitting neglected at Dock 7 of Seattle's Fishermen's Terminal was the 32-foot gillnetter Bryan. Purchased, operated and retired all in 1997, Bryan jigged cod for one season in Southeast Alaska before its owner, George Schile, returned to longlin-

ing along the Aleutian Chain. Although Schile didn't have any practical use for the Bryan, his affinity for his boat kept him from selling it. With two boat payments, and an increased "inactive vessel" moorage rate at the terminal, Schile was eager get the Bryan back on the water.

Enter Jack Karuza, 58, a fifth-generation fisherman (and my dad), who turned his Alaska seine and longline operations over to his crew in 1997, when he stayed shoreside to open a family-owned seafood market. Although he enjoyed his latest industry-related mission, which largely consists of educating the public about wild seafood ("the only 'F' word around here is 'farmed,'" he says), Karuza declared he was "tired of working in a box," and eager to be on the water again.

Although Karuza began his career with a few gillnetters over 30 years ago on the waters of Puget Sound, he sold out of the fishery in the 1970s and headed to Alaska. In order to fish the sound salmon season this year, he needed to round up some gear — namely, a boat, a net and a permit. Fortunately, this was not a problem. He borrowed the Bryan from Schile, leased a net from a friend, and secured the permit from his brother.

In the very dark and early morning hours of Aug. 1, we steam past the breakwater outside Squalicum Harbor in Bellingham, Wash., toward the Birch Bay-area fishing grounds and the Fraser River sockeye. Schile, who happened to be home on a weeklong break from a five-month longlining stint, decided he'd like to catch the opener as well. Schile's experience with net fisheries is extremely limited, having been primarily involved with longlining and jigging.

A SOLITARY SOCKEYE ripe for the picking commands the attention of George Schile.



JENNIFER KARUZA PHOTOS

THE LAST FEW FATHOMS of gillnet lie just ahead of the bow as Jack Karuza (left) picks Fraser River reds out of the net while George Schile holds the web out.

"Oh, you're gonna love it," Karuza tells him. "Once you experience this, you'll become a net guy, not a hook guy."

After a quick catnap on the way out, I awake to the boat's gentle reverse motion and the subdued hum of a setting net.

"We saw a jumper, so we set right here," Karuza says. I scan hastily across the bay, which seems considerably quiet to me. I look at him quizzically. "Actually, we noticed it was 8, so we set," he concedes, laughing.

On the deck of the 32' x 12' Bryan, we've got two captains — both with their own boats and their own crews in their other lives. Although one of them may own this gillnetter, it's not hard to make out who the skipper is on this trip. It's Karuza running this show, and Schile, unquestioningly, has been relegated to deckhand on his own ship.

The entire 300 fathoms of net is out when Schile looks at the drum and notices the line is getting uncomfortably short.

"Hey, Jack. I think we're at the end

of our rope, here. Literally," Schile announces. Karuza kicks the boat out of gear as he glances at the drum, and makes a quick reach to the hydraulics to stop the rotation.

During the set, which lasts about an hour, Karuza grabs the binoculars and looks for jumpers, while Schile keeps an eye on the net. "The corks are going down," Schile observes. "Maybe it's loaded with sockeye," he says, a note of hope in his voice.

"I don't think so," replies a cautious Karuza, "but there's always a chance. The difference between seining and gillnetting is that with gillnetting, you get 'em coming and going."

The corks have bounced up again and the ebb tide pushes us quickly. Karuza, still holding the binoculars, turns and offers Schile some advice.

"You gotta look around a lot. That way, everyone thinks you know what you're doing."

An hour has passed since we set the net out, and by 9 a.m., the chips, cookies

PUGET SOUND SOCKEYE GILLNETTING: THE FACTS

- **Number of boats:** Currently, 321 boats are in the fleet and 140 boats fished the sockeye opener.
- **Size of participating boats:** Bowpickers and sternpickers are between 24 and 38 feet long.
- **Fishing area:** Catch area for Fraser River reds (Area 7/7A) extends south from the San Juan Islands, north to Point Roberts and the Canadian border.
- **Depths:** From 18 to 35 fathoms.
- **Gear:** Gillnet boat and net. Net is 1,800 feet maximum length, 5-inch minimum and 5 1/2-inch maximum mesh.
- **Capital investment:** Boat costs \$2,500 to \$50,000; a net costs \$5,000 to \$6,000 new, \$700 to \$1,000 used or can be leased for 10 to 15 percent of the catch. Permits, worth under \$1,000 a few years ago, are now worth \$5,000 to \$10,000. Permits can be leased for between \$500 and \$1,500.
- **Annual landings:** The 2001 Fraser River sockeye landings show 80,100 pounds for non-Native catch and 171,600 pounds for the tribal catch.
- **Licenses and permits:** Limited entry since 1974. State issues only renewals. Fishermen can buy and sell existing licenses. A Puget Sound gillnet license is good for all commercial salmon fisheries.
- **General regulations:** Gillnets must be operated in a straight line, no circle setting. The first 20 meshes below cork line — the “bird web” or “seabird strip” — must be 5-inch white opaque mesh. Mesh must be nylon twine. May not fish gillnet gear between midnight and one and a half hours after sunrise; logbook must be kept aboard gillnet vessel and maintained while fishing sockeye in Area 7/7A.
- **Ex-vessel prices:** 2001 price averages show fishermen receiving 80 cents/lb. for sockeye, 70 cents/lb. for kings, 30 cents/lb. for coho and 15 cents/lb. for pinks.
- **Markets:** Fresh fish sales to local markets are solid. Frozen product goes mostly to the European market, with a small amount to Japan. Most fishermen sell to what few buyers remain, including Ocean Beauty, Arrowac, Trident and San Juan Seafoods.



He attaches a buoy to the net just off the bow, drops it into the bay, and steams toward the large buoy attached to the opposite end.

“I’m sure it’s loaded with sockeye,” Schile still insists as we make our way to the red ball.

Karuza still isn’t sure. “We’ll be lucky if we get 10,” he answers.

We steam right up to the ball and find that is just what we have — a loose ball, bobbing about, no net attached. Schile looks sheepishly at Karuza. “I guess neither one of us bothered to check the knot,” Schile says, as he leans over with the deck brush and grabs the corkline, which, fortunately, is coiled up nicely near the floating ball.

With net securely re-attached, Karuza starts the hydraulics and guides the first part of the net over the bow.

In 1998, a gear modification law went into effect that required all gillnetters fishing in the Area 7/7A Fraser River sockeye and pink salmon fisheries to have a “bird web.” The first 20 meshes below the cork line must be of 5-inch white opaque nylon twine, the theory being that the highly visible white web is easier for birds to see than traditional green monofilament drift gillnet web. The goal is to eliminate or significantly reduce the incidental capture of seabirds without significantly reducing the fishing efficiency of the nets.

Both men get busy picking, but it isn’t fish they’re picking, it’s seaweed. Thick seaweed, and lots of it.

“Not looking good,” Karuza says, pulling strands of green weed out of the net and reaching over occasionally to operate the level wind, which helps

MAKING SURE web is piling evenly around the drum, Jack Karuza (left) keeps an eye on the level wind.

the net wrap evenly around the drum. Halfway through the first haul, our first fish finally comes aboard, but it’s a black dog shark. Right after him, however, a big, beautiful, shiny sockeye rolls over the bow.

“This must be the jumper we saw!” Karuza says. “But where the hell are all his buddies?”

During the last portion of the haul, three more reds come over the bow, followed by a few more. We also catch a school of flounder, which get picked out and tossed over the side. It’s not much, but by Karuza’s standards, we were lucky; we got more than 10.

Shortly before noon, we’re hauling gear on our second set. The tide, which was supposed to start flooding at 10 a.m., is still pulling a hard ebb, and there isn’t much activity in the bay. The seiner out just ahead of us doesn’t seem to be bringing much aboard, either.

“You gotta see ‘em to catch ‘em. That’s the theory we’re working on,” Karuza says in regard to the lack of jumpers. He picks out kelp and seaweed from the net, which, unfortunately, is all our second set brings — it’s the dreaded water haul.

As soon as the gear’s on board, we set again. Karuza’s got motivation for setting; this may be the only day of fishing



FINALLY THROUGH the Seattle Locks, George Schile’s 32-foot gillnetter Bryan is Bellingham bound.

and sodas are set out as well.

“Maybe we should eat before we do anything rash like pick up the net,” Karuza says, noticing the spread. After a round of snacks, it’s time to start hauling in the gear.

The quest to get the fisherman and the boat back on the water was not as easy as anticipated. Four years of being docked had taken their toll on the Bryan, and it was in need of a lot of TLC. Karuza replaced batteries, worked on the out drive, changed the oil, pressure-washed and copper-painted the bottom. But in just a matter of days, the boat was ready for its coming-out party.

A few days before this opening, I watched from the Locks in Seattle as the Bryan emerged from among the shadows and into the sunlight, proudly gliding along the water toward the Locks. It ambled slowly, as if on parade, up to the cement block where Karuza tied it up and waited for his turn to pass through the gate

and begin the tour to Bellingham. After a short wait, Karuza received the signal and started moving toward the gate.

The moment of glory was temporarily spoiled.

“Gillnetter! Hey, gillnetter!” the man in the control tower sharply spit out. I noted his tone sounded not unlike someone calling for a thief to return with the stolen merchandise.

“Get back!” he ordered. “Gillnetter!” With hundreds of onlookers and tourists at the Locks staring in our direction, I waved frantically to Karuza, both of us trying to figure out what had gone wrong. The ear-piercing blast of a horn behind him quickly cleared it all up.

“Let that tourist boat by you! The sightseer needs to get through first!” continued the voice in the tower. After waiting for the fleet of tourist boats to go first, Karuza finally got under way.

Now, amidst a cool fog at Cherry Point, Karuza decides the tide is running too strong to pick up the net from one end.



for the season.

The Fraser River sockeye fishery is a complicated matter that has caused outrage and consternation among Puget Sound fishermen. A 1999 annex to the Pacific Salmon Treaty between the U.S. and Canada significantly reduced the U.S. non-treaty harvest of Fraser River fish, and the reduction is estimated to cause an annual average net loss to the Puget Sound commercial fishing industry of \$2.5 million.

The Total Allowable Catch of Fraser River sockeye in the U.S. decreased from 22.4 percent to 18.4 percent. Of the TAC, the non-treaty share was reduced from 50 percent to 39 percent. All of the percentages will be reduced even further in the 2002-2010 seasons. The significant decreases prompted the creation of the highly controversial Puget Sound Economic Assistance Program, in which Washington state has been buying back the licenses of fishermen affected by the negotiations.

Before the buyback program was implemented, there were 675 Puget Sound gillnet licenses. This year, the state bought back 354 licenses for \$27,460 each, leaving 321 in the fleet. The state plans to buy out another 121 licenses at later dates.

The Pacific Salmon Commission’s
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Fraser River Panel manages the fisheries, according to the conservation and allocation principles established in the Pacific Salmon Treaty. The number of openings

in the Fraser River sockeye season is determined according to the commission's best guesses on run size and the adherence to the constraints of mixed-run stocks. The directed harvest opportunity is on the summer run, which is often mixed up in the early and late runs. The conservation concerns are for the early and late summer run stocks, which constrains the harvesting of targeted stocks.

"We've got just a short number of days to wrap it up," Karuza explains, and he's right; this is the only day he and the other 139 Fraser River sockeye gillnetters are going to get. It's quite a change from one of the last years he fished Puget Sound, 1976, when the fleet of 600 saw at least 15 fishing days per season and ex-vessel prices of \$2 or better per pound.

"We used to feel like buffalo hunters back then — now we feel more like the buffalo," Karuza says. A fishery that once supported strong numbers of Pacific Northwest fishermen is now, essentially,

BY CUTTING the gills to bleed the fish, Jack Karuza is preserving the quality of the fish he'll sell.



a fishery for the hobbyist, part-timer or retired fisherman who isn't dependent on it to make his living. This is OK for Karuza, who admittedly has little to gain and nothing to prove, but not OK for a man trying to make a living.

By late afternoon, the tide has finally changed, and with it comes a distinct shift in catch size and demeanor on deck. Healthy, bright and robust reds come over the roller five at a time, and the men are picking furiously. They stand in the midst of a deck covered in sockeye. The energy on board makes a transformation from lighthearted to intense as Karuza hits his stride. Today, he has returned to his roots, and judging by the look of intense determination on his face, I decide my best bet is to just stay out of the way. He spots the fish, reads the tides, and picks the reds quickly and vigorously. What was intended to be a carefree day of fishing on Bellingham Bay has within moments evolved into an earnest and fervent day of fishing.

"They're running deep, and they're running silent," Karuza says, noticing that the reds are getting caught closer to the leadline than the corkline.

"You see," he continues, plucking a fish and setting it on the deck, "the other nice thing about gillnetting is you get to meet every fish."

There's a particular method and order involved in picking fish. One man must gather web at the corkline, while the other starts at the leadline. If the net is gathered in this fashion, one or the other will eventually come to the fish and pluck it from the net. Although proficient at gaffing halibut on the high seas, Schile

seems to struggle a bit with the concept of picking salmon. He makes the novice's mistake of grabbing web from the center, which hampers the process and rarely leads to the fish.

In between sets, Karuza steams around looking for jumpers, and a good-natured Schile keeps himself busy bleeding each fish before setting it in the hatch. Karuza's plan is to use his wholesale dealer's license to purchase the 350 sockeye (2,140 pounds) he'll end up catching today, and sell them to his own store after first delivering them to a local, independent fish processor who will clean and freeze the fish and hold them in cold storage.

By nightfall, the inevitable Northwest rain is falling but the mood is far from dampened. The boat runs smoothly, we're catching fish, and really, everything is as it should be.

We've caught far more sockeye than we hoped — over 150 on the fourth set ("I saw at least four jumpers coming out this way," Karuza says), and the race continues for Schile to hurry and get

them bled and into the hatch so we can set again.

By 11 p.m., the bunk calls to me. Even Schile, accustomed to battling the Bering Sea for eight months a year, looks wiped out. Karuza is the only one left on board with any energy. Although the day's peak fishing is over, it's pouring rain, and the season closes in less than an hour, Karuza decides to set one last time.

"Another one? Why are we setting again?" I whine. "We'll only catch sharks this time of night, and there's no time!"

"Why?" Karuza asks, incredulously. "Why? We've got to go back and get the fish we didn't catch on that second set!"

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"The other nice thing about gillnetting is you get to meet every fish."

—Jack Karuza

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