



JENNIFER KARUZA PHOTOS

TANGLING WITH KINGS

Toothnets, which allow fish to respire while they're meshed, are the centerpiece of an experimental Columbia River fishery.

BY JENNIFER KARUZA

It's a pleasant May evening, and a throng has gathered at Mayger Dock, 35 miles east of Astoria, Ore.

The troupe — three local gillnetters, three observers from the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, a couple of fish buyers, and a writer from NF — have met at mile 57 on the Columbia River to participate in one of the first April-May hatchery chinook gillnet fisheries in more than 20 years.

The river appears motionless, and luxuriant green trees stand tall along the shoreline. The sun, at 7 p.m., is just beginning to go down. Mount St. Helens looms, and the only sounds are the creaking of abandoned docks along the river and the soft chatter of fishermen.

I'm joining fisherman Mark Ihander and biologist Jeff Whisler aboard Ihander's 28-foot sternpicker, the *Hobo*, for the eight-hour opening.

Ihander is one of 20 fishermen participating in a test fishery that uses a "tanglenet," or "toothnet." Whisler is an observer working for the state of Oregon.

The Washington and Oregon fish and wildlife departments are trying to assist fishermen in their harvest of strong salmon stocks without jeopardizing weak-stock recovery efforts. If the project is successful, the agencies hope to be able to relax current restrictions governing Pacific Northwest mixed-stock fisheries.

The program, based on one tested in Canada five years ago, experiments with shorter drift times, two shackles of net with different mesh sizes for compari-

son, and a recovery box. The tanglenet, similar to a traditional gillnet but with a smaller, looser mesh, snags fish in the jaw or tooth area rather than by the gill, allowing them to respire in the net.

Ihander scurries past us toward the ladder that leads down to his boat. "Shall we fire up the engines?" he calls over his shoulder.

A third-generation fisherman, he brims with energy and is eager to start in on the evening ahead of him. Outdoor toil and sea air have treated him well — he looks at least a decade younger than the 50 years he claims.

He unties the lines and pulls away from the dock, then hops over to the port-side steering station and welcomes us aboard.

"It's kinda nice having guests on the boat," he smiles. "Usually you're so alone."

In addition to gillnetting in the Astoria area, Ihander puts in time crabbing and dragging

A CLIPPED adipose fin, Jeff Whisler points out, proves this chinook is a hatchery fish and thus a keeper.

EXPERIMENTAL tanglenets help fishermen like Mark Ihander bring their catch in alive, and return endangered wild salmon to the Columbia River.

all over Puget Sound and fishes for halibut and salmon in Alaska.

"I've just about done it all," he says. "The only thing I haven't done is Alaska in the winter. I figure I can get my ass kicked here just as well in the winter."

"When the snow flies in Alaska, so do I."

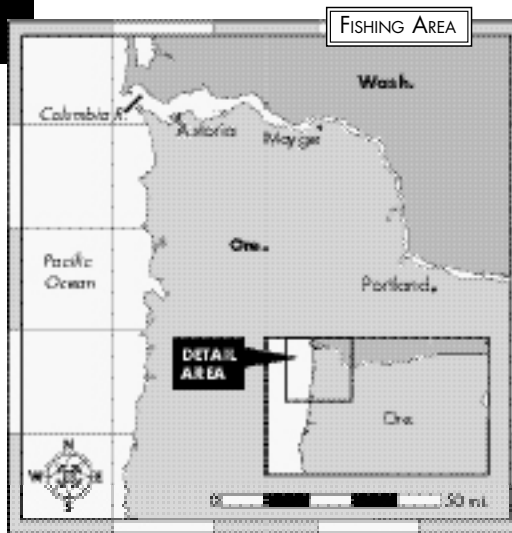
Ihander bought the *Hobo*, a 1972 fiberglass sternpicker with carrying capacity for about 3,500 pounds of fish, last fall.

"I got the boat, trailer, license, drift right and gear for \$14,000," he says. "Not bad, considering I was looking at a



COLUMBIA RIVER TANGLENET FISHING: THE FACTS

- Number of vessels: 20 boats were chosen by drawing to participate in the project. (There are 500 boats in the regular Columbia River gillnet fleet.)
- Size of participating boats: Typical Columbia River gillnetters are about 24 to 32 feet long and 9 to 11 feet wide.
- Fishing area: From the mouth of the Columbia River to the Bonneville Dam.
- Depth: Depths vary in different areas of the river, from 10 feet of water on the beach to 40 feet of water at the ship channel.
- Gear: One half of a 150-fathom net, a recovery box, and a pump for the recovery box.
- Capital investment: Mark Ilander spent \$14,000 for his boat, trailer, license, drift right and gear. He invested another \$1,000 in the toothnet project.
- Permits: A Columbia River gillnet license and a special permit. The experimental-gear permits are provided at no cost to the fishermen.
- Regulations: Chinook with adipose fin (non-hatchery fish) must be released.
- Ex-vessel prices: \$1.50-\$2.50 a pound for spring kings. Winter/spring kings early in the season can fetch up to \$5 a pound.
- Market: Local fresh market.



drift right alone for \$6,000.”

Ilander keeps it simple: His electronics consist of a radio and a depth finder.

“That’s about all I like to deal with anymore,” he says.

We head towards Gull Island to drop the gear in about 30 feet of water, and I notice the box mounted on the starboard side.

“I call it the Jesus Box. You put ‘em in there dead, and they come out alive. You’ll see,” he promises.

Ilander built the recovery box, which is made of plywood. It’s double-chambered, 42 inches long and 16 inches deep and wide, and has a divider in the middle. It’s large enough to accommodate two adult kings. Bycatch and wild kings go directly into the box, where river water is pumped over gills at a rate of 10 gallons per minute. It works like CPR, and a fish that appears dead can recover and be released back to the river.

Ilander has roughly \$1,000 invested in the project. Along with the recovery box,

he provides half (75 fathoms) of the net. He’s compensated by having the option to sell the hatchery kings he catches in a season he wouldn’t otherwise be fishing.

Ilander throws the buoy out to lay out the first set. The first half of the net, pink in color, is a 4-inch mesh, and the second 75 fathoms are green with 3-inch mesh. Ten minutes into the set, Whisler sets up the pumps and siphons river water into the recovery box.

“I don’t see it being the mesh size, really,” Ilander says. “It’s the Jesus Box, and picking your net up all the time, not letting it sit for two or three hours.”

Ilander supports the tanglenet project; he favors anything that will keep him and other commercial fishermen on the water. “I’m a believer in getting any kind of fishin’ time other than what we’ve got,” he explains.

Twenty minutes from the time we drop the net in, Ilander picks up the buoy and starts hauling the net in through the reel.

The first 75 fathoms come up, but the only fish it brings with it are a few shad. Shad, which are somewhat similar to herring, flood the river. Whisler estimates between 2 million and 4 million shad return to the Columbia and Wil-

lamette Rivers each year. There is no market for them.

Ilander guides the second 75 fathoms through the reel and glances over at Whisler, who stands ready with metal clipboard and sharpened pencils.

“Well, Jeffrey,” Ilander observes, “things aren’t looking so good.

“It doesn’t matter what kind of net you use. If they’re not there, you don’t catch ‘em,” he adds.

He’s spoken too soon.

“Excellent! We got one!” shouts Ilander, as he hurries to grab the dipnet to scoop the king and help bring it on board. He cautiously rolls the king out of the net and looks up with a chuckle.

“A dipnet and a gillnetter,” he begins. “Those two don’t really go together! I’ve never owned one in my life!”

Whisler laughs back. “Yeah,” he says. “These guys had to go to a sporting goods store.”

Whisler, 27, has spent time gillnetting in Alaska’s Cook Inlet. He is familiar with Puget Sound and dedicated to helping rejuvenate commercial fisheries.

“This is all for fishermen and for the industry, to keep commercial fishing in this river,” he says. “There won’t be any police out here. The goal is recovering wild fish and having fisheries at the same time. We’re giving fishermen ownership

in the reshaping of the fishery.”

As soon as the first king is on deck, a second comes through the roller, and a third is right behind it.

While Ilander guides fish over the stern, Whisler inspects the kings to determine if they are hatchery or wild. Chinook missing their adipose fin (a small, unused fin that is clipped before young hatchery fish are released) will be kept and sold. Fish with all fins intact are assumed to be wild, and go straight into the recovery box to be released after a resting period.

In this set, two king are clip-fins (“keepers,” says Ilander), and the third is wild.

Whisler picks up the wild king and gently places it in the recovery box, where river water flows across its gills. The fish, swimming around and flapping his tail, appears to be in good condition.

“I’m gonna let this guy go,” Whisler announces.

Ilander rushes across the deck. “Here,

let me help,” he offers, as they both grab the king and toss him gently back into the river where he swims away, apparently grateful.

Ilander looks approvingly at the two hatchery kings lying on deck. “It took us five hours to catch that many last time,” he says.

As soon as the kings are sorted out, Ilander roars back to the grounds and tosses out the buoy for his second set.

Because part of the study is a gear comparison, Ilander alternates which end of the net he picks up first, allowing each mesh size equal amounts of time in the water.

He drops the first buoy as he lays the net out, and drops a second buoy when the entire 150 fathoms is in the water. He roars around to the other end of the net, waits 20 minutes and picks it up.

Suddenly, a skiff bobs along the Hobo’s port side. It carries two men, one of them holding out a bucket. He’s looking for roe from some of the female shad we’ve amassed for roe. The skiff is run by J.R. Taylor, a seine fisherman out of Kodiak, Alaska, and along for the ride is fellow fisherman Jim Holde.

Ilander is happy to fill his bucket with fish, and after an exchange of fish tales, the skiff speeds off into the dark.

“You just never know who you’re gonna meet on the river,” laughs Whisler.

When 20 minutes have passed, Ilander picks up the net.

He’s catching one king after another, and the split between hatchery and wild is about 50-50. Currently, the recovery box holds three kings and two lively hatchery smolts.

Although he can’t say for sure, Whisler assumes unmarked kings are wild. Some hatchery kings don’t have the clipped fin because they weren’t all marked at the same rates, and they come back at different ages. He estimates that about 60 percent of 5- to 6-year-old kings and about 85 percent of 4- to 5-year-old kings are marked.

Along with our kings, we’ve got our shad, a couple of wild sturgeon (which go directly into the recovery box and are

tossed back into the river after being measured by Whisler), and one steelhead.

Whisler is busy. He inspects the kings for clipped fins and takes measurements, makes notes on energy and stress levels, and monitors the progress of fish in the recovery box.

“We got a variety on that one,” Ilander observes, tossing a few shad overboard.

Although he has been fishing throughout the frigid night without any break at all, Ilander hasn’t lost any of the punch he had at the start of the evening. He makes set after set, once in a while pouring a cup of coffee from his thermos without breaking stride. At this time of year, he fishes with little or no sleep. Although he admits he gets worn out, it’s necessity that keeps him moving.

“I even have the wife drive me around, I get so damn tired,” he says, putting his mug away.

“But as much as you might want to go home, if the net’s laid out, you gotta haul it up again,” he explains. “I just keep setting it out. As long as you’re making a dollar, you’ve got the energy. It’s hard at 3, 4 in the morning. But when the sun comes up, that rejuvenates you.”

Not all fishermen are thrilled with the toothnet project. Fearful of becoming “tanglenetters” instead of “gillnetters,”



AN OFFER of shad is just what J.R. Taylor (right) was hoping for when he pulled his skiff alongside Mark Ilander’s Hobo.

some zealously insist they can fish selectively with long drifts and by adjusting their own nets, and they are not interested in making the transition.

Ilander doesn’t agree. “Those guys are sitting on the beach,” he says. “And they’ll stay sitting on the beach.”

Throughout the night, the recovery box works its magic. At one point, a wild jack, bleeding and not breathing, bobbed around in the recovery box for a couple of hours.

“He went away happy,” Whisler says. “He was swimming strong. Pretty impressive.”

At 4 a.m. we finish. We head for the dock to tie up and unload the night’s catch. Ilander has released 16 non-clipped kings, and will sell 13 hatchery kings for \$1.60 per pound. Totals for all three gillnetters that evening include 57 hatchery kings kept and sold, and 51 unmarked kings released.

Ilander emerges from the hatch and reaches for the hose as the brailer is lifted up to the dock. Although he has just finished eight hours of fishing (and has eight to go, after driving to another boat) the grind of the evening seems to disappear. Holding the hose, he looks past the peakless Mount St. Helens toward the east, where just a sliver of light appears through the dark clouds and black sky.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d think it was breaking day over there,” he says. ■

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and they come out alive.
You’ll see.”**

—Mark Ilander

ON HIS WILD-SALMON RECOVERY BOX