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[Good work for salmon at sea](#)

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We have talked, argued, studied and invested billions in the last 30 years to help more salmon migrate from their birthplace to the Pacific. Much less has been said about how to get more mature salmon back from the sea, to perform the essential function of reproducing.

There is no shortage of resentment, conflicting interests and scientific mystery. These are salmon, over which humans fight. But Columbia salmon spend most of their lives roaming the coasts of the North Pacific, where there are three possibilities for their ultimate fate: They can simply disappear, which happens to a great many for reasons not understood. They can survive all these travails and tortures and return to their native stream to spawn. Or, they can be caught, sold and eaten.

The last possibility is significant. James Connaughton, chairman of the White House Council on Environmental Quality, caused a stir in salmon circles two years ago when he asked, if Snake River chinook salmon are a precious and rare resource requiring the full protective power of the government, why do we eat so many? Half the returning Snake River fall chinook are harvested. Some runs of endangered Puget Sound salmon have harvest rates that push 75 percent.

Changing this is politically and economically difficult. The salmon harvest supports innumerable livelihoods in four states, two nations and several Indian tribes. Harvests are controlled by international treaty, a compromise between nations and states and the numerous competing interests embedded in their populations. Resources are not easily surrendered.

A crucial breakthrough was announced late last week. A renegotiation of that contentious Pacific Salmon Treaty has been completed, and if ratified and put in place holds the promise of a significant increase in salmon returning to the Columbia and Puget Sound. The fishermen have agreed to catch less fish. Canada has agreed to reduce its harvest by 30 percent. Alaska has agreed to reduce its catch by 15 percent. Canadians will receive \$30 million from the United States as compensation; Alaskans \$7 million.

This is good news for Washington. Columbia and Puget Sound salmon go to sea and turn north to feeding grounds off Canada and Alaska. Some 90 percent of Canada's salmon catch off Vancouver Island is from U.S. rivers and hatcheries. More still are

caught off southern Alaska. And Alaskan fishermen catch many Canadian-born salmon. A reduced harvest has the possibility of allowing 10,000 more chinook to return to the Upper Columbia, according to the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission. The effect on Puget Sound also will be important. "We now have a fighting chance to save the salmon," said Gov. Chris Gregoire.

Reducing salmon harvest is not a solution. It is more of a logical and necessary reaction to scarcity. How to affect that scarcity is even more contentious and uncertain. The unexpected and relatively sudden collapse of the once-mighty Sacramento River chinook adds to the argument. That run only a few years ago allowed huge salmon harvests off California and Oregon, but nothing this year. Something happened to those fish in the Pacific. Something, scientists say, is "hammering" migrating salmon along the coasts. It is not dams. It is not fishermen. Ocean conditions are a possibility, they say. Changing currents, changing food supplies, global warming — the many possibilities are being investigated for our future arguments.

For now, while returning salmon are too few, the treaty negotiators have agreed to something we know will have an impact. They have done us a service.

Tracy Warner's column appears Tuesday through Friday. He can be reached at warner@wenworld.com or 665-1163.