

Letter to Washington Governor Jay Inslee from Ken Balcomb

November 2018

Re: year one Report and Recommendations of the Southern Resident Killer Whales Recovery and Task

Dear Governor Inslee,

Thank you for your good faith effort to convene a Task Force to make recommendations to you regarding how to recover the Southern Resident killer whale population, and for the honor of inviting my participation in the process. You have before you the list of recommendations that were discussed at length among the Task Force members, and I herein submit my minority report.

The Co-Chairs and organizers of the Task Force meetings and all of the Member participants worked diligently to wrestle through some very difficult environmental issues; and, some very polarized stakeholder positions were brought to the table. I was heartened to see that Goal 1 is to increase Chinook abundance to benefit SRKWs, because that is what they most need most urgently. There are sixteen specific recommendations put forth to move toward that goal, and most of them have at least some optimism of benefit for the SRKW. However, virtually all of the recommendations have hoped-for results that might appear in the distant future and be impossible to evaluate with respect to significant whale demographic trajectory change in a meaningful time-frame. Some of the recommendations are clearly self-serving for stakeholders, but that is my observation more than a criticism.

Throughout the meetings I have been dismayed that the discussion of bypass of the four Lower Snake River dams (Recommendation 9) did not get more traction, given that action would offer the most immediate and dramatic increase in returning adult Chinook salmon to the mouth of the Columbia River and Washington coast (prime SRKW foraging areas) in the shortest time (2-3 years). The 4LSR dams never should have been built and have been an acknowledged ecological disaster from their conception. I kept hoping that you would simply initiate a phone call to LT General Semonite (the commanding general of the Army Corps of Engineers) to get the facts about who has the authority to order bypass of these dams, but it seems that the consensus of the Task Force was to establish a time-consuming several year stakeholder process to address issues associated with the possible breaching or removal of the four lower Snake River dams, rather than get the facts now and/or make a bold recommendation. The number one fact, who has the authority, can be answered in a phone call, but it seems that the forces against bypass want to keep everyone confused. As a result, recommendation number 9 now slips into a less meaningful timeframe and back into the quibbling that has gone on for decades while the salmon and SRKW continue to dwindle. My discussions with career salmon biologists who studied the spill option (#8) and NOAA's own reports conclude that following that recommendation will not lead to salmon recovery, either. So it looks like the SRKW are stuck with the failed status quo.

The second Goal of decreasing disturbance to whales in the Salish Sea has a feel-good veneer but it results from naïve hypotheses elevated to hysterical dogma that the SRKW are suffering from stress of all the underwater noise and/or cannot find their food in the din. It may seem odd coming

from someone like me who has sounded the alarm over military sonar, but those sound sources are many orders of magnitude louder and designed to be stressful and injurious; whereas, ordinary vessel radiated propulsion sound is an anthropogenic acoustic feature that creates little overlap into the biosonar envelope of the whales, and in its steady predictable pattern is readily accommodated. Whales evolved in occasionally extremely noisy sound fields and are exquisitely adapted to interpret their acoustic environment as it changes - they behaviorally react more to abrupt starts and stops and changes of frequency and intensity than they do to small vessels idling in their vicinity. They will voluntarily approach the extremely loud sound field of large vessels underway to ride in the bow and stern wake within meters like surfers, and then they go about their ordinary travelling and feeding. In years not too long ago they would approach and take fish from fishermen's gear in spite of gunshot, seal bombs, and dynamite aimed at them. Alaskan fish-eating Orca still receive those insults. The twelve recommendations in pursuit of Goal 2 are largely "red herrings" compared to Chinook salmon restoration, and their effect on SRKW demographics or distribution cannot be objectively evaluated in spite of the hysterics of some Task Force Members. Regrettably, recommendation number 28 represents the worst in cliff-hang politicking and coercing for a diversionary recommendation that is meaningless for whale protection, while obfuscating much more important issues. I give it a "thumbs-down" and the other recommendations in this goal a "ho-hum".

Goal #3 to reduce toxins in the environment is laudable and long overdue, but it provides no immediate relief to the SRKW and it will be decades, if not centuries before the half-lives of many of the most noxious legacy chemicals expire. Interestingly, the lethal toxin premise completely ignores the fact that the much more contaminated ecotype Transient killer whales are flourishing. The effects of implementing the five recommendations for this laudable goal will more likely benefit the food chain and the prey in the near-term than benefit the predators in a demographic way. I would give these recommendations a "thumbs-up" and accept that their goal is in the long term category of actions.

Thank you,
Ken Balcomb
Center for Whale Research