Welcome to Salmon-less Idaho

Did you ever notice how many brushings you can get out of an empty tube of toothpaste? It’s typically so many that we have redefined what “empty” really means. We actually have unilateral developed techniques to get to the very bottom of things. So much so that we don’t even consider the notion of being “out” until we are “out”.

In shared bathroom situations, “out” can vary amongst the parties involved. Usually someone will break before the other(s). However, I personally have shared tubes with folks as relentless as myself, going weeks on E. Or even worse, you find that your roommate has had another tube hidden all along and you have been in an epic battle with yourself. And then there are the spares. Hidden here and there when needed. The little one in the suitcase, the other little one in your partners suitcase, the kids’, the one in your river bag, your hunting duffle and all the same belonging to your partner, roommate(s) kids, spouse, guests and so on. It’s a rare occurrence to truly be “out” of toothpaste. But, not to fear, at some point, we simply get a new tube(s) and all is well again. It is best if cooler heads prevail and a fresh tube arrives within the normal ranges of “empty”. And when it does, oh my, isn’t life grand! We can squeeze it anywhere and get results. The kind of toothpaste moments you can tell your grandchildren about. In fact, if conditions are right and the tube fairly new, we need only take the cap off to have artesian toothpaste. It’s times like this when having a non-capping roommate can have its issues. This mentality of, as long as we have “some”, we are alright, is inconsequential with easily replaceable items such as toothpaste but not so with things not so easily replaced.

Welcome to Salmon(less) Idaho

I live on the Salmon River in Challis Idaho. I can see the river from my living room. I cannot tell you the last time I saw a Salmon in the Salmon River. We live in a land where you are considered a pessimist if you don’t look at the half empty glass as half full. Or in the case of toothpaste, it’s always full to some degree. What if we only looked at some of the important things in life from the perspective of what isn’t there. Would we generate more concern? You are 73, you have 12 years left, you don’t have 73! It is not in our nature to think of what is missing, but rather what is left. And then to have it ingrained in us to be happy with what is left.

Don’t be concerned that millions of Salmon are not going to arrive, be happy that thousands will. This is just great politics and word smithing. Don’t you love when politicians and bureaucrats (P&Bs) throw meaningless numbers around. Millions of this and billions for that. There are less people that actually understand the meaning of such numbers than there are Salmon in the Salmon-less River. For instance, lets say that during the State of the Union Address we hear that we are giving xhundred billion to Slovinkia for exclusive rights to their numquot production and we are funding domestic earthworm energy research with another umpteen katrillion, then there’s always the teachers, the fireman, the police, the military, grain imports and exports,… It all sounds good or bad but none of us have a clue of what is really being said. We need reliable perspective! xhundred billion to Slovinkia seems like a lot, but what if we’re told that that’s 50% less than we traditionally pay and the financial benefit to their numquot production far exceeds our investment. Now there’s some information we can understand. Often numbers are simply emotional drivers and mean nothing unless we understand them. But for those who wish to simply drive our emotions, they are great “keep the masses in check” tools. What if such things were presented in pie charts. We would not only get the facts but possibly understand them as well. But that is not typically the intent. No, with (P&Bs), its more the norm to throw out big meaningless numbers, leave you feeling overwhelmed with such amounts and left with the notion that such decisions are better left to others, “our elected officials and or their appointees”.

I can’t help with such worldly affairs as Slovinkia and their numquots, but I can when it comes to the Salmon River. It is time for not only the glass to be half empty, it’s time for it to be “99.7% empty. “Welcome to the Salmon-less River”.

Relatively speaking, we have no Salmon!

Would you shop at a food-less grocery store? a gas-less gas station? go on a fun-less vacation?, go scuba diving with a tank that read Air-less? enter into a sex-less marriage?, oops sorry if you already have. It sounds great to shop at Payless but how about Own-less? Get-less? Just-less? It aint tooth paste but there’s no one going to be telling their grandchildren about these “good ole days” of fishing for Salmon on the Salmon River. Welcome to Salmon-less Idaho. It might be what it takes for everyone to truly understand where we are at. If the world decides to give up on our Salmon, then let it be with the correct information. As long as we taut how many fish we have rather than how many we don’t have, we are no better than our bantering (P&Bs), Truth-less! Do you know how many kids have stared into the water on our Middle Fork of the Salmon River float trips over the years, and asked, “Why do they call it the Salmon River?” “That’s a good one kid, you got me?”

How about those pie charts? Let’s take how many Salmon used to make it here vs. how many do now, or the amount of money spent unproductively in regaining our Salmon vs money spent on processes that really work, or the increase in the amount of jobs created in the federal and state government by a lack of Salmon vs the actual increase in Salmon, or my favorite, the amount of time spent managing, manipulating and harassing upstream residents, business owners, sportsman, permit holders, etc., vs. time spent on processes that will actually increase Salmon number. The last being a bit of a trick question, fore there is nothing to be done by upstream users that will increase Salmon numbers beyond the final jump on the tube for one final marginal brushing. Any way you slice it, the pie charts all look the same; Reality is a sliver and the folks in La La land make up the big chunk that’s left.

We currently have a national debt of 20 trillion dollars. I know, in one ear out the other. What if I said your share is 80 thousand, due tomorrow? And if you have a spouse and children, 80 grand for each of them too. Are you feeling it now? In the early 1900s a couple hundred men involved in a half dozen expeditions attempted to reach the south pole. Some did, most didn’t. Most lived, some didn’t. Sounds interesting, what an adventure! Those lucky guys. The reality; 1500 miles dragging a sled, much of it at 10,000 ft, 50 below zero, no plant or animal life from start to finish. Drag a sled with everything you need for over three months, every day from New York City to Denver or LA to Kansas City, nothing but frigid white, windy nothingness. Want to go now? All I’m saying is; we need to tell the story better. The facts mam, nothing but the facts.

Relatively speaking, we have no Salmon.

I may be wrong, but I would guess that we have spent Billions on the Salmon-less problem, yes, that’s with a B. And no results. (Turns out its over 17 Billion to date, and get this; almost a third of my monthly electric bill goes towards Salmon recovery. Spread that over all the power users of the Columbia basin?) Sure, someone will start telling you about hatcheries, barges, fish ladders, upstream irrigation measures, thousands of this, 10s of thousands of that, hundreds of thousands more, an entire Salmon-less industry has been created. Jobs, infrastructure, investments, all so large that it’s now more important to have the Salmon-less problem than it is to fix it. Its amazing how much we are willing to spend on failure. We have entire segments of government, state and federal, in place, just to manage and manipulate the poor folks who have chosen to work, live, invest in, the Salmon-less River country.

Several times each year the Outfitters of the Middle Fork of the Salmon River get together with the USFS to discuss the issues of floating down the river while Salmon Hanky Panky is going on in said river. It is amazing, the time, effort and money that has been spent on measures to appease the powers that be in the Federal government. Not to do anything that might help the Salmon mind you. Just to look good in the face of doing what’s politically correct and press worthy. Annual helicopter surveys, Volunteers, hidden cameras, informational placards, information talks, cancelling of river permits, continual threats to the permitees, threatened camp closures, government officials hiding in the bushes (This is true, literally government officials hiding in the bushes!, You can’t make this stuff up!). And meetings. All the meetings. All the non-Salmon garnering meetings! Not to mention the thousands of man hours and miles to attend these meetings. And none of it, I repeat, none of it will have one iota of positive affect on the Salmon of the Salmon-less River.

One quick additional note on the aforementioned threat of camp closures and to show a perfect example of the ridiculousness and the over reach of this Salmon-less business. As a result of the tremendous fire activity in the Middle Fork corridor since the early 80s to present, (If you haven’t seen the immensity of it all you can not really appreciate it), there has been innumerable mudslides, blowouts of side canyons and streams (some large enough to dam the river), mammoth log jams and such. All to say, that the amount of natural sediment and debris which enters the middle fork each year and that of the past 4 decades is incomprehensible at best. Now back to camp closures; The USFS is threatening to close specific camps because the sediment created by that little foot path from the boat to the camp could somehow create enough sediment to somehow adversely affect a Salmon. Maybe a wheel Barrel load over several years vs. the Bazillion of tons entering naturally. (Again, you can’t make this stuff up!). If someone pulled this kind of nonsense in the private sector they would be “job-less” overnight. However, in the land of the Federal Government, this is business as usual. Oh, and I just checked again, still no Salmon in my back yard.

Another wonderful example of the gross misconduct associated with this myth called Salmon Restoration, is located on the beautifully wild and remote, Monumental Creek. Monumental Creek is the largest tributary to Big Creek, which is the largest tributary to the Middle Fork. I would guess that Monumental Creek is over 40 miles long with the lower 25 being within the wilderness boundary. Monumental creek is the famous creek of Zane Gray’s “Thunder Mountain”. The story of the old west mining town where the mountain slid down and dammed the creek and flooded the town, (somewhat true). In the early 2000s I had purchased a land-based hunting and fishing business from my neighbor on Big creek. It included operating on all of the wilderness portion of Monumental Creek. It was sometime in late August when I had my wife drop me off at the Monumental Creek Trailhead with 8 head of stock and the camp gear we were to use in our new Monumental Camp some 15+ miles downstream. We spent the night at the trailhead and early the next morning I was off with my riding horse and 7 very loaded pack animals. At that point I had been outfitting and or guiding in the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness for about 25 years. I had traveled a lot of wilderness trails in that amount of time but none as beautiful as those first 15 miles that day and the next 10 the following day. I remember telling my wife later how extremely special that trail was and would be for us in the future. The trail was a perfect mix of everything “Central Idaho Wilderness”. Mountains, streams, sage brush, Old Growth Firs, Log Pole Pines, massive Spruce, meadows, towering cliffs, history, sunshine, shade and napping spots galore! All the while with the trail winding beautifully and safely down the ever-deepening valley and with Monumental Creek itself growing from a trickle to a full-blown trout stream.

During the course of my travels the first day I encountered quite a few young men and women who were obviously up to something with trail work but not the one I was on. Judging by the number of them, I assumed they were doing something pretty substantial. On a side trail? It really didn’t add up at the time. Never the less, all that humanity aside, it was a very special day on the trail, never knowing it would be the last.

Like all sizable tributaries to the Middle Fork, Monumental Creek is home to spawning Salmon. And like most sizable tributaries to the Middle Fork, it has an historic trail paralleling it, and in many cases, will have the trail cross it periodically. In the aforementioned 15 miles of Monumental Trail it would cross the stream a few times. No big deal, horses, mules, hikers and wildlife alike simply woller across for a few steps in ankle to knee deep water and then back on the terra firma of the horse trail. These several crossings also allow the stock to tank up on water when needed or a quick refreshing dip by the passersby. Well, wouldn’t you know, these few creek crossings were determined, once again by the powers that be, to be the quintessential spawning grounds that if protected would turn the Salmon Tide! Hallelujah! Let me check the back yard. Nope, still no Salmon.

Somebody(s) in their infinite wisdom, chose to eliminate the use of the aforementioned, most beautiful and safe trail I had ever experienced, and to relocate it on the sidehill well above the valley floor. For miles and years, the crew I had passed (it all makes senseless sense now), would work on the trail reroute in order to bypass the only 400 square feet (the size of your living room) that Salmon had left to spawn in the 2.4 million acres of wilderness and the additional 5 million acres of National Forest surrounding it, and the thousands of miles of spawnable stream bed within.

The new trail? A Nightmare! It is carved into a hillside too steep for its presence. It has simply become a multi-mile storage shelf for any and all debris that comes off the hillside. Pinecones, rocks, gravel, dirt, deadfall, limbs, sticks, etc.. There is almost no way to exit the trail safely once you begin and I don’t have a clue what two opposing groups with stock would do if they met somewhere on it. There is also a section “so” steep that they brought in countless Gabion Boxes to use to make it at all passable. For those who don’t know, a Gabion Box is a large wire mesh box which when filled with rocks and gravel become a gravel building block. They are often used to sure up river banks and roadsides. They are also notorious for ripping the shoes off horses and mules as they walk across them. Did I mention we are in the wilderness here and not along I-70? Talk about your nose to spite your face! Nothing could be more unnatural, more degrading to wilderness, less safe, less appealing to users, nor have less of a positive effect on Salmon recovery. Oh and bye the way, They blocked the original trail to force the use of the new one.

Does anyone truly believe that measures such as these are enacted because it is also truly believed that they will save the Salmon? Or is it more likely that trail funding, manipulating Permittees and a genuine fear of “not buying in” will leave a government official left to play with the uncool kids. Where are the Civil Servants who are willing to call BS on all of this nonsense? Not promoted, that’s for sure. No, just play nice, walk single file, still no Salmon!

Your parents must be so proud!

We have a local government owned gravel pit. They cannot operate it certain times of the year because it may disturb the local eagle population. I went for a boat ride with two of my friends during early December and saw some of these undisturbed eagles, 15 in one tree! Dozens more in the vicinity. We then passed a Great Blue heron Rookery which is less than a half mile from my back door. Hundreds of GBHs will peer down at you in the spring as eggs hatch. Jurassic Park has nothing on the feeling you get when you look up. And watch out for the white stuff! I would hope that we are all knowledgeable enough to know how all these feathered friends of ours make a living. Now repeat this little, couple mile scenario, over the next thousand miles to the ocean and along all the associated thousands of miles of tributaries, and then please tell me again, how getting rid of my fly rod and raft is the answer. Give me permission, my 12 gauge and a couple of hours and I will single handedly save millions of Salmon, at least get them on their way. But no, not politically correct. We must save the unendangered Endangered Species over the truly Endangered Species. Regardless of a tirade with a 12 gage or not, those fish, whether they go or not, are not coming back anyway. Eat up Big Bird, somebody up here might as well enjoy them.

We are all hypocrites, and we all have a share of the blame, but there is a big difference between experiencing, affect and impact. The last Salmon killed will not be by a guy with a fishing pole, the last Salmon not to breed won’t be prevented by a raft floating by, the last Salmon fillets won’t be eaten along the Salmon-less River corridor by a range cow. No, the last Salmon probably won’t even get here. I’m no scientist and I’m no Greenie either but I do know this; The Salmon River in my back yard is Salmon-less. The Middle Fork of the Salmon River that I float all summer is Salmon-less and the tributaries like Big Creek where we run Fish Camp all summer and hunt Big Game all fall are all Salmon-less. Everyone who isn’t brain-less knows that removing dams would improve Salmon numbers. By how much? Who knows? What affects would it have on others downstream, boats, farmers, power, don’t know? I do know that there is nothing more unnatural than a dam, un-less its multiple dams. It’s really that simple. Ultimately, we have to make a choice. If we are to truly make this conversation bullsh&%-less, its either dam-less or Salmon-less.

I’m not a big fan of graffiti but a “-less” on everything “Salmon” in Idaho, might just start to get the point across. “I would like to welcome everyone to the Salmon-less Highschool, here in beautiful Salmon-less Idaho, located on the famous Wild and Scenic Salmon-less River.”

I can’t change the ineptitude nor the inefficiencies of the bureaucratic machine. I can however, speak the truth and beat the drum. We have company T-shirts which we give to our guests and sell to anyone else who would like them. The main reason for the sale of them is for my son Joel to sell them through his web site and to be part of the process. His website, [www.meandjoel.com](http://www.meandjoel.com) The shirts have a new twist this year. The say The Middle Fork of the Salmon-less River. Just doing our part to spread the word. As long as we continue to send the message that all is well in Salmon(less) country, why would anyone think it different? Or why would folks from far off place be concerned or compelled to help. You never know what might trigger a certain nerve in a certain person who might just wield enough street cred to get something done. It’s time for the folks and the towns of the Salmon-less River country to speak up. Quit talking about the Salmon we have and proclaim the ones we don’t. The tube is empty. Oh wait, let me look. Ah, no, still no Salmon.

Steve Zettel…from Philly on a Greyhound to a packstring in the Idaho wilderness, 38 years of outfitting and guiding, and still none the wiser.