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MORE WATER SHOULD MEAN MORE FISH

Much improved water security, described by fish biologists as a missing piece of the puzzle, is now available to central Vancouver Island's Cameron Lake and Little Qualicum River system.

Living Rivers - Georgia Basin and Vancouver Island (LR-GB/VI) has completed a \$350,000 project at the outlet of the lake providing an enhanced water storage capability for the drought-prone summer months and much improved access between lake and river for native trout.

The six-year project, which involved consultations with the owners of lakeshore properties, has involved a number of different agencies. These include the provincial government, Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO), which maintains and operates an important salmon spawning channel and hatchery on the river, and Living Rivers' delivery partner, the British Columbia Conservation Foundation (BCCF).

Water flows from the lake are controlled at the outlet to the river by a combination of a wooden weir and a new, sophisticated, pre-fabricated aluminum fishway and automated gate. The gate can be raised and lowered at any time by way of a VHF radio signal from DFO's Big Qualicum Hatchery thus providing fine-tuned control of water levels, critical in summer and early fall when young coho and steelhead are rearing and adult salmon are beginning to spawn.

A new provincial water license allows DFO an additional 1,355 acre-feet of Cameron Lake water storage for fish conservation purposes. This is in addition to the 2,400 acre-feet of storage already permitted under DFO's first license, issued 30 years ago by the B.C. Ministry of Environment.

James Craig, a BCCF project manager for LR-GB/VI, explains that only 15 cm has been added to the maximum water storage level behind the weir, by raising the height of the steel supports for the stop-logs. However, a total of 50 cm of additional low flow augmentation storage has been secured by a new and innovative re-design and management protocol for the weir structure.

"We have managed this by a combination of new bottom storage, achieved by lowering the channel for 50 metres upstream from where it leaves the lake and for 180 metres downstream of the weir, and by adding the 20 cm of storage no longer needed by DFO following operational improvements to the spawning channel," Craig says.

He is confident the additional water being made available will lead to an increase in the numbers of coho salmon, chinook salmon and steelhead trout in the Little Qualicum River, which also supports cutthroat, rainbow and brown trout.

“Our new fishway is an important addition where the resident trout population is concerned,” he says. “The design of the original fishway made it very difficult for immature trout, spawned below the weir, to enter the lake where they prefer to rear. The flow for much of the time was just too strong, but that is no longer a problem and migration conditions are now much closer to a naturalized state. We also expect greater fish production from the five kilometres of trout rearing habitat between the lake and Little Qualicum Falls.”

Craig adds that both Living Rivers and DFO would like to see an automatic hydrometric (flow measuring) station again operating on the river. Stations were in place from 1913-1922 and 1969-1993, at Cameron Lake’s outlet, and near Qualicum Beach from 1960-1986. Real-time stream discharge data is an essential ingredient in supporting successful fish flow targets but no budgets are available to underwrite the costs of installing and maintaining a new station.

Wise flow management and storage release will become even more important in future with the prospect of more frequent and extended droughts under climate change.

Streamflow monitoring is of continuing concern to DFO and LR - GB/VI, and efforts are being made to identify potential partners that might be prepared to financially support a real-time Little Qualicum River monitoring station.

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CONTACTS:

Craig Whitman, RPBio. Senior Biologist
Living Rivers-Georgia Basin
B.C.Conservation Foundation
Nanaimo
Office (250) 716-8776; Cell (250) 713-2810

James Craig, Project Manager
Living Rivers- Georgia Basin Vancouver Island
B.C.Conservation Foundation
Nanaimo
Office (250) 716-8776; Cell (250) 714-3088

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