

**An Overview of the Bute Inlet Sport Fisheries**  
**For Trout, Char and Salmon Originating from the Homathko and Southgate Rivers**  
**And the Tributary Streams of Bute Inlet**

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## **Introduction**

For the past twenty years a sports fishery has developed and grown around the stocks of Trout, Char and Salmon that originate primarily in the Homathko and Southgate watersheds, and to a lesser degree from other rivers that terminate in Bute Inlet. This fishery is conducted during most months of the year in the main stem Homathko, Southgate and Orford Rivers, several of their tributaries, and from the shoreline of Bute Inlet up to twenty miles from the head of the inlet; thus crossing the boundaries between fresh and salt water, and tidal and non-tidal waters. The backbone of the fishing opportunities found in the area are the conspicuously large runs of Sea Run Cutthroat Trout and Bull Trout that have found a unique set of natural circumstances which contribute greatly to their survival and success. Elements of these conditions include relationships that exist between the Trout, Char and Salmon, and a high freshwater content on the surface of Bute Inlet during the ocean going phase of the Cutthroat and Bull Trout life cycles. In fact, the runs of Cutthroat and Bull Trout found in this area are completely unrivaled anywhere on the west coast of North America south of Prince Rupert, maybe the world, and are a true phenomenon of nature the likes of which are rarely seen in modern times. For many years sports fishermen have had a small presence in this area, but it was generally known amongst anglers that Trout fishing beyond most anglers' wildest expectations existed in Bute Inlet and its feeder rivers. However, the inaccessibility of this area had greatly limited access to these world class fishing opportunities until recent times. It was the advent of the use of helicopters to gain access to these remote and truly rugged wilderness areas some twenty years ago that enabled the sports fishery to expand its presence. Currently, the heaviest angling use of this area is

made by a handful of angling guides who have been able to cultivate a very high level of clientele willing and able to afford the costs associated with heli fishing. There is also a smaller but not insignificant effort being made by non-guided sports fishermen willing to pay the price for helicopters, one licensed angling guide who uses jet boats for access and a few intrepid anglers willing to boat to, hike into, and camp in this rough country.



Fig. 1 Fine specimens of a Bull Trout on the left and a Cutthroat on the right.

### **An Anglers Understanding of the Fish and Their Habits**

Even though anglers and angling guides do not generally possess the depth of knowledge of the physiology and growth development of Salmonids that a fish biologist does, they often know the behavioral habits of fish as well as many biologists. It is through careful and thoughtful observations of fish and their behavior that brings

increased success for anglers, and angling guides in particular. Too often the observations of anglers and guides are carelessly dismissed by fisheries biologists as anecdotal, yet it is these very observations, often gleaned from decades of experience, which enable some anglers and guides to be recognized as the most productive fishers in their area. In much the same way that successful farmers are savvy in the ways of weather, so are successful anglers savvy in the ways of the fish they chase. Bearing this in mind the following observations are a tapestry of patterns that have been recognized by some of the most productive anglers and guides that fish in the Bute Inlet fisheries.

The habits of the Trout and Char inhabiting Bute Inlet and its feeder streams are varied and complex, but if there is one key factor to their health, survival and behavior it is the Salmon runs to the Homathko and Southgate Rivers, and in particular it is the Chum Salmon runs. The Chum Salmon in these two rivers appear to be the meat and potatoes in the diet of both the Cutthroat and Bull Trout. A decrease in the historic size of Chinook and Coho runs native to the rivers in the head of Bute Inlet have left the Chum as the dominant Salmon run in these streams in terms of run size. In the Fall the eggs being laid by the Salmon provide a considerable food source for both the Cutthroat and Bull Trout. However, through the Winter it is the large number of post spawning Chum carcasses that feed the Trout, especially Bull Trout, and keep them going until Spring when again it is the Chum Salmon that provide a much needed increase in the Trout diet through the emergence of huge numbers of fry. As Spring advances and the rivers begin to freshet the Cutthroat follow the Chum fry to the ocean and out into Bute Inlet; but it appears that it is not only the Cutthroat that follow the fry out to sea as Bull Trout are also caught far out

the inlet through the Summer months. Finally the circle becomes complete once again in the Fall as the Cutthroat, and some Bull Trout, follow the Salmon back into the rivers.



Fig. 2 Fishing from the shoreline of Bute Inlet on a day in late June.

The Cutthroat Trout living in Bute Inlet seem to have a life history typical of many runs of anadromous Cutthroat. They begin entering the rivers in late August or early September and continue to do so until December. They over Winter largely in log jam areas and in deep pools but as early as late January or early February they begin to move into their spawning areas in both the main stem of the Homathko and Southgate Rivers as well as their tributary streams. The Cutthroat spawning commences as early as mid February but doesn't hit its peak until late March or early April and is complete by early May. By a design of perfection in nature this main spawning time coincides with the emergence of the Salmon fry to provide a ready source of protein when the fish are at

their weakest. As Spring wears on and the freshet begins, the Cutthroat begin to exit the rivers in April to live the Summer out in the relatively low salinity of the surface water in Bute Inlet. They do this on the tails of the Chum fry which are beginning their downstream and ocean going migration which gives the Cutthroat a ready and nutritious food supply until early July when the Chum fry have finally exited Bute Inlet. Likely as not, the high levels of fresh water in the form of glacial run off provide an easier transition from the freshwater environment to the ocean environment which would improve the Trout's chance of survival after the rigors of spawning. From mid July through to the end of August the Cutthroat concern themselves with chasing the available bait fish and other feed in the Summer abundance of Bute Inlet, then of course they begin the journey back to the river environment as Fall approaches. Year in and year out these fish continue to have a healthy appearance and sustain a remarkably large population. The most notable variation from year to year in these fish is their average size which most years is around the eighteen inch mark, with some years the average being a little smaller at around seventeen inches. The largest specimens can attain lengths over twenty-four inches.



Fig. 3 A Cutthroat Trout and Cutthroat redds found in Whitemantle Creek, a tributary of the Homathko River which is included in the proposed Plutonic developments.

The Bull Trout in Bute Inlet are considerably more difficult to pin down in their living habits as there appears to be great variations in their behavior which seemingly has to do mostly with food supply or lack thereof, and a species survival strategy of diverse behavior. Without doubt some Bull Trout stay for long periods of time in fresh water while others will happily venture out into Bute Inlet as far as forty miles from the head of the inlet. This willingness to venture away from rivers and into saltwater environments may be related again to the abundance of freshwater in Bute Inlet. Some Bull Trout also seem willing to move from the Homathko River to the Southgate River, and vice versa, depending on food supply, while others may well spend prolonged periods of time in the greater estuary that is Waddington Harbour, as is evidenced by angling that is available in the intertidal zone of the Southgate River. Adult and juvenile Bull Trout can be found in both the Homathko and Southgate Rivers any month of the year, and juveniles can be found in tributary streams of these rivers any month of the year. Whatever the individual life history of any given specimen one thing is certain; the overall health of the Bull Trout population is tied to the health of the Chum run. This relationship is most notable in the Spring river fishery for these fish as it is the spent carcasses of Salmon that the Bull Trout rely on as their main feed to survive the Winter until the Salmon fry begin to emerge from the gravel in the Spring. Years when there are few Salmon carcasses to be found on the river banks the Bull Trout are fewer in number and skinny in body, whereas on years that there are many Salmon carcasses the Bull Trout are larger in number and full in body. Similarly, years when there are few carcasses in one river but many in the other there are obvious correlations in the number and condition of the Bull Trout. The number of Salmon carcasses can be affected by river conditions from November through

February as high water flows can wash many carcasses out of the rivers and into the estuary; this can be misread as a poor Salmon run due to lack of carcasses. However, there is a further similar correlation between Bull Trout numbers and the number and amount of Salmon redds that are observable in a given river; generally, it is the amount of redds that speak more accurately to the size of the previous Fall spawning. It is generally supposed by anglers that the Bull Trout spawn in the Fall, but it should be noted that there is little river angling available in the Fall to confirm this through angling observations due to very high and dirty water conditions. Through the times of the year when the Homathko and Southgate Rivers are fishable there are few if any reports of Bull Trout spawning activities, so it is by deduction that anglers believe that Bull Trout spawning occurs in the Fall in these watersheds. This deduction is not without a base as it is known that many coastal and interior runs of Bull Trout do spawn in the fall; the Bull Trout run in the Pitt River is but one example. Notwithstanding the variations mentioned above, the average size of the adult Bull Trout in the rivers at the head of Bute Inlet is around twenty-three inches with large numbers of fish over thirty inches and a few exceptional fish that surpass the thirty-three inch mark. Of note is a current disturbing trend that has the average size down a little and fewer really large specimens being caught by sports fishermen, this is likely due to what has amounted to very poor winter feeding conditions for several consecutive years which saw very few Salmon carcasses available in the river. But on the bright side there have been larger numbers of juveniles than in previous years.



Fig. 4 Chum carcasses along the banks of the Southgate River in March.

### **The Sport Fishery for Trout, Char and Salmon**

To fully understand the dynamics of the sports fishing activities for Trout, Char and Salmon in Bute Inlet and the rivers there it is necessary to separate the efforts being made by angling guides from that of the fishing public. To begin with, guided angling accounts for the lions' share of angling effort in both the Homathko and Southgate Rivers as well as the shore fishing done along the Inlet. Furthermore, the guided angling effort uses fly fishing as its main angling method and practices catch and release angling almost exclusively; whereas the non-guided angling in the area is practiced in large part by spin casting lures and the legal retention of fish by sports fishermen is prolific, though recent regulation changes no longer allow for retention of Trout and Char in these streams.



Fig. 5 A happy client from Argentina and her guide holding a Coho caught from the shoreline of Bute Inlet in late September.

The guided angling effort for Trout, Char and Salmon in the rivers flowing into Bute Inlet, as well as in the Inlet itself, came into being in a significant form just over twenty years ago with the advent of heli fishing. Since that time, the guided fisheries in the Bute Inlet area have grown to be a truly world class fly fishery catering to wealthy sportsmen from all over the world who are searching for extraordinary wilderness Trout fishing, in terms of both size and numbers of fish. It has been argued that Bute Inlet is not a wilderness setting as there is a long history of logging in the area. The counter of that point is twofold; firstly, during the rise of the guided sports fishery there has been a serious decline in the logging industry which has made industrial activity during the main fishing season appear to be nearly non-existent; secondly, in today's world where there is

not a place on the planet that can't be arrived at in less than twenty-four hours of air travel the human perception of wilderness has been altered to accept areas that have been logged in the past but are recovering from those activities to be considered wilderness, particularly when that area has a larger population of Grizzly Bears than people. The guided fishery operates from comfortable lodges that are easily arrived at by way of Campbell River rather than remote fly in wilderness locations, thus making it considerably more accessible than remote operations. The highway system to Campbell River, the airport located there which has a runway that accommodates private jets, and the amenities found in Campbell River make it a convenient and desirable destination for anglers from all over the world. Currently, the guided fishery in Bute Inlet accounts for perhaps as much as ninety percent of the angling effort and generates over one million dollars to the local economy.



Fig. 6 Former U.S. President George H. Bush on his July heli fishing trip to Bute Inlet.

The guides in the area operate from February through to October with fisheries being conducted on the Homathko River and its tributaries from February to the end of April for Trout and Char; on the Southgate River and its tributaries from February to September for Trout, Char and Coho Salmon; along the shores of the Inlet from early June to early October for Trout, Char and Coho Salmon; and from time to time but to a much lesser degree on the Orford River from March to October for Trout, Char, Salmon and Steelhead. The main guiding season begins in late February and runs through late April to coincide with the Salmon fry emergence which produces the best fishing of the year and is largely confined to the Homathko and Southgate Rivers and their tributaries; this portion of the guiding activity represents approximately eighty percent of all guiding effort and is effectively ended with the Spring freshet and the silting of the rivers. Finally, there are token or exploratory trips occasionally being made in January, May, October, November and December. Likely enough ninety percent of the guided effort is made using fly fishing as an angling method with the remainder being done by spin casting. As mentioned before, catch and release is practiced by guides almost exclusively with the only retention occurring in the case of a hooking mortality and only when the retention of the fish is condoned by Provincial or Federal fisheries regulations. During in river fisheries fly fishing is preferred by the guiding community for three main reasons; 1) it is the opinion of most guides that the use of lures greatly increases the chance of hooking mortalities; 2) fly fishing in a wilderness location is a more sought after experience by wealthy clients thus a more lucrative venture for guides; and 3) the use of lures can produce grossly large catch numbers that only serve to degrade the sense of sport in the experience and make one lose sight of what sport fishing is really about. All the same, on

an average day a reasonably skilled guided angler can land twenty fish on flies, and then there are the extraordinary days. Being glacial run off streams both the Homathko and Southgate Rivers change their course and physical make up annually, this makes it important for guides to do an early season reconnaissance every year. The features looked for on these initial trips are general course of the river, constitution of the river bottom, areas where Salmon carcasses are present or abundant and areas where Salmon redds are present or abundant. Constitution of the river bottom is important as fish generally stay away from areas that are largely sandy. Areas where there are carcasses and redds will draw and hold large numbers of fish. The general course of the river will indicate to a guide not only where to find fish but which species of fish. As a rule Cutthroat and Bull Trout have different preferences in the type of water they hold in; generally Cutthroat hold in faster water and Bull Trout hold in slower water, but as with any fishing there are no hard and fast rules and these two species will co-habitat and can be found in water that is the usual preference of the other species. A final but important point about the guided effort in the Bute Inlet fishery is that during the Spring season the amount of angling pressure wrought on these fish stocks by guided anglers is heavy enough to affect the behavior, and perhaps the health, of the fish. Again it is the Bull Trout in particular that seem very sensitive to these pressures, and that should be no surprise as Bull Trout are known by science to be tremendously sensitive to any human or natural changes in their habitat and living conditions. Having recognized this fact, the guiding community has taken it upon themselves to work co-operatively to co-ordinate their angling efforts in terms of areas fished and how often those areas are fished in order to minimize the impact their fishery has on the health of the fish and the quality of the fishery.



Fig. 7 A Bull Trout after a Winter of good feeding conditions, March 2005.



Fig. 8 A Bull Trout after a Winter of poor feeding conditions, March 2009.

The efforts made by the fishing public are considerably less than that of the guide community and are mostly limited to the Spring season on the Homathko, Southgate and Orford Rivers; however, on the Orford River there is noteworthy effort made by non-guided anglers to fish for Coho and Chum Salmon in the Fall. Certainly there are a number of anglers that use fly fishing as their preferred angling method but the majority of the public effort is made by spin casting lures. Most anglers do use helicopter access but there are a few who are willing to “rough it” by camping after having gained the lower reaches of these rivers by propeller boat or jet boat. The amount of non-guided angling pressure increases significantly on years when the logging industry is active in the area as workers in a camp setting are often keen to fish after the work day is done, and on their days off if they are in a situation where they have to stay in camp. Again as mentioned above, the angling public likes to exercise their right to retain fish when and where it is legal to do so, and of course there is an increase in the numbers of fish killed with the amount of angling pressure; thus when industry is active in the area the number of fish killed also increases. An important note on the effects of angling pressure made by camp workers is that their preferred method of angling is spin casting lures, consequently the number of hooking mortalities can increase dramatically when camp workers participate in the fishery, though in the past five years there has been very little logging activity in the area. Finally, recent years have seen a significant increase in non-guided angling pressure as word has spread far and wide of just how impressive this fishery is. It is likely that in the not too distant future the estimated proportion of guided to non-guided angling pressure will have to be revised as every year more non-guided anglers make the effort to experience this spectacular fishery.



Fig. 9 An example of the wilderness setting that draws clients from the world over.

### **Known Effects of Run of River Projects on the Angling Community**

There is already precedence for information of the effects that run of river projects have on the angling community. Up until three years ago the same guides who work in the Bute Inlet fishery also utilized the runs of fish available in the Toba River watershed. With the construction of the Toba Montrose power development, an area that until that time was a wilderness setting became a heavy industrial zone complete with a three hundred man camp, heavy use industrial roads and high tension line right of ways cutting through the landscape. These developments were immediately recognized by the clients of the guides and those clients made it abundantly clear that they had no interest in angling in that area any longer; their sense of wilderness had been thoroughly

undermined. This power development completely killed the guided fishery in the Toba River watershed. From the standpoint of the angling public the access to the Toba River watershed has been greatly diminished as the developers of this project have all but stopped overland access to the river by gating the road and posting a security guard at the gate who informs anyone who ventures there that they are not allowed access and to turn around and leave. The fishery in the Toba River watershed is nowhere near the quality of the fishery in Bute Inlet so it does not warrant the angling public to pay the cost of helicopter access. For all intents and purposes the sports fishery in the Toba River watershed is dead.

Given this precedence one does not need a degree in business, biology or rocket science to know what will befall the sports fishery in Bute Inlet if Plutonic Power proceeds with construction of their proposed development. The vast scale of the plan for the Bute Inlet project completely encompasses all the areas of the current fishery both in river and along the inlet - and then some. Should this project commence it will destroy the most prolific fishery for Sea Run Cutthroat and Bull Trout in the Province of British Columbia and perhaps the world. The building of this proposed mega project would ruin the livelihoods of the local fishing guides and businesses involved in the fishery; it may also infringe on the rights of British Columbians and Canadians to enjoy an enduring pastime that has deep roots not only in local communities but in our nation. Finally, the loss of this fishery would be a travesty against the long and storied history of sports fishing in British Columbia and the profound legacy that sports fishing has throughout Canada.

