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Dammed if you do

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It's a good time of year for documentaries, if your electricity and internet can handle pounding rain and deep-freeze snowfalls. Stuck on unplowed Harstine Island with plenty of hearty soups and greens, I searched for free, online docs to spice my studies.

The pun that titles 2019's "Artifishal" might be the only liberty the film takes. In the urgent question of salmon and trout habitat restoration, it's clear from the name which side the directors are on - but I appreciate the acknowledgment of differing perspectives.

"Artifishal" opens with a critical examination of salmon hatcheries in California. As it illustrates the cycle of hatchery production, release and harvest, it moves northward to our own Washington.

As fishery staff are clubbing wild-caught hatchery salmon on the Elwha to harvest eggs and "milt" from females and males, respectively, one of the employees describes the process as arguably "barbaric" but necessary. Everyone involved loves wild fish and agrees that they are threatened by development, but all define "wild" differently and have divergent notions of how to protect them.

"Artifishal" posits that the two sides of the wild fish debate are hatcheries, politicians and sport/recreational fisherfolk vs. scientists and "nature." Native tribes and individuals are portrayed across pro and con. It posits that habitat ought to be restored by demolishing obstructions and leaving the rivers alone to straighten themselves out.

Ecological resilience without human interference is exemplified by the Toutle River's steelhead trout recovery after the 1980 eruption of Mount St. Helens. In five years, trout had recovered to pre-eruption population levels, and in seven they had doubled that number. Fish can bootstrap, or finstrap, themselves in the absence of hatcheries or dams.

The Elwha Dam removal is one of the doc's case studies. Finished in 2014, the largest-to-date project cost \$320 million, and that was well and good. The problem was the \$17 million hatchery built to serve the river afterward.

Hatcheries, explains author Dylan Tomine, are part of the "Four H's" affecting salmon and steelhead trout populations, along with "habitat, harvest and hydropower." He argues that steelhead decrease on the Skykomish River, in the absence of three of the H's, is attributable solely to the hatchery that had been functioning throughout the decline.

Hatchery fish, several scientists contend, lack genetic diversity and adaptations specific to their streams of origin. They compete and interbreed with remaining wild populations, polluting the gene pool and hampering development overall.

Ken Balcomb of the Center for Whale Research says that hatchery salmon used to average 22 pounds, but as of 2019 weigh 8-10 pounds. He connects this to a decrease in orca populations.

Set against dying whales and unnatural ecologies are federal money, booming tourism, jobs for rural populations, even the very existence of salmon: "If you still want to see salmon, we're going to need to have hatcheries, unfortunately," says the manager of California's Pullman Hatchery, a mitigation hatchery intended to compensate the salmon for 180 miles of river access lost to Shasta Dam since 1942.

Federal money is allocated to state fish and wildlife agencies by volume of fishing licenses sold. States compete to offer the most attractive sport fishing options, and even power companies get in the game, as an Idaho Power commercial for a hatchery shows.

Harry Morse at California Fish & Wildlife estimates hatcheries cost \$20 million a year to build and run, and that each employs at least 20 people. Of the \$15.28 billion the Pacific Northwest's Bonneville Power Administration has spent since 1982, a Government Accounting Office survey found 40% was spent on hatcheries.

The film winds up on future dam removals, like on the Klamath in California (since rescheduled to 2023), and the disastrous Cypress Island escape of 300,000 Atlantic salmon from a collapsed net pen in

2017. Trying to end on a high note, it shows how public pressure forced Washington to eliminate net pens by 2022. (A state Supreme Court case is currently being heard.)

"Artifishal" doesn't propose solutions to keep everyone happy, but it might please the majority - if that includes salmon and trout living as they always have.

"Artifishal" can be seen for free at <http://www.thoughtmaybe.com>.

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