

No Fish, Only Starfish Left

By LAEL MORGAN

JUNEAU—"If those Russians and Japanese don't stop fishing in our waters, we're going to be eating starfish," John Nevzoroff, a seasoned commercial fisherman from the Aleutians, predicted last year.

The 1972 season was bad and this year's was a disaster—the lowest Alaskan salmon pack since 1887.

Streams that teemed with fish last season stood empty this fall. Subsistence fishing was at starvation level in some areas of the state. Even the bears went hungry. . .

"And I hope you have a crying towel for 1972," warned Mel Seibel, senior biometrician, Alaska State Division of Commercial Fisheries.

According to the most educated guesses, the Bristol Bay Area—once the world's most important sockeye salmon fishery—will be closed next year. The Halibut Commission is considering total closure of the Bering Sea for 1974 and 1975 and starfish may, indeed, be the only seafood left on the menu.

"You hear people blaming foreign fishing on the high seas as a common cause," Seibel considered. "But while we have substantial evidence to that effect, especially in Western Alaska, the primary factor contributing to the bad run is some very severe winters."

For the last two years, deep freezing has severely cut the survival rate of young fish and recuperation will be a long time in coming. While red salmon get their growth in a couple of years, the sockeyes don't mature for four to six years and chums come of age at four.

In 1970, a record harvest of 68 million salmon was reported and escapement was good.

In 1971, however, the catch dwindled to 47 million. A catch of 30 million was predicted for 1973 but only 21 million fish were actually netted and escapement of spawning fish was equally disappointing.

Seibel recalls that Alaskan

salmon runs were under peak in the late 1930s and early 40s; recovered and then hit a tremendous decline in the late 50s.

"In the mid-1940s the catch averaged 41 million. But from 1960 to 1969 it averaged 51 million. . . an increase of roughly 25 percent. And of course we were looking at great things for the 1970s."

They were counting on high escapement figures, he added, but they failed to consider the weather factor.

And Alaskans were not the only ones hurt by the decline, he noted.

"The Japanese mother ship reported the smallest sockeye catch since 1954 and cohoes and chuck a little better.

"Friends in the game division feel it's had a definite effect on the bear population and the frequencies of bear maulings.

"Maybe it will take CARE packages for the bears. . . I don't know. But I do know if we send them anything, it won't be fish."

"It's getting to the point where you're not going to find salmon on the market. What's caught here is going to Japan and Korea."

Seibel had good news, however, when it came to the size of the catch frozen and cured and also on the price of fish which reached an all-time high here last summer.

Over 500,000 pounds of fresh frozen and cured salmon were sold, as opposed to 360,000 last season.

Prices for Alaskan king salmon reached \$2.10 a pound; cohoes \$1.55; and chums \$1.30 against \$1.50; \$1.15; and .88 for 1972.

It's also possible that the future may be brighter than estimates indicate. The newly-created Office of Rehabilitation and Enhancement (within the State Department of Fish and Game) is working on numerous fish rearing programs and has already had considerable success with salmon.

In one experiment off Kaslof, Bob LaBead, regional supervisor, reports a survival factor of 85 percent, as opposed to the

natural survival rate of 10 percent for young spawn. And LaBead believes it's possible to engineer survival of fish, even in winters of deep freezing.

"We estimate the Alaskan salmon run is still capable of an annual harvest of 75 million fish," biometrician Seibel said optimistically.

"And we could easily see another 10 million on top of that with fish rearing programs. I don't think it's all gazing at stars, either. In 1970 we had 68 million.

"We've come close enough to the stars so I think we can see them."