



MORE THAN AN UGLY FACE

FISH SCIENTISTS AND FIRST NATIONS IN IDAHO AND BRITISH COLUMBIA ARE REVERSING THE MISFORTUNES OF THE LESS-THAN-BODACIOUS BURBOT.

BY VINCE HEMPSALL

THERE'S NO QUESTION THEY'RE UGLY. With bodies that are more eel than fish, wide mouths stuffed full of razor blades, and leopard-print scales that belong on the set of a 70s porno, the British Columbia Kootenay burbot aren't exactly poster children for endangered species management like, say, baby polar bears. But that hasn't stopped a handful of US and Canadian organizations from braving frigid winter conditions to try to save them.

Despite their looks, burbot taste damn good, and that's part of the problem. In fact, they're considered the poor man's lobster by many local anglers. "I started fishing burbot as a kid 50 years ago, and I remember when there were 100 boats off Balfour sometimes," says Don Miller, a resident of Procter, a small community located near Balfour on Kootenay Lake's West Arm. "I'm not sure, but I think limits were around 24 [per person] a day back then... and at the end [in 1997] it was nothing."

Overfishing, combined with the introduction of mysid shrimp, which competed for food, and nutrient loss from construction of the Libby Dam in 1972, helped send the burbot population into a tailspin. In 1969, over 26,000 were caught on Kootenay Lake alone, but in 2004, it's estimated there were only 50 adult burbot left.

The burbot fishery on the lake was officially closed in 1997 and a similar moratorium was enforced on Kootenay River in Idaho. At that time, various organizations, including the Kootenai Tribe of Idaho, US Fish & Wildlife Service, Idaho Department of Fish and Game, and the BC Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations, among others, were actively trying to figure out a way to save the species. "It was, and still is, the first burbot recovery effort of its kind in the world," says the KTOI's Susan Ireland.

Things began to change when Moyie Lake entered the picture.

BABES OF BURBOT FISHERIES STAFF RECORDS TAG NUMBERS ON FEMALES THAT WERE HELD OVERNIGHT IN A TUBE UNDER THE ICE TO SEE IF THEY'RE READY TO SPAWN. OVERFISHED FOR THEIR LOBSTER-LIKE GOOD TASTE, BUT THANKS TO A CONCERTED CROSS-BORDER INITIATIVE, THE BURBOT IS ON ITS WAY BACK



Located just south of Cranbrook, the lake has its own burbot population, and biologists discovered they're similar in genetic makeup to those in Kootenay Lake and are disease-free. So, every year since 2009, a group of about 20 anglers and fish biologists brave February temperatures and catch hundreds of them through holes cut in the ice, because burbot are one of the only fish that spawn during the winter. When a pregnant female is brought to the surface, she's whisked to a "breeding tent," where a portion of her eggs are removed, mixed with burbot sperm and fertilized. She's then released back into the lake.

"We use underwater cameras to find spawning balls [clusters of breeding burbot]," says BC ministry biologist Sarah Stephenson, who is in charge of the breeding tent. "We catch and release about 350 fish and collect around six million eggs, which are fertilized and then sent over the border. Needless to say we need a lot of permits." The ice-fishing process can

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take up to nine days and transporting the eggs to the hatchery located at the University of Idaho takes five hours. Six months later, 20,000 burbot fry are either transported across the border and released in Kootenay Lake or in the Kootenay River in Idaho.

And the good news is it seems to be working. Releases of burbot into Kootenay Lake and Kootenay River have occurred since 2009 and annual monitoring shows numbers "that now match those seen in the mid-90s," says Stephenson. The hope is that the burbot there will again naturally reproduce and, ultimately, that a sustainable fishery will thrive in the Kootenays once more. It's an incredible amount of work and cooperation between multiple organizations, not to mention it's expensive, and a large portion of the funding comes from the Bonneville Power Administration. But the ugly burbot fish is worth it.

Photo: BC MFLNRO