RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARCHIVES: AN HISTORIAN'S USE OF GOVERNMENT SCIENTIFIC LIBRARIES & ARCHIVES

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ABSTRACT: Scientific libraries hold many non-scientific (that is, anecdotal) sources that are often ignored by modern arts and science researchers. Before the 1940s, the field notes of biologists contained wide-ranging social commentary in addition to numbers and models. Early scientific reports held by the Pacific Salmon Commission, the Nanaimo Biological Station, the I.O.S., and the federal Department of Fisheries (Pacific Headquarters) contain a wealth of data that could inform the work of both historians and scientists.

These resources, produced by a generation of scientists that was not as rigidly specialized as the modern counterpart, give the historian valuable social and technological insights. They give modern biologists information about the historical weights of fish (much higher than today), stock reconstruction, run failures, and descriptions of industrial pollution, logging, and overfishing. They also demonstrate that not all fish stock failures – for instance, the historic fluctuation of the oolochon stocks in the Pacific – can be blamed on human mismanagement.

While many refuse to accept anecdotal evidence for historical or scientific proofs, in many cases it is the only evidence that exists for fish stock sizes. It may not fit into modern statistical models and it may not be politically correct, but it can inform modern researchers. As it was generated by biologists trained in the arts and sciences of the day, it’s worth looking at.