

Earth Day - even for fish at sea

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This year, the upbeat spirit of Earth Day seems to hang by a thread. Oil dominates the world economy, at record prices. President Bush proclaims a halt in greenhouse gas growth by 2025 but offers no steps or leadership to get there.

If the world - and especially this country - is trying to mend its ways, where is the evidence? This glum outlook fits the facts, but it's only a partial read of the future.

Take salmon. The fish is familiar table fare, but it's also a bellwether species for biologists. The fish bridges two different worlds - fresh and salt water - during its complicated three or four year lifespan.

In the ocean, warming temperatures and changes in currents can withhold food, starving the schools of silvery fish, which can do little to quickly adapt.

Six years ago, the number of adult salmon returning to the Sacramento River to spawn from the Pacific was more than 800,000. This past winter's returning run was only 68,000 with a change in food-bearing ocean flows to blame.

Can humans do much about these currents? If global warming - and its attributed effects on ocean surface temperatures - are reasons, then it will be hard to reverse the downward trend promptly. It may take decades to stabilize ocean currents while salmon populations tail off or vanish, even in a mainstay river like the Sacramento.

But there are still human-applied fixes that must be tried. In coastal rivers, logging or landscape-changing operations, farm diversions, and city water taps all leave a mark on salmon numbers. Though ocean conditions are a prime culprit for the fall-off in fish counts, delta water pumps, which supply municipal supplies and farms, are also under scrutiny. This heavy dipping diverts water - and river-reared fish - at crucial times during the migratory cycle.

Reworking the state's water supplies for the sake of salmon will be a huge undertaking. But the fish's fate should redirect attention on the long-running debate over safeguarding water supplies in the delta.

Last week a federal judge, for the second time, slammed federal water regulators for inadequate diversion plans. In the latest case, the judge indicated that neither the delta nor the salmon that live there were given enough thought in the business-as-usual siphoning of fresh water.

Before the vast ocean is blamed for a salmon die-off, there may be changes to make closer to home. That's an Earth Day message. ###