

OPINION: Killing seals and sea lions won't solve the Northwest's salmon crisis



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The bill before Congress to expand the killing of pinnipeds is deeply flawed



Chain links: Removing one of part of an ecosystem won't necessarily save another. *Photo: The Marine Mammal Center*

By Ronald D. Reed. August 18, 2026. A three-week-old harbor seal named Waffles was found in Bellingham, Wash., this summer with a bullet lodged in his skull.

He was the third seal treated for gunshot wounds by a regional marine wildlife hospital in less than a year. The other two died.

Waffles also had to be euthanized because of his injuries.

The cruelty of an illegal shooting is easy to recognize. The ecological crisis surrounding Pacific Northwest salmon is harder.

H.R. 9621, the Northwest Endangered Salmon Predation Prevention Act now before Congress, would substantially expand authority to kill seals and sea lions in Washington waters in the name of salmon recovery. Its premise has intuitive appeal: pinnipeds eat salmon; salmon runs are endangered; therefore, killing predators

should leave more salmon alive. (Pinnipeds are aquatic, carnivorous mammals, including seal, sea lion and walrus species, with all four limbs modified into flippers.)

But will killing more pinnipeds recover salmon, or is Congress focusing on a symptom rather than the conditions that created the crisis?

Casey McLean, a licensed veterinary technician and executive director of SeaLife Response, Rehabilitation and Research, or SR3, told me that calling this simply a pinniped problem gets the ecology backward.

“This is a distraction from what the real issue is,” she said.

Humans have built dams, locks and other structures that concentrate migrating fish.

“This is not a pinniped issue,” McLean said.

She called it “a human issue,” because we have “kind of herded all of the food and made it easy for them in certain spots.”

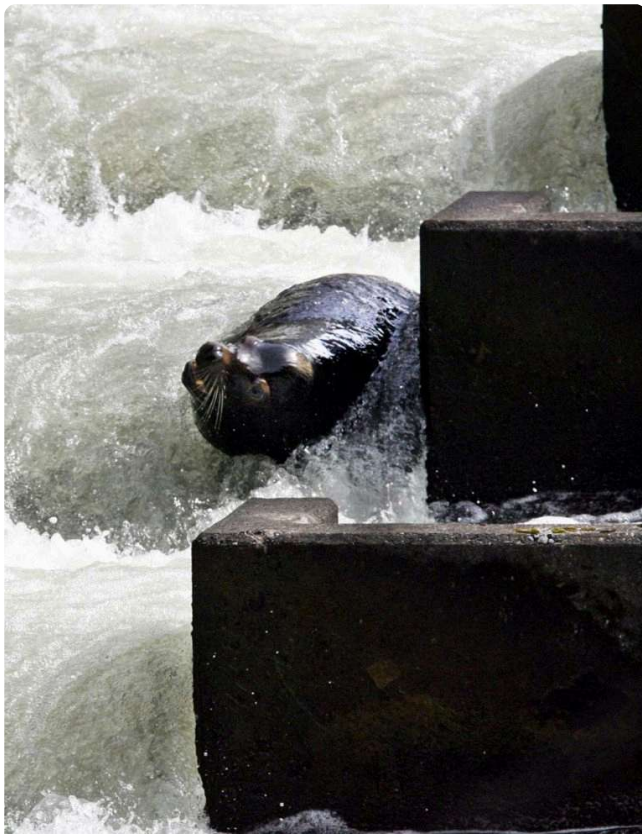
The history complicates the blame.

Salmon runs were already collapsing during the late-19th-century cannery boom and decades of dam building when pinniped populations were severely depleted. Their recovery may complicate salmon recovery today, but it cannot explain a crisis that began while seals and sea lions were suppressed.

Dr. Timothy Ragen, former executive director of the U.S. Marine Mammal Commission, described the ecological problem as a “predator pit.” When habitat destruction, harvest, dams and other pressures drive prey populations low enough, even normal predation can remove a large percentage of what remains.

“We’ve made the prey population so vulnerable that any predation is almost intolerable,” Ragen told me. “And that is not the predator’s fault.”

That does not make predation irrelevant. It changes the diagnosis.



Fishing trip: A California sea lion in the fish ladder at Bonneville Dam. Photo: AP Photo/Rick Bowmer/File

Ragen has served on federal task forces examining pinniped interactions with salmon at Bonneville Dam and Willamette Falls and has supported removing individual pinnipeds where highly endangered salmon faced acute losses.

McLean, although opposed to culling, said she can understand narrowly targeted removals when scientifically supported, adequately funded and used to learn through monitoring and necropsies.

The choice is not between killing sea lions and pretending predators have no effect. It is between addressing demonstrated problems and assuming broader killing will produce recovery.

This raises the most consequential question about H.R. 9621: What would success look like?

Success should mean more wild salmon reaching spawning grounds—not simply fewer pinnipeds.

McLean’s most basic scientific concern was startlingly simple.

“It won’t work,” she said.

If lethal removal expands and salmon continue to decline, managers will have spent years, money and political capital without repairing the conditions still limiting recovery. Sea lions have been lethally removed at Bonneville Dam

since 2008, yet salmon recovery remains elusive. Before expanding that approach, Congress should demonstrate the population-level recovery it has produced.

McLean also questioned how Potential Biological Removal, or PBR, limits can be calculated responsibly without adequate monitoring. The bill authorizes take as a percentage of PBR without sustained funding to generate and monitor those estimates.

“Without a monitoring plan,” she said, “how do you know what 10% of PBR is?”

Ragen argues management should instead account for all major sources of salmon mortality, establish meaningful comparisons and measure which interventions improve survival.

“If you really want to do this right, then let’s do a full analysis of all these sources of mortality,” he said.

Ragen described adaptive management as comparing approaches across watersheds or fisheries to learn what actually improves salmon survival.

Such caution matters. Food webs do not behave like arithmetic. Harbor seals eat salmon—but they also eat hake, which consume juvenile salmon. Ragen warned that reducing seals could free more hake to consume even more salmon smolts.

Meanwhile, less visible pressures remain. More than 40% of the spawning and rearing habitat historically available to Columbia River Basin salmon and steelhead is permanently blocked by dams. Mixed-stock fisheries can harvest vulnerable wild fish alongside stronger runs. Hatcheries can release enormous numbers of fish at once, creating what Ragen called a “dinner bell” for predators.

Killing a predator asks comparatively little of us. The harder question is whether we are willing to change ourselves.

And even if predator removal leaves additional salmon alive, do those fish reach spawning grounds and contribute to recovery, or simply become available for additional harvest?

Habitat is degraded. Water is warming. Artificial bottlenecks remain.

None of these problems can be solved with a rifle.

The costs of simplification are painfully visible at SR3. McLean told me the hospital treats seals and sea lions that arrive alive after being shot, sometimes suffering for extended periods with pain and infection. During one necropsy, SR3 found cancer surrounding a retained projectile in an animal that had survived an earlier shooting. These animals embody something larger: the temptation to substitute an immediate, visible act for the slower work of true repair.

That work will demand more of us.

McLean argues for broad-scale habitat restoration and serious testing of nonlethal technologies designed to keep pinnipeds away from artificial bottlenecks.

Ragen points to more selective fishing gear, reduced pressure on vulnerable stocks, fisheries buyouts, experimental harvest restrictions and terminal fisheries, where harvest can be concentrated closer to stronger returning stocks and vulnerable wild fish potentially spared.

These choices are harder. They may cost money, constrain fishing opportunities and require reconsidering dams, hatcheries and practices with powerful constituencies behind them.

Killing a predator asks comparatively little of us.

The harder question is whether we are willing to change ourselves. Salmon recovery may require economic and cultural compromises—different fishing practices, different investments and different expectations about what rivers and ecosystems must provide for us.

The lesson extends beyond salmon. Across a warming, increasingly stressed planet, we cannot indefinitely ask the natural world to absorb the costs of preserving every human economic and cultural preference unchanged. Some forms of business as usual cannot continue indefinitely.

Near the end of our conversation, McLean reminded me that beneath the divisions surrounding salmon lays extraordinary common ground.

“We all have the same goal, which is more salmon,” whether for fishing and food, for Southern Resident killer whales or for the ecosystems salmon nourish.

“Man,” she said, “would I love to see us all be able to come together to actually work on a real solution.”

Perhaps that is the standard by which H.R. 9621 should be judged: not how many predators it allows us to remove, but whether it leaves more self-sustaining wild salmon swimming Northwest rivers decades from now.

Ragen framed the obligation in generational terms.

“What does that do for future generations?” he asked of management that keeps depleted populations barely hanging on. “Why can’t we establish a better world that we can pass on to those future generations?”

Salmon recovery will require sacrifice.

But before deciding that seals and sea lions should make that sacrifice for us, perhaps we should finally ask what *we* are willing to sacrifice.

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