

Recapping Issaquah's 50th Salmon Days Festival

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Issaquah celebrated its 50th Salmon Days Festival on October 5 and 6, drawing people from around the region to the city's hatchery and downtown. The two-day event featured local artists, foods from around the world and free entertainment. It served as a reminder that human actions directly affect the native salmon.



A yellow lab flies through the air during a Puget Sound Dock Dog event.

When I arrived at the festival I was quickly overwhelmed by the amount of people and booths. I'm not a crowd guy, but I do love street food, music and seeing wild salmon. I especially enjoyed the [Puget Sound Dock Dogs event](#).

Brenda DeVore, community engagement and events manager at the [Greater Issaquah Chamber of Commerce](#), said an average of 150,000 people attend Salmon Days each year. This year was much busier due to the 50th anniversary, great weather and Seahawks not playing on Sunday. She estimated this year's attendance to be around 190,000.

My first thought was, "How does inviting nearly 200,000 people to within a quarter mile of crucial salmon habitat benefit these fish? Have you *seen* the mess crowds make?"



Front Street in Issaquah packed with vendors and festival goers.

Managing the madness

Luckily for the salmon, DeVore and the event planners run a pretty tight ship.

To prepare for the event, DeVore met with the [Lake Sammamish Kokanee Work Group](#) and other conservation groups to discuss strategies to minimize the festivals impact on Issaquah Creek. This year, the 50+ food vendors were required to use only [compostable](#) and/or recyclable containers, and donate their used cooking oil to a company that converts it to bio-fuel. The event was plastic bag- and balloon-free to avoid plastic pollution in the stream. It also featured recycling and composting stations next to all the trash bins.

But is that enough? Can you really trust 190,000 people and over 400 vendors to completely clean up after themselves?

The short answer is no, but that's where local recycling company [Recology](#) came in.

"Recology worked through the night to make sure everything was cleaned up. That's a relationship we have with them through the city of Issaquah," DeVore said. "The city is very serious about taking care of the stream."

Since I live nearby and was curious, I went to the event grounds on Monday morning (before speaking with DeVore) to check out the devastation. The place was spotless. I was amazed.

A symbiotic relationship

In general, the relationship between humans and salmon has not worked out well for the salmon. Upon settling in the Pacific Northwest, humans drastically reduced native populations through over-fishing, habitat destruction and pollution. But events like Salmon Days could help balance the scales. No, eating a deep-friend-onion-on-a-stick while watching dogs dock jump doesn't directly benefit our aquatic neighbors, but understanding their journey and fragility might.

"Inviting this many people to the creek is educational and gives people who have never seen a wild salmon do so," DeVore said. "I had one person tell me that they absolutely geeked out because they didn't realize about the journey. People are surprised and delight by what they see and they respect it."



A crowded creek-viewing bridge with a docent holding an "Ask Me" sign in the background.

During the festival, the hatchery's creek viewing area is armed with volunteer docents from [Friends of the Issaquah Salmon Hatchery \(FISH\)](#) that educate onlookers and keep the area clean. Nearby, booths from conservation groups and agencies further the education and receive exposure in return. DeVore said 72 local non-profit organizations have an opportunity to fundraise and raise awareness through Salmon Days.

The festival raises money directly for Friends of the Issaquah Salmon Hatchery through its "Sip to Save the Salmon" beer and wine tasting events and the opportunity to drop donations into the giant bronze salmon statue in front of the hatchery.

While the salmon benefit from donations to conservation groups and community awareness, Issaquah's local businesses benefit from the influx of people. Without the salmon, Issaquah's shops and restaurants would miss out on what's often their best sales weekend of the year. Without the festival, the salmon wouldn't have the chance to amaze thousands of people, perhaps inspiring them to volunteer or make some of the salmon-friendly lifestyle choices listed below.



Salmon returning to their spawning grounds in Issaquah Creek.



An underwater viewing tank at the Issaquah Hatchery.



Pippen checking out one of the hatchery tanks. In retrospect, Salmon Days was a little crowded for this guy.



Salmon need cool water shaded by native plants and trees.

Threats to native salmon

According to the [State of the Salmon in Watersheds 2018](#) report, some the greatest challenges salmon face are from human-caused habitat loss, climate change and fish passage barriers. That's in addition to natural challenges like predators. Here are some alarming stats from the report:

- "In the past decade, up to 90 percent of coho salmon in urban streams in the Puget Sound watershed died before they could spawn because of toxic stormwater runoff."
- "Since the arrival of settlers in the early 1800s, between 50 percent and 90 percent of land along streams and other waterways has been lost or extensively modified."
- "The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife estimates that about 20,000 barriers to salmon and steelhead exist across the state." At least 10,291 exist in the Puget Sound region alone.
- Climate change has led to a [25 percent decrease in April 1 snowpack](#) levels in the Cascade Mountains, causing an increase in water in late winter and early spring and a decrease in water in summer.

Making salmon-friendly choices

Recovering native salmon populations is a giant undertaking that local agencies and organizations simply can't accomplish on their own. The everyday choices of citizens and landowners either help or hurt the salmon population, it's that simple. Below are some choices in the "help" column, many more can be found through on the [Washington State Recreation and Conservation Office](#) website and [State of the Salmon "How to Help" page](#).



Look for products bearing the Salmon-Safe logo.

- Practice [natural lawn care](#) to avoid chemical runoff and conserve water. Use native, drought-resistant plants in your garden to reduce the need for water and fertilizers.
- Pick up pet waste and dispose it properly. Pets in Seattle alone create nearly [50,000 pounds of waste per day](#), which contains harmful bacteria like Roundworm, E. coli and Giardia.
- Never dump chemicals into storm drains, as they lead directly to local watersheds. Join Seattle's [Adopt-a-Drain](#) program to keep pollution out of the stormwater system.
- [Use less water in your home](#). Take shorter showers, turn off the sink while brushing, wait for full loads to run the dishwasher and washing machine. Each drop you

save is more for the salmon!

- Limit electricity consumption by using energy efficient appliances and turning off lights when not in use. Conduct a [home energy assessment](#) for more ideas.
- Use [natural and non-toxic cleaning solutions](#) and avoid products with microbeads. Avoid polyester fabrics, as they contain plastic fibers that enter the water supply when washed.
- Limit transportation pollution by carpooling and taking public transit. Keep your car running efficiently and [check for fluid leaks](#). Anything that spills on the road likely washes into waterways through storm drains.
- Look for produce and beverages with the [Salmon-Safe](#) emblem.