



Arden Moore hauls in a hefty coho salmon aboard the Ocean Belle. *Photo courtesy Jonathan Moore*

## Summer season a mixed bag for local fishermen

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With the summer season now well astern, many vessels of the Port Townsend fishing fleet have returned to Boat Haven to undergo routine maintenance and repairs. The Leader caught up with a few local fishermen to see how the season went for Washington and Alaska.

Joel Kawahara stayed in Washington waters for the summer season, aboard his 42-foot salmon troller, Karolee — based out of Quilcene.

Kawahara noted the added challenge posed by COVID-19 this year when he was looking around for coastal ports.

“The situation in Washington state was complicated by the occurrence of COVID outbreaks here and there,” Kawahara said. “The major two ports for the northern half of Washington state were more-or-less closed.”

Kawahara said the docks at La Push and Neah Bay were closed to non-tribal access by the Quileute and Makah Tribes as an attempt to keep infection rates down on the

reservations. Kawahara, who normally uses Neah Bay in the summer season, instead had to move over to the Port of Port Angeles to sell his fish.

“We didn’t start until late June and it was slow at first; in July it slowly began to pick up,” Kawahara said, adding that once the fish started biting, his catch numbers started to resemble a normal season.

There was no way of making up the lack of fish at the start of the season, Kawahara said, but the losses were partially mitigated by slightly heavier salmon and more favorable prices for the fish later on.

Asked why he thought the prices had



F/V Ocean Belle photographed in Alaska during the summer troll season. *Photo courtesy Jonathan Moore*

increased, Kawahara said he had heard that rising costs for meat and poultry have driven up demand for wild salmon.

While better prices were certainly welcome, Kawahara said at the close of Washington’s summer season, he was left feeling optimistic about the future return of salmon in the area as well.

“We watch the salmon returns by looking at the fish counts over the dams in the Columbia River. Fall Chinook and coho this year are coming back in unexpectedly larger numbers, larger than the lack of fishing effort,” he said. “Ocean productivity has improved significant amounts, judging by the number of fish. So

there’s optimism for next year.”

Jonathan Moore and his family recently returned to Port Townsend along with their 46-foot Little Hoquiam troller, Ocean Belle, following the close of the summer troll season in Alaska. Moore said his arrival in Alaskan waters was met with some unrelenting snotty weather.

“It was wet and windy for most of the summer,” Moore said. “It almost felt more like it used to be. We’ve been pretty spoiled these last several years; it could’ve just been back to normal.”

Like most everyone these days, Moore said he struggled at times to navigate the uncertainty posed by COVID-19.

“We kind of struggled a little bit to stay optimistic and positive at times because of so much uncertainty with the markets,” Moore explained. “My fish are mostly restaurant fish, so we weren’t sure how the market was going to work out.”

As if foul weather wasn’t enough, Moore said he had to stay quarantined aboard the

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## Season: Mixed results

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Ocean Belle for 14 days after arriving in Alaska, with twice-daily temperature checks.

While Ocean Belle wasn't setting any records for salmon caught this year, Moore said a consistent stream of coho afforded him another "get-by year."

"We didn't have any huge smashes, but it was kind of a steady trickle," Moore said. "It wasn't a banner year by any means."

For the last third of the season, Moore's wife Laura and daughters Anabel, Arden and Ayla joined him on the boat, which luckily happened to coincide with a break in the weather.

"The weather got really nice in September. It was great, especially when the fishing slowed down; we'd do some half days and go exploring on the beaches and stuff," Moore said.

The captain also gave top marks to his crew while they were aboard the Ocean Belle.

"They did phenomenal," Moore said. "All of them are really helpful and it's pretty great now that they're older too, I can send them back, they run the gear and I don't even have to go back there and supervise anymore."

Moore said despite this season's trials, he still felt more than the necessary level of optimism required of any fisherman.

"Oh, man, let me tell you, next year is going to be really good," he said. "There were a lot of juvenile king salmon in the ocean — a lot — the most I've seen since the last peak, which was 2013 to 2016."

Mike Carr and his 32-foot gillnetter Miss Melito also just hauled out in Port Townsend after he and his crew of four — including his fiancé Maria Melito — spent the summer fishing Alaska's Bristol Bay.



The Moore family, Jonathan and Laura pictured with their three daughters Anabel, Arden and Ayla. Photo courtesy Jonathan Moore

Bottom: Coho salmon ready for freezing aboard the Ocean Belle. Photo courtesy Jonathan Moore

"It was another really big run; the past six or seven years [Bristol Bay] has had really big runs," Carr said. "They haven't had any disaster years as far as fish returning, except for 1997 and 1998."

Carr added that 2020 wasn't a particularly lucrative year, due in part to the fact that COVID-19 saw a reduction in shoreside cannery staff. With fewer staff to process the caught fish, the company that Carr was fishing for placed a cap on the amount of salmon they would receive.

"We had about a week during the peak of the season, where we just couldn't go and catch all those fish that were out there," Carr said. "You could load your boat up until you



couldn't fit any more fish on your boat, but you wouldn't get paid for them."

While a bay full of fish and nowhere to take it sounds like a commercial fisherman's nightmare, Carr said in those situations he just had to step away and think about the day ahead.



Laura Moore pictured with a hefty catch aboard the troller Ocean Belle during the Alaskan summer season. Photo courtesy Jonathan Moore

"The best thing to do is just go and lay your head down and get some sleep and just look for tomorrow; don't think about what you missed out on," he said. "Don't let your successes get to your head and don't let your failures get you down, there's only one way to look and that's forward."

In similar fashion, Carr said he was looking forward to the next season.

"The only thing that were downers this season had to do with the pandemic. I only see that getting better," he said. "I don't think that a lot of the problems this season are going to carry on into the future."

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