



## Tips for Doing Tours in the “Off Season”

Because of the seasonal nature of the salmon lifecycle, the hatchery and FISH have become known for a certain type of tour for both school groups and weekend tourists alike. With spawning salmon returning in autumn, our talking points are concrete and visible, and connections of salmon to the land and the activity of the hatchery are easy to make.

What is less obvious is the value of the tour when adult salmon are *not* present and it can take a little creative wrangling of the usual talking points to feel like one is making the tour relevant and immediate. However, many thousands of visitors do come during the part of the year without spawning salmon, and while they are valuable and beautiful ambassadors, we should see this time of year as a bonus, not the norm.

As docents, our job is not just to inform but to interpret. A science interpreter doesn't just offer facts and explanations, but translates what the guest is seeing into an experience they can relate to. We offer a context to their visit they wouldn't get any other way. And with that in mind, we can find ways to explore the hatchery year-round as an ever-changing representation of the salmon's own life-cycle. This doesn't just help us “get by” in times when we don't have fish—it's actually an opportunity to engage visitors who might be less moved by the animals themselves and more swayed by other factors (such as art, community, environmentalism, logistics, birds, etc).

So here are some tips, both of what to focus on and how to change the focus. Some of these will depend on the time of year and visitor interest, and these are not meant to be a script or a formula. Just some ideas for how to build the year-round wonders of the hatchery into your tour.

**Take Time:** All the things we normally show them, but with extra time to interact, ask questions, and delve into the functions of the hatchery and its relationship with the environment.

**Reframe it:** Make the seasonal nature of the facility into an advantage, e.g., “you're getting a backstage tour so when you bring your family back in the fall, you'll be able to tell THEM what they're looking at” or “other times of year, you won't be able to see three species of fish here” or “this is a unique time since in summer, we get ducklings!”

**Birds:** Look up! The hatchery is home to a tremendous variety of birds, from hummingbirds to herons. You can even sometimes see bald eagles flying over! So have your visitors take a few moments to look for our feathered friends, who also engage in interesting behaviors. Talk about why they might make a home here, and what the impact is on salmon and their ecosystem.

**Habitat:** While we can't see the fish in the creek, there are fish there. Use this time to look for the other things our salmon need: clean, clear, cold flowing water, ample shade and oxygen and food supplied by trees and vegetation, the rocks and pebbles and tree branches which create hiding and nesting spots. Ask whether this is a good place for salmon to spawn, and why. Talk about what can be done to ensure the salmon keep returning, or widen the discussion out to the surrounding community or what visitors can do at home.

**History:** The hatchery has a long history here in Issaquah that ties into its economic and cultural identity. The land itself used to be a campground/park. The hatchery building was built as part of the Works Progress Administration at the same time as Issaquah's sewer system, in order to put local people back to work. Issaquah's historic economy relied on dairy farming, logging, and coal mining, so you can talk about the effect of those industries on the environment and the creek, and the difference today.

**Models:** When you don't have the real thing, you can use the various models of salmon around the grounds to talk about a variety of topics such as life cycle, gender, species, and anatomy. Gilda and Finley and the display board beneath the aquarium are good places to spend extra time.

**Mosaic:** The stained glass mosaic opposite the viewing windows is a great place to take visitors, not only because it has fish year-round but because it's a great hook for people who are less science/bio inclined and more into art or community. Explain how the mural was a group effort that spanned generations and community groups. The other cool thing about the mural is that it's tactile, and many of our visitors appreciate using other senses!

**Native Plant Garden:** Now is a great time to talk about the ecosystem salmon are a part of rather than focusing on the phenomenon of migration. How do plants and salmon interact? Why are native plants important in that relationship? What are the consequences of invasive species to salmon populations?

**Predators:** The bridge and the two murals (aquarium room and water tower) have lots of other animals to look at and talk about. While it's tempting to rely on the beauty of the salmon themselves, getting visitors to understand just *why* they are so important is also key. Salmon are a keystone species, but how exactly do they fit into the food web?

**Species:** When the salmon return, generally we have one species at a time. In the spring, we've got three species of fish on the grounds at once! While they're harder to see than the adults, the function of the hatchery is to raise these fish so that some *will* come back.

**Story rocks:** Salmon are important to Issaquah's identity as a town, but also to the identity of the native people who came before. Take some time to tell the story or use the readers in the group to take turns telling it. Talk about what that story tells us about human's relationship to salmon and also the life cycle (i.e. salmon "return" to nature to ensure the health of our rivers and forests).

While it is tempting to feel that our winter/spring/summer visitors are "missing out," it's a great chance to show them the beauty of this place in other ways, as well as a reminder to folks that the hatchery and our community are a home to many species as well as salmon *year round*. What happens here throughout the year impacts our salmon return, and this is an opportunity for us to reach people in a way they may never have expected.