

Joel Kawahara, 70, lifelong fisher, dies at sea after leaving Neah Bay

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Joel Kawahara , a salmon and... (Heather G. Johnson /)

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By [Isabella Breda](#)

Seattle Times staff reporter

A lifelong fisherman, tireless advocate for salmon recovery and a friend to many, Joel Kawahara died at sea this month. He was 70.

Kawahara left Neah Bay on Aug. 8 in his fishing boat, the Karolee, on a trip for salmon, but after his family and friends didn't hear from him over the weekend, they reported him missing.

The Coast Guard boarded the Karolee near Northern California last week. Nobody was aboard. The search was suspended after covering nearly 2,100 square

miles off the West Coast in cutters, aircraft and with small boat crews.

When he wasn't on the saltwater, Kawahara was often fighting for the future of salmon and fishing families, his friends and colleagues shared.

They remember him as a bit of a Renaissance man, in touch with the water and deeply invested in his relationships and his duty to advocate for his industry, the salmon and habitat they rely upon.

Kawahara testified before elected leaders about the impacts of hydroelectric dams on salmon, volunteered at streamside tree plantings and often fed his community with fresh-caught fish and oysters from his beach on Hood Canal or treats from his garden.

“He was both a fisherman who took and he saw the responsibility that was associated with taking of giving,” said Joseph Bogaard, the executive director of Save Our Wild Salmon Coalition, a nonprofit that advocates for policy and actions to restore Columbia-Snake River basin salmon runs. “It’s that principle of reciprocity, which was just part of his DNA.”

‘Where else can you go and be part of nature?’

Joel and his brothers, Ken and Karl, grew up in Lower Queen Anne. Their dad owned a fishing tackle store on 2nd Avenue.

They spent most weekends at their grandparents’ home on Dabob Bay on Hood Canal — fishing for salmon in front of the house, collecting oysters and cooking them over a bonfire.

The three brothers all went different directions after leaving home, but it was clear Joel would always be a fisherman, Ken Kawahara said.

Their dad retired and would spend his summers fishing in Alaska, and Joel would always be with him. “My dad decided, well, if I just keep doing this, Joel’s never going to do anything else. So he sold the boat,” Ken Kawahara said.

He spent a few years at Boeing, but the work on military contracting conflicted with his values.

“I was and am pacifist in my philosophical core,” he described in an email interview with The Seattle Times in 2023. “... I kept my mouth shut, saved money and bought Karolee in 1987 so took vacation time to fish in Alaska.”

It was clear he belonged on the water.

“What else can you do that keeps you in the open spaces for half a year and still make enough to live?” Kawahara wrote. “Where else can you go and be part of nature, at the whim of nature for your livelihood and when weather gets bad for your life?”

Tele Aadsen, of the fishing vessel Nerka, met Kawahara when she and her partner were both kids growing up in the fleet.

Kawahara never hesitated to take on a mentorship role, Aadsen said, recalling when Kawahara took her partner, Joel Brady-Power, to the bar to break down “in a human way” what to know to serve on boards needed to keep the fishery going.

He always wanted to help.

His friends and colleagues shared stories of him lugging big batteries onto a young fisher’s boat, trading notes, talking about the lure or plug that was working well for him and sharing his deep understanding of how ocean conditions and the weather influenced the movement of salmon.

Kawahara stayed invested in everyone he met, said Dan Ayres, a former shellfish manager at the state Department of Fish and Wildlife.

He remembered personal details and checked in with people he seldom saw, baked a pie for a friend in the Karolee’s tiny galley and offered salmon to his former deckhand to ensure the health of her unborn baby.

Kawahara never seemed too concerned about his own fishing, Aadsen said. He caught fish, Aadsen said, but he seemed more focused on ensuring everyone else had the access and opportunity to harvest, that salmon were abundant and protected.

‘Things that he knew were essential’

Over decades, Kawahara traveled to the state and nation’s capitols and spoke out in court, newspapers and letters to advocate for the future of fishing families and salmon.

He was always opening hearts and minds to the importance of taking care of salmon and salmon habitat, said Linda Behnken, a commercial fisherman and executive director of

the Alaska Longline Fishermen's Association. She and Kawahara would each accept the National Fisherman Highliner Award in 2009, honoring fishers known for giving back to the industry.

Removing the four Lower Snake River Dams became a major focal point of his work, Behnken said, noting that if the dams aren't removed, salmon runs are at risk of extinction. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in a 2022 [report](#) found dam removal on the Lower Snake would be necessary, along with other actions to rebuild salmon abundance.

Kawahara served on the board of Save Our Wild Salmon Coalition since its inception in 1991. He also served on the Habitat Committee for the Pacific Fisheries Management Council and industry boards.

He didn't have a company vehicle or gas card, but would still make the trek to far-flung places to serve on advisory boards and councils, like that of the Olympic Coast National Marine Sanctuary.

In the winter, he would walk the creeks and rivers that spill into the Salish Sea, tallying spawning salmon for state counts. He planted thousands of trees in these watersheds and coordinated with other local fishers to provide fresh salmon for a place-based education program hosted by the North Olympic Salmon Coalition, a [regional fisheries enhancement group](#).

Kawahara eventually relocated to his family homestead at Lindsay Beach on Dabob Bay, named for his maternal grandfather, which has a conservation easement with the Jefferson Land Trust.

He was a center of gravity for his community on many fronts, said Heidi Eisenhour, a Jefferson County commissioner who grew up in the trolling fleet based in Port Townsend.

When asked if he was interested or willing to stand up for salmon against some major players in the pesticide industry, there was no hesitation, said Earthjustice managing attorney for oceans Steve Mashuda.

The groups would secure a settlement with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency preventing the use of pesticides near habitat for endangered salmon.

“Joel is a guy who at his core, he wanted to be out fishing, but he spent so much time in windowless, fluorescent-lit meeting rooms,” Mashuda said. “These were all things that he knew were essential.”

Kawahara’s memorial website can be found at everloved.com/life-of/joel-kawahara/.

Seattle Times staff photographer Karen Ducey contributed reporting.

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