Salmon Bring Nutrients Home

Part of the Ecosystem
The return of salmon to their home streams is an important part of the West Coast ecosystem. Returning spawners bring home nutrients from the sea in their bodies. These nutrients become part of the stream ecosystem when the salmon die.

Streams that are far from the ocean do not have many nutrients that animals and plants need to grow. Salmon carcasses provide food for plants and animals, even after their death. Their decaying bodies fertilize the streams and forest with nutrients from the sea. Many animals might not survive without the additonal food that is created by decaying spawners.

Part of the Food Chain

Salmon are eaten by many animals as they return to their home streams. When salmon die they also provide food and nutrients for many animals that eat their carcasses. A single dead spawner can feed thousands of tiny insect larvae. In turn, the larvae become rich food for the next generation of salmon fry living in the streams.
Algae, fungi and bacteria, which live in the water, also take up marine nutrients. In turn, they are food for the tiny insects that are eaten by salmon fry.

All these nutrients in the water help the salmon fry grow bigger and stronger. If salmon cannot return to their home rivers because of overfishing or blockages on their route, there will be less nutrients in the stream. This can mean that fewer salmon will survive in the next generation.

Helping the forest
Salmon carcasses are part of the forest ecosystem. Birds, bears, and smaller animals drag dead salmon ashore, carrying marine nutrients through the forest, and depositing the nutrients in their feces. The remains of the salmon fertilize the forest soil which helps the growth of trees. This is important where heavy rainfalls wash away the nutrients that trees need to grow.

Salmon are an important part of the west coast ecosystem. Their bodies provide valuable food, nutrients and fertilizer for the animals, streams and forests where we live.