

ABORIGINAL FISHERIES ISSUES: THE WEST COAST OF CANADA AS A CASE STUDY

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Summary

A brief account is given of the major fisheries-related issues facing aboriginal societies along the Pacific coast of Canada. This includes the implementation of traditional access rights, now increasingly recognized by Canadian authorities in spite of wrenching cultural change, a declining resource base, and the overwhelming impacts of commercial fisheries. Increased consultations between Canadian authorities and aboriginal communities would benefit all. In addition, it is suggested that granting increased and, in parts, exclusive resource access to aboriginal fishers would generate numerous social benefits, for both the aboriginal communities and society at large.

This brief account concentrates on British Columbia (BC), Canada, and on the issues that confront aboriginal peoples in salmon and other fisheries, but is meant to illustrate problems of resource access and management affecting aboriginal people in other parts of the world.

1. First Nations: Culture and Identity

BC aboriginal peoples today describe themselves as “First Nations,” so indicating both original occupancy and nationhood. Aboriginal rights, including fishing, are increasingly recognized in Canadian law. In 1992, the federal government of Canada, the provincial government of BC, and the First Nations’ Summit established a process of modern-day treaty making to resolve issues of ownership of traditional territories and clarify access and management authority. The issue is complicated: most of BC’s fisheries resources are fully exploited, and some are clearly overexploited.

Aboriginal peoples of the Pacific Northwest derive their culture and identity from

traditional territory. They are anchored to place in a way that is difficult to fully understand for those who were brought up in a culture characterized by high geographic mobility. For most aboriginal peoples, moving away permanently is not an option. Indeed, for coastal peoples in general, fisheries are not just the main source of subsistence and wealth. The seasonal cycle of fisheries resources has also shaped their social and cultural life. Thus, anything that affects the availability of fish has social and cultural as well as economic repercussions.

Respect for territory and for all natural resources is the foundation of aboriginal society, culture, and economy. Until contact with European explorers and traders, hereditary chiefs and elders had an ownership right and management responsibility to ensure the survival of all stocks of salmon and other species. Resource harvest was based on a seasonal round that involved traveling to different sites at different times of year. Pre-contact management systems were grounded in traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) of a wide range of species from different places and habitats. In effect, pre-contact fisheries were based on a rigid “area licensing” system.

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Biographical Sketches

Nigel Haggan grew up in Northern Ireland with connections on both sides of the doctrinal divide. Perhaps in consequence, his main area of interest is in exploring ways for people from different cultural, religious, and educational backgrounds to collaborate. He moved to Canada in 1981 and spent twelve years helping to develop cooperative fisheries management concepts and programs between British Columbia First Nations, government, science, and industry. He joined the UBC Fisheries Centre in 1994

with the idea of using the university as a neutral forum where diverse interests in the Pacific Fishery might be sufficiently comfortable to pursue their common interest in healthy ecosystems and fisheries. Current work includes ways to integrate traditional environmental knowledge with “mainstream” science and a suite of initiatives to make university fisheries science more accessible to aboriginal communities. He is also involved in projects in Hong Kong and Indonesia designed to maximize the ecological, social, and economic benefits from marine ecosystems.

Pamela Brown is a member of the Heiltsuk Nation whose traditional territory is in the central coast area of BC, and was born and raised in Bella Bella. Her early experience includes commercial fishing on the east and west coast of Canada and work in the Namu Salmon cannery. Pam received her B.A. in 1990 and graduated with her M.A. in anthropology at UBC in 1994. As part of her M.A. thesis program, she curated the Museum of Anthropology’s (MOA) exhibit *Cannery Days: A Chapter In The Lives Of The Heiltsuk* (1993–1994) that described the life and work experience of women and men in the Namu salmon cannery.

Pam is now Curator of Ethnology and Media at MOA. Her interests include cultural representation, ethnographic authority, First Nations protocol, developing partnerships between First Nations communities and museums, virtual museums, treaty negotiation support, and First Nations training. Pam continues to work on collaborative exhibits including *Kaxlaya Gvilas, The Ones Who Uphold the Laws of our Ancestors*, a collaborative exhibit between the Heiltsuk Nation and the Royal Ontario Museum, 2000-2001.