

# CHAPTER 18

## First Nations and wild salmon

*Arnie Narcisse, Chair, BC Aboriginal Fisheries Commission, North Vancouver, BC, Canada*

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In this chapter I will refer to how we can work in cooperation with each other and how, as First Nations, we can help to instill some of the values that we have for these salmon that have kept us alive all of these years.

### **Historical relationship of British Columbia First Nations and salmon**

British Columbia's First Nations have a special relationship with the wild Pacific salmon, a relationship forged over nearly 10,000 years. Salmon are an important source of food and commerce for many of British Columbia's 202 First Nations. Our cultures, languages and values are intimately linked to the continued existence of salmon and other marine resources. The recent decline in salmon numbers, and increasing pressures on salmon stocks and habitats, was referred to in a number of the previous chapters. We have more humans and the salmon resources have never been under greater pressure - that is a fact that we all recognize. First Nations have responded to the threats facing wild salmon by increasing their involvement in habitat protection and restoration and salmon enhancement activities, in addition to co-management efforts.

We also know that it is vital that we incorporate our traditional knowledge into how we treat salmon. It was my Great Grandfather, not my Grandfather, who was among the first to decry the hatchery techno-fix first introduced around the turn of the century - a warning that was ignored by many and that is more important than ever today. He made this statement in the 1911 Slatlimx Declaration that talked about the impact of more people coming into his territory, the impacts of the gold-mining activity upstream and the impact of the commercial fishery that had opened up in 1888. In 23 short years, the populations of fish and salmon that he had relied upon to feed his family had been decimated to such a degree that a hatchery and spawning channel was being constructed in his territory. The Slatlimx Declaration basically stated that all First Nations want is the same as yesterday. That is it, nothing more, nothing less. Specifically, he was concerned with the construction of a hatchery in his territory together with the effects of gold-mining and commercial fishery. I do not know whether or not he understood the magnitude of the problem that he was facing back then and that the cycle had indeed been broken.

This relates also to the discussion about augmenting the food web requirements. The nutrients that were delivered to the watershed, by the salmon, were diminishing. Those naturally occurring nutrient loads come from decomposing salmon and that vital link to the cycle was being broken as early as 1911- this long cycle that had been carried on for eons.

### **New problems with salmon faced by First Nations today**

Now we fast forward to 2003 where we are seeing the impacts of these activities. Overfishing and minimal habitat destruction were the only problems back then in the early part of the last century. If my Grandfather were to see what I am facing now, he would say that I have a lot more problems to deal with than he ever had. Now we have other problems and issues including the impacts of urbanization. As well, the intensive agriculture that we see in the Fraser Valley and in the Yakima Valley and other places, remind us of the values that we need to wrestle with in terms of what has more value. For example, does water have more value in growing crops or growing fish? And in addition we now have salmon aquaculture and loss of biodiversity to deal with.

### **The role of First Nations in the development of species and habitat recovery plans**

These impacts have led to the recent designation of three Pacific salmon populations as *endangered* wildlife species by COSEWIC: Cultus Lake sockeye, Sakinaw Lake sockeye and, in the interior Fraser, the Thompson coho. The Soowahlie people from the Sto:lo Nation have relied upon the Cultus sockeye, the Sechelt people have relied upon the Sakinaw sockeye and the many Interior First Nations, have relied upon the Interior Fraser coho stocks. Despite this fact, none of these tribes are involved in the Species at Risk Act (SARA) process or the required recovery planning processes. There is something wrong here since the value of these salmon is the greatest to these affected tribes and, therefore, we consider that they should be participants in these discussions. The listing process, used by COSEWIC, is based on a whole set of different values, mainly economic. If the species has some economic value then it is more likely to be listed and given attention in the form of these recovery plans. If they do not have a lot of economic value, then the attitude is that they will be dealt with later.

We are currently engaged in discussions with Environment Canada and other ministries, including the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, which are examining ways and means to incorporate the capacity of First Nations in the development of species and habitat recovery plans for the endangered salmon species described above. There are many First Nations' tribes that have developed a high level of stewardship capacity over the past ten years under the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy. Note that I emphasize stewardship capacity and not management capacity. Management is a foreign concept to us as First Nations' people. We do not manage the resource; we try to work in a husbandry or stewardship mode. That is the capacity that we have developed over the past ten years under the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy. The tribes that are involved in stock restoration efforts are complimented by a broad range of habitat restoration, protection and enhancement work, as well as a full sweep of stock assessment programs, from helicopter overflights to carcass dead pitch assessments.

The Nicola Watershed Stewardship and Fisheries Authority, a program that I previously managed, built the first permanent coho enumeration fence in the BC interior town of Merritt and in the middle of City Park. The reason I make mention of this is because this project has been instrumental in helping to increase the value of the local coho and chinook salmon populations to the local people. Prior to the construction of the fence, people were mistreating the salmon. Basically, this was because they had no sense of community with the salmon and no connection to them. With the building of the facility, they now have that connection, and busloads of school children are coming to the fence to witness, first hand, the benefits of some of their schoolroom enhancement programs. The children have helped to instill new values in their parents and new respect for the fish so that there is no longer mistreatment of these special animals.

The good thing about this story is that it brought together four levels of government to achieve one common vision. This was instigated in 1998 when David Anderson was the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans and we were going through the throws of the coho conservation requirements and the 'red' listing. I recognized the significance of the coho conservation concerns and went to the Department of Fisheries

and Oceans and advised them that we wanted to construct a coho enumeration fence that could withstand the vigour of a cold-water system. This is a volatile system that has no lake to hold it back so that when it comes down, it needs a substantial fence to stand up to it. We were able to convince the Department of Fisheries and Oceans to fund the project. When I talk about four levels of government, I am also talking about the First Nations as we consider ourselves a level of government. At that time the provincial government agency, Fisheries Renewal BC, was in operation. They provided the \$137,500 required to operate this facility for the first year. The fourth level of government was the municipality of the town of Merritt itself and the Mayor gave us her blessing to build the coho enumeration fence in the middle of City Park. The moral of this story is that you can bring four levels of government and the community together under a common vision to carry out a common goal. That is one of the things that we are doing as First Nations' people in terms of trying to broaden the value-base that we have for wild salmon stocks.

### **Instilling new values**

We also need to think about the young people and instilling new values into their parents. These are values that go beyond simple economics. They are values that are incorporated into an ecological perspective and the need to reconstruct the broken cycle. This cycle begins in many of our traditional territories. The Carrier Sekani Nation, at the headwaters of the Fraser River, are working to reconstruct a broken cycle by developing conservation management and harvest plans that are especially mindful, not only of their food needs, but of those of the animals they share the salmon with. They are hopeful that, by doing this, they will be able to restore the productivity that once sustained their people, the land and the animals and, thus to repair the broken cycle.

### **Salmon farming issues**

Salmon aquaculture is the most recent techno-fix that has come our way. My Great-Grandfather was faced with hatcheries and spawning grounds; I am faced with salmon aquaculture and other types of finfish aquaculture that we as First Nations people are very concerned about. Someone appears to have determined that farmed salmon may have more value than wild salmon. Someone has determined that it is acceptable to take food out of the mouths of poor, developing nations to make fishmeal for farmed fish so that we, in the developed nations in the northern hemisphere can eat them. I have been told that it takes four times the amount of feed to create the fishmeal that produces one pound of Atlantic salmon. There is something extremely wrong with that equation.

Moreover, there are too many unanswered questions surrounding this industry that precludes our embracing it as a sustainable one - problems such as escapes, diseases including sea-lice, habitat degradation and so on. Yet, it appears that in the eyes of government, farmed salmon have more value than the wild salmon. This is evidenced by the fact that there is a federal Salmon Aquaculture Commission in place in Ottawa within the Department of Fisheries and Oceans Canada. Their job it is to promote salmon aquaculture; however, there is still no wild salmon policy that will, once and for all, give the wild salmon the protection that they need in order to flourish.

### **Wild salmon policy**

In the draft copy of the Fraser Review of the 2002 Fraser Sockeye fishery the first recommendation is the establishment of a wild salmon policy.

*It is recommended that the Department conduct consultations on a wild salmon policy and associated guidelines with First Nations' harvesters and other interest groups, including conservation organizations and the policy should be finalized by December 31, 2003. This policy will provide a framework for defining conservation objectives for naturally spawning salmon and will include direction for resource management, conservation units and reference points, habitat protection enhancement and aquaculture.*

The current draft wild salmon policy has the blessing of the majority of BC's First Nations and needs to be ratified soon so that we are no longer subjected to the schizophrenic responses received from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans and the Province of British Columbia with respect to the priority of conservation of wild salmon over farmed salmon. We urgently need that policy.

I would like to comment briefly on a statement from Bill Rees (See Chapter 14) "*Farming salmon is an inherently unsustainable economic substitute for a service that nature once provided free.*" Those are wise words. Similarly, Brian Riddell points out, "... *the first hundred years of managing Pacific salmon focused on their economic importance. Recently, conservation issues have led to substantial allocation debates, and now the focus is clearly on the conservation of "wild" salmon, their diversity and their ecosystems.*" (See Chapter 7). The maintenance of the biodiversity of wild salmon and their attendant ecosystems have always been the core value of the First Nations of BC. The loss of the salmon that we depend upon, would be catastrophic to all aspects of our being as First Nations' people and it is a loss that we are not prepared to allow.

### **Conclusion**

Our job, as First Nations' people is to instill those other values, that go beyond simple economics, into the psyche of the general public, and to make people aware of the broader ecosystem requirements that will benefit the wild salmon. In 1911, my Great-Grandfather attempted to point out these values to the Honourable Frank Oliver, in the Slatimx Declaration that he was signatory to. Today I write letters to the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans Canada to do the same thing. It is critical to instill a set of values that will ensure the long-term sustainability of the Pacific wild salmon.