

Subsistence Fishing in Canada
A Position Paper
Prepared by the Coastal Learning Communities Network
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The Nature of Subsistence Harvesting

Subsistence harvesting is the hunting, fishing, and gathering of natural resources to meet the food, fuel, clothing, and livelihood needs of individuals, households, and communities. The exchange of subsistence products is embedded within the social relations existing with communities and can take various forms such as gift, reciprocal exchange, barter, and sale. This position paper focuses on subsistence fisheries in Canada.

The Current Context of Subsistence Fisheries

At a policy and regulatory level, subsistence fisheries stand in contrast with commercial fisheries. Before and during most of the Twentieth Century, the distinction between subsistence and commercial fisheries was not easily made. Most fisheries had components both of subsistence and sale of products to markets external to the community. Today commercial fisheries are conducted by professionally certified fishers with highly capitalized vessels and licenses usually within a corporate structure and selling their products largely for export in global markets. However, within this commercial fishery, there still exists significant numbers of smaller-scale fishing enterprises with strong community attachments.

This dichotomy between subsistence and commercial fishing occurred during the last two decades of the Twentieth Century. Fisheries policy in Canada became dominated by a restructuring agenda which focused on enclosing the fisheries commons for economic efficiency, using privatization of access as the primary management tool for achieving this goal. Within a relatively short time frame, fisheries harvesting was transformed from a socially-embedded activity characterized by occupational pluralism, multi-purpose fishing strategies, extended family working relations, and egalitarian sharing of returns into highly specialized fishing operations, conducted by professional fishers and fully integrated into a global fishing economy characterized by the commoditization of fishing access, products, and labour. As a result, the number of fishers has been

greatly reduced and the cost of a commercial fishing licence is well beyond the means of most coastal residents who, at the same time, can no longer obtain fish locally to fulfill their nutritional needs due to export-oriented policies and markets. Just as importantly this restructuring of fishing has coincided with the collapse or depletion of many fish stocks, fishing ever lower trophic levels in ecosystems, and extensive habitat loss or degradation. While the remaining commercial fishing enterprises have become very profitable, constant restructuring is required to keep returns high. Thus there is an ongoing loss of fishing enterprises; most often the less financially endowed small-scale commercial fishers.

Through the restructuring process, subsistence fishing has become either illegal or highly marginalized. Nonetheless, significant numbers of people still participate in subsistence fisheries which play a vital role in fulfilling livelihood needs. Subsistence fisheries are also important in paying household expenses of women, youth, and the elderly. Where policy makers still recognize the existence of subsistence fisheries, it is narrowly defined as fulfilling some exceptional cultural need or providing a leisure benefit, as an aberration, or even as something to be only tolerated until it can be eliminated. A case in point is the First Nations food fishery, guaranteed in law by the “Sparrow Decision” of the Supreme Court of Canada and recognized as a key element of federal fisheries policy. In practice, however, the First Nations food fishery is so narrowly defined that it provides only a small to negligible contribution to the livelihood needs of First Nations.

The on-going restructuring of the commercial fisheries and the neglectful or hostile treatment of subsistence fisheries by policy makers and managers means that coastal residents, their households, and communities face continuing dispossession of fisheries access, an ever diminishing resource base, loss of local control over food supply, and declining social unity. This restructuring is not limited to the fisheries. These communities experience the same kind of losses in human resources, health services, and education as economic efficiencies dictate the centralization of services in urban centres and the capitulation of local needs and aspirations to market forces.

Reversing Restructuring through Restoration

Recent events have revealed the immense vulnerabilities created or worsened by restructuring to the security and safety of our food supply, public health, the environment, and climate. There is a growing realization that it is time to reverse restructuring, and that one of the most important places to start is with the food that maintains our life. The current focus on food sovereignty; along with local, organic and slow food approaches to how we eat, are indicative of

community wisdom concerning the need to reverse restructuring. A renewed emphasis on subsistence fisheries is a critical avenue to provide communities with a secure source of low sodium protein, omega-3 fatty acids, iodine, selenium, iron, zinc, and the A, D, and B vitamins.

The reversal of restructuring for subsistence and other livelihood fisheries must be achieved through a three-fold restoration:

Restore Fish and Fish Habitats

Conservation makes sense when there is something to conserve. Today, however, the tragic collapse of incredibly rich fish resources in Canada demands a more responsible and extensive effort than just conservation to restore fish stocks to full capacity, maintain a balance in aquatic food chains, and provide a livable home to aquatic species. Restoring the natural wealth of our lakes, rivers, and oceans in order to meet the long-term food requirements of Canadians and others in this world should take precedence over preventing declines in profitability.

Restore the Commons

Reversing restructuring requires a collective effort in which resources are shared, spaces provided for cooperation, and the benefits of hard work accrue equitably to community members. The current privatization of access to a few people and companies is a major obstacle to a renewed emphasis on fisheries that provide food, livelihood, and community well-being. The community dependence on the fisheries commons, going back generation upon generation, was taken away without parliamentary consent by a relatively small number of government officials and industry representatives. A process must be initiated to return the commons to its rightful heirs.

Restore Community

It is well accepted that communities benefit from healthy fish stocks. It can now be seen that the reverse is also true. Without healthy communities, fish stocks collapse. Restoring the notion of community, of the interdependence of people among themselves and with their environment, is necessary for the rejuvenation of both fish stocks and subsistence fisheries.

The Creation of Community Fisheries

Now is the time to restore the common wealth of our aquatic environment for the benefit of communities and the public good. We invite subsistence fishers and small-scale commercial fishers to work with us in achieving this goal through the establishment of community fisheries. The

commercial, corporate model of fisheries has left communities more vulnerable and Canadians less sovereign and secure in meeting future nutritional needs. Community fisheries would give priority to food, livelihood, and social needs instead of profitability and international competitiveness.

Fishing for food and regaining the capacity of fisheries to contribute to the livelihood of coastal residents is only part of the immense challenges faced by these communities. Community members will need to come together on a number of fronts to resolve the many social, economic, and cultural difficulties they currently confront. It is thus advisable that planning and development of livelihood activities occur not in isolation but in concert. The governance of community fisheries by the wider community would counter-balance the effects of the individualistic, corporately-driven commercial fisheries to ensure that the food and livelihood needs of the community are met. To achieve this, communities must be given allocations of fish before they are allocated to strictly commercial interests. This is not a new or radical concept. Before the intense restructuring that occurred in the 1990s, the “adjacency principle” was enshrined in federal fisheries policy. The adjacency principle recognized the priority of allocating fish first to fisheries dependent communities. Giving priority to the allocation of fish to community fisheries is simply an updating of this policy to current circumstances and to offset the effects of privatization.

Respect, Community Learning, and Two-Eyed Seeing

As a community of First Nation and non-aboriginal residents of Canada, we are committed to working together to reverse restructuring and to foster livelihood fisheries through the restoration of fish, habitats, the commons, and community. We embrace the indigenous view of respect and relationship:

- 1) We respect all of Creation,
- 2) We are related to the earth, forests, and oceans,
- 3) We will provide for our existence in humbly respecting our place in the web of life,
- 4) We respectfully acknowledge those who have passed on so that we might live,
- 5) Our greatest restoration must be in restoring our relationships to each other and with Creation, while working toward a common vision to ensure a healthy world for our children.

We urge others to form learning communities that are inclusive, collaborative, and engaged in a process of learning by doing through the identification and analysis of common issues and in taking actions together for their solution.

We recognize that science has contributed much to the betterment of human kind but also recognize that strictly science-based solutions have contributed to our current crisis. Our learning, research, and actions must be guided by two-eyed seeing; gleaning from science the insights that help us to understand our world while maintaining our vision of a world governed by respect, relationship, and interdependence.

The Coastal Learning Communities Network is working to revitalize Canada's coastal communities by empowering coastal residents through shared learning, collective action, and the embracing of indigenous approaches to natural resource management. Its members live on Canada's three coasts and along the shores of major freshwater bodies.

The Network has developed four overlapping spheres of program activities: story telling, focused issue analysis, learning circles, and communications technology. The Network strives to be inclusive; welcoming First Nations and non-Aboriginal participants, university-based and community-based learners. The Network continues to extend its outreach to other First Nations, coastal communities, universities, and policy makers.

Vision Statement:

- Revitalize relationships between communities of place and adjacent natural resources that directly benefit local people for all generations.
- Embrace indigenous stewardship and self-determination as models for communities everywhere.

Mission Statement:

- Facilitate community empowerment through sharing experiences and values and creating opportunities for collective action.
- Expose and challenge the impacts of privatization and corporatization with alternative models that dedicate local resources to local communities.

Adopted on May 30, 2007 in Tofino, British Columbia