CCIRA

The Common Voice

CCIRA Newsletter
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Central Coast Indigenous Resource Alliance

Trust: a fundamental step towards collaborative fisheries management

Last year our Nations had some major challenges with Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) with respect to the management of crab and herring. This is nothing new. In our attempts to protect the resources in our territories, our Nations have often gone head-to-head with DFO. We've had to. We have lost much of our abalone; we get reports that geoduck, urchin and sea cucumber are in decline; our Food fishers have difficulty catching enough rock cod, salmon and crab. The list goes on. The recurring theme with these declines is that the high-level management by DFO – that cuts our Nations out of a meaningful role in fisheries decision-making – does not work.

For our Nations, whose well-being and culture are closely tied to the health of marine ecosystems, we have the most to lose from unsustainable fisheries practices. The over-exploitation of marine resources in our territories, coupled with the lack of trust from the DFO are having real impacts on our ability to sustain our way of life as coastal First Nations. Meaningful change in fisheries management will only be achieved when DFO engages with us in joint decision-making that incorporates our knowledge and respects our Indigenous laws.

Crab pilot project

Many young people in our communities can't imagine going crab fishing for a couple of days and coming home with 50 or 60 crabs to share with their community. But for elder fishers, like Heiltsuk's Fred Reid, this was simply the way things were. At 86, Fred still fishes for food when he can, but things are a lot different now. The last time he

A seiner at work on the central coast

went crab fishing he spent two days and caught just six crabs. "He was so discouraged," says his son Mike Reid, who is the Heiltsuk's Fisheries Manager, "he just pulled up his traps and went home."

Our Nations have been engaged in discussions with DFO about crab management for eight years. Crab has been identified as a suitable pilot project to create a joint decision-making structure (or government-to-government protocol) for fisheries management. The hope is that a collaborative decision-making protocol for crab can be developed and applied to other fisheries. But, Nuxalk's Stewardship Director, Megan Moody, says that up until this point, "progress on this work has been really slow. It has been frustrating for our community members and leadership." Nonetheless, discussions at a recent meeting with DFO showed some new promise, and there is hope that this meeting may mark a turning point in this project.

In the meantime our Nations continue to assert our Indigenous laws to protect our resources. But we also remain open to working with other levels of government to find ways to make things work.

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"We are already being affected by the decline in fisheries and nobody's listening. It is really stripping away our future here…Something has got to change." Heiltsuk Fisheries Manager, Mike Reid.

Progress with DFO on collaborative crab management

After a recent meeting with Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO), our Nations have some new hope for central coast crab. Working together, we agreed on necessary steps that will take us closer to a collaborative decision-making framework for managing this resource.

Most notably, both parties agreed to key elements of a Letter of Intent for collaborative governance of crab on the central coast and draft work plan, which outlines the necessary steps towards sustainable management of this important resource.

After years of slow progress and frustration on this issue, our Nations are optimistic that the positive outcomes from this meeting may steer things in a new direction. If successful, this work may lay a foundation for collaborative governance of other marine resources.

Our Nations would like to recognize DFO for their willingness to engage with us in a meaningful way on this issue.

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Build trust, share decisions

Megan sits at the Fisheries Reconciliation Table with Coastal First Nations. In her view, "DFO are typically reluctant to give up their management power or let First Nations have too much of a say, even though it would benefit the stocks. As soon as you say the words 'co-management' or 'collaborative 'or 'joint' decision-making, they seem to shy off." In essence, there is a lack of trust by DFO in our Nations' management abilities.

In Heiltsuk territory the problem is the same. "It seems the DFO does their due diligence in regard to their duty to consult with us," explains Mike Reid. "But in a lot of cases it seems simply like a process they are going through. They come into the room, nod their heads and leave and then do exactly what they originally intended to do in the first place."

"Our fight is not with fishermen. It is with DFO's managers," says Mike. "Most of the time when we explain to fishermen that we are closing an area because of conservation concerns, they are on board. They don't want to see the stocks decline – their living depends on it." In other words, most fishermen agree that the stocks should be managed better. Mike and Megan's contention is that First Nations need to be directly involved in making those decisions.

Cleaning salmon for a meal

Local knowledge and management is key

Part of the problem is DFO does not regularly have people on the ground within our territories. This typically means people in offices far away are making decisions about resources with no local knowledge or feedback from us. It also means relationships between DFO officials and our people are fleeting, with little opportunity to foster greater rapport.

"DFO really need to sit down with us and figure out this collaborative decision making process like we are proposing with crab. They have to trust that we [First Nations] are crucial to the sustainable management of our resources."

- Nuxalk Stewardship Director, Megan Moody.

Meaningful change in fisheries management will only be achieved when DFO engages with us in joint decision-making that incorporates our knowledge and respects our Indigenous laws.

"If they [DFO] had a greater presence here and met with us consistently, it would strengthen relationships. I think they would begin to trust our observations more," says Megan. In the meantime, "DFO needs to accept that First Nations' local knowledge is really valuable for management. I really believe in the value of local management and First Nations must be a key part of that."

What it comes down to, explains Megan, is that the "DFO really need to sit with us and figure out this collaborative decision making process like we are proposing with crab. They have to trust that we are crucial to the sustainable management of our resources."

Something has got to change

In reality, the DFO are the new kids on the block here. "We've harvested from the ocean for millennia and done it sustainably," explains Mike. "My Dad talks about going crab fishing with his uncle; they threw back the first crab every time. They took only what they needed, taking only the males, and leaving some of the big males so they can reproduce. These are examples of common sense management that our folks have gained over millennia. It is part of our culture and our heritage…these things are the foundation of good management."

With the combined pressures from commercial and recreational fishing on the central coast today, we need to incorporate the common sense practices of our Nations to manage the fishery. And we need a meaningful process to enable that. And that process must be built on a foundation of trust.

Mike is old enough to have witnessed major changes in his territory. "We are already being affected by the decline in fisheries and nobody's listening. It is really stripping away our future here. I have five children and 14 grandchildren. When I think of their future it is really dismal. We are losing our way of life. Something has got to change."

Fishing boats at work on the central coast.

Kitasoo/Xai'Xais Heritage Database: bringing wisdom and stories home

Over the last two years an information-gathering project has taken place in Kitasoo/Xai'Xais territory. As part of the Indigenous Law Project, community researchers unearthed over 2000 items of cultural and scientific significance to the Kitasoo/Xai'Xais people, including historic photographs and records, recorded oral stories, interviews with knowledge holders, previous scientific reports and more. All this information has been assembled into something called the Kitasoo/Xai'Xais Heritage Database.

This Database is a wealth of information about the culture and resources within Kitasoo/Xai'Xais territory. It is already being used to direct resource management decisions, and is also the foundation for an important cultural project: the Kitasoo/Xai'Xais storybook.

Heritage Database supports herring management

While working on the Kitasoo/Xai'Xais Management Plan for Pacific Herring, decision makers were able to search within the Database for useful information. This search readily provided information on traditional herring harvesting sites and stewardship practices, as well as the impact of industrial fisheries and more. All this was accomplished without having to consult numerous binders, maps and hard drives stored in different locations.

Collectively, this material was synthesized and incorporated into the management plan. "The database is a tremendous wealth of information," says CCIRA's Science Coordinator, Alejandro Frid. "Thanks to it, the herring management plan has traditional laws as its foundation, with science providing supplementary guidance." This foundation will help ensure herring management is informed by Kitasoo/Xai'Xais values, and not just the interests of others.

The Database will be continually updated and its value for assisting First Nation decision-makers will only increase over time. But this is only part of its significance. The Database is also a storehouse of stories.

A collection of stories by the community for the community

This winter there is something new on the bookshelves and tables in Klemtu. Every household has received a copy of a book entitled Feathers and Feast-Fires: Kitasoo/Xai'Xais Stories.

Oral story telling has always been an important part of Kitasoo/Xai'Xais culture, and this book of stories is not meant to replace that rich tradition. Instead, it is meant to support it by taking all the stories within the Heritage Database and putting them directly into the hands of all Kitasoo/Xai'Xais people in the form of a book.

In the words of community researcher, Emma Wilson, "Feathers and Feast-Fires is a collection of stories by the community for the community." Notably, it is not being sold to outsiders.

As the storybook took shape the community was asked for feedback on preliminary drafts to ensure the stories were being captured accurately. Local language teachers

"Feathers and Feast-Fires is a collection of stories by the community for the community."

Roxeanne Robinson and Nora Robinson, and Sgüüxs transcriber Michelle Edgar contributed with spelling and translation of traditional words. Eight local artists contributed photographs, sketches or paintings to illustrate the book.

"Now we see people sitting down with the book and using it to help recount these stories," says Emma. "It is a tool to initiate conversation between generations about Kitasoo/Xai'Xais history, cultural governance, and language." Emma notes that people are particularly excited to read old stories by, or about, their grandparents or other elders who have passed on.

Still, Emma explains, the book is not a permanent or definitive collection of Kitasoo/Xai'Xais stories. "We know that Feathers and Feast-Fires represents a fraction of stories that were once recounted, and some Kitasoo/Xai'Xais stories have multiple versions. The stories in the book are not meant to be the authoritative versions. Rather they are part of the living legacy that is Kitasoo/Xai'Xais culture."

Salmon painting from Feathers and Feast-Fires, by Klemtu artist Jeff Robinson.

Science and our fishers agree: crab populations in trouble

As fishing pressure has increased in recent years and our Nations' catches of Dungeness crab have declined, our people have become concerned about the state of this food resource in our territories. And we've done something about it.

Our Watchmen have assembled the most comprehensive scientific dataset available on central coast crab. CCIRA's Science Coordinator, Alejandro Frid has used this data to publish a scientific paper on the impact of crab fishing closures. And now, our fishers have contributed their knowledge of past crab populations to shed light on how much crab stocks have changed over the decades, and the impact it is having on our people. Collectively, all of this information is being used to make a case with DFO for better management of central coast crab.

Fishers' knowledge reveals crab decline

Under the guidance of Dr. Natalie Ban at the University of Victoria, Lauren Eckert has been working to compile our fishers' knowledge of past crab abundance and our Food, Social and Ceremonial (FSC) needs. Working with all four central coast Nations, Lauren has interviewed 38 people with an average of 48 years of crab fishing experience.

"All participants observed changes in crab abundance during their lifetimes," writes Lauren in a preliminary report. 83 percent of the fishers described those changes as "severe." They reported that in recent years, typical catches were just 23 percent of what they used to be.

What makes these numbers even more alarming is that catches have declined dramatically over time despite improvements in fishing technology and increased fishing effort. Compared to the past, "crab fishermen are using more efficient trap technology, soaking traps for longer, and setting them deeper," writes Lauren.

Over the decades, there has been a shift away from homemade hoop traps towards recreational and commercial traps, and average soak times have increased from three to 13 hours. What this means, explains Lauren, is that the declines in crab abundance the fishers are reporting are likely conservative estimates of what is really happening. The question is why there are less crab being caught in the first place. For most fishers on the coast, the answer is no mystery.

Fishing competition impacts FSC catches

85 percent of fishers Lauren interviewed reported that commercial crabbing wasn't present in their early days of fishing. Yet, more recently participants noted much greater recreational and commercial crab fishing activity; 76 percent reported severe declines in their catches in places where these activities had taken place.

Wuikinuxv's Gord Moody and Brian Johnson checking the shell-hardness of Dungeness crabs.

The implication is that our people are losing access to a food source - one that is rooted in our traditions and has helped sustain our people for generations - because of competition from other fishers.

Successful catches unlikely

Those interviewed considered a harvesting trip to be successful if they caught about 15 crabs from two traps. But with the increased fishing pressure, successful harvests are becoming exceedingly rare.

By running computer simulations on crab data collected from nine common fishing locations, CCIRA's Fisheries Coordinator, Madeleine McGreer, determined that only one of those nine locations had a reasonable probability of a successful harvest (70 percent chance of success). The other eight locations had probabilities of successful harvests between 0 and 20 percent.

Notably, the area where success was likely is also the only location tested with a long-standing permanent commercial crab fishing closure. These results are consistent with Alejandro's previous research, which showed that legal-sized male crabs became larger and more abundant when recreational and commercial fishing closures were in place, but declined in size and number in places where fishing was permitted.

In other words, the science and our fishers are telling the same story: recreational and commercial fishing pressures are reducing the size and abundance of crab to the point that our Nations cannot meet our FSC needs. Permanent recreational and commercial fishing closures are needed to help populations recover and ensure our Nations' access to this traditional food.

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Gord Moody holding a spawned out female Dungeness Crab.

Josh Vickers, Patrick Johnson and Gord Moody assess mating marks on a Dungeness crab.

Research links rockfish conservation to our indigenous rights

Fifty years ago Charlie Mason could hop in a boat, travel a short distance from his home in Klemtu, catch enough rockfish for a meal or two, and then head back to town. "Today it is not that easy," he says. "Sometimes I have to go to four or five spots before I catch anything." Charlie is concerned that the increase in recreational and commercial fishing over the past 50 years is putting too much pressure on central coast rockfish. These concerns are widespread among our Nations' fishers.

In response, CCIRA launched a rockfish research project in 2013. The strength of the project lies in its reliance on science and traditional knowledge. CCIRA has now published a study that explores the state of rockfish in our territories, while making connections between rockfish conservation and our indigenous rights.

Rockfish and our Indigenous rights.

For our Nations, resources like rockfish are not only a source of food – they are cultural sustenance. "The loss of traditional resources has a long history of affecting the physical, mental and spiritual well-being of indigenous people throughout the world," writes CCIRA's Science Coordinator, Alejandro Frid, in his paper from the study.

Although Canada's constitution grants indigenous people priority access to fisheries for Food, Social and Ceremonial (FSC) purposes, increasing pressure from commercial and recreational fisheries has a very real impact on our FSC harvests. Our rockfish research is providing new information that will help manage fisheries more sustainably while nourishing our cultures well into the future.

For our Nations, resources like rockfish are not only a source of food – they are cultural sustenance.

A black rockfish among a school of yellowtail rockfish in central coast waters.

The study

Alejandro led the study, with numerous community members dedicating themselves to the necessary fieldwork. The traditional knowledge of elder fishers was essential for identifying study sites and providing historical context.

The study sampled 282 fishing sites using hook and line, and the catch from local FSC fishers. Researchers recorded the size, age and abundance of rockfish inside and outside Rockfish Conservation Areas (RCA's) while recording the proximity of fishing sites to fishing lodges and ports.

Rockfish are long-lived species (some can live up to 120 years) and take many years to mature, with bigger and older fish producing the most offspring. However, fisheries tend to target these big old fish. This makes rockfish particularly vulnerable to overfishing.

"In working with Alejandro I've realized how long it takes for the fish to become big and how old they can get," says Charlie. "Once you clean out all the big females from an area it is really hard for them to come back and multiply."

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"...CCIRA launched a rockfish research project in 2013. The strength of the project lies in its reliance on science and traditional knowledge."

Rockfish research: key results and potential management actions

Result 1: At sites important to FSC fishers, there were few old and large Quillback rockfish and even fewer old and large Yelloweye rockfish (red snapper)

Next Action: Urge DFO to manage fisheries not just for overall abundance, but to restore and maintain more large and old individuals in the population.

Result 2: Rockfish Conservation Areas (RCA's) benefit Yelloweye rockfish.

Next Action: Expand protected areas using the expertise of central coast Nations.

Result 3: RCA's did not benefit all species.

Next Actions: 1) Reassess the suitability of RCA habitat for different rockfish species, and 2) Increase monitoring to ensure recreational fishers are complying with RCA boundaries.

Result 4: Long-lived species are bigger and more abundant further away from lodges and ports.

Next Action: More detailed study of impact from recreational fishers.

Additional Actions: Study the impact of commercial fisheries on central coast Rockfish.

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Results

Results revealed that large and old Quillback and Yelloweye rockfishes were rare across the study area. These findings are consistent with our elders' experience, and suggest that these species – which are of particular cultural significance to central coast Nations – are likely being overfished within our territories.

However, results also showed that Yelloweye Rockfish (known locally as red snapper) were larger within Rockfish Conservation Areas (RCA's), where recreational and commercial fishing is restricted. This discovery illustrates that RCA's may be an effective conservation tool for this species.

However, the positive impact of RCA's was not true for all rockfish species.

Alejandro speculates that this may mean the protection RCA's offer is most beneficial to highly valued species like Yelloweye that receive a lot of fishing pressure. But it may also indicate that habitat within some RCA's does not meet the requirements of some rockfish. Additional habitat studies may provide insights for maximizing the benefit of RCA's for multiple species, such as adjusting the current boundaries.

Lastly, researchers found that long-lived rockfish species, like Quillback and Yelloweye, were bigger and more abundant at fishing sites that were farther away from fishing lodges and other ports. This finding likely reflects the impact that recreational fishers can have on accessible rockfish populations. However, this was not the case for shorter-lived species, like Copper Rockfish, and more work is needed to understand why.

A young yelloweye rockfish

Heiltsuk Guardian Watchmen, Jordan Wilson, assessing Catch-Per-Unit-Effort during rockfish research at traditional Heiltsuk fishing sites. This yelloweye rockfish looks like a nice meal, but it's actually an immature female that is not even old enough to reproduce.

"The loss of traditional resources has a long history of affecting the physical, mental and spiritual well-being of indigenous people throughout the world."

CCIRA Science Coordinator, Alejandro Frid.

Nuxalk ancestral governance project

150 years ago western governments imposed a system of governance on our people that does not recognize our values, traditions or laws. Since then, our Nations have effectively been cut out of decisions that affect our people. The Indigenous Law Project has been one way that our Nations have been working to shift the conversation towards one that integrates our culture and makes us decision-makers in our territories.

In Nuxalk territory, this work has evolved into the Ancestral Governance Project. This project is aimed at reinvigorating a governance system that is true to Nuxalk values, laws and social organization, while allowing for the reality of working with the multiple levels of government that exist today.

Applying past traditions to today's decisions

"This work has become a really important part of our Stewardship Office," says Nuxalk's Stewardship Director, Megan Moody, who oversees the project. One priority is the creation of governance handbooks that outline legal principles of Nuxalk society from the past, right down to each person's role in the community.

"We are exploring how the multiple societies, families and Stataltmc (hereditary chiefs) within Nuxalk territory worked together to make decisions in the past," Megan explains. The objective is to apply this knowledge to how Nuxalkmc make decisions today.

"It is critical that the Nuxalk are integrally involved in decision-making on issues that involve us and our territory. This project is empowering us to get closer to that goal." - Nuxalk Stewardship Director, Megan Moody

Grace Hans and Caroline Mack reviewing Nuxalk place name maps

"Cultural researcher, Clyde Tallio, really understands all the complexities of our culture and he is amazing at explaining the concepts to others," says Megan. "He is always reminding us that we simply need to put all the information we have uncovered into a Nuxalk voice, and explain it in a way that makes sense to us."

As Clyde explains, "our Elders left us teachings - this essential information to help guide our ancestral governance work." With the support of Nuxalk cultural researcher, Iris Siwallace, the Ancestral Governance Project is helping to preserve those teachings by digitizing and archiving a wealth of historical information.

After all the cultural upheaval of the past, it is a big challenge to re-establish ancestral governance within the Nuxalk Nation. But the bigger challenge will be integrating these values into discussions and decisions with other governments. And, yet, this is already happening.

Megan cites a draft bear stewardship policy and a signage project with BC Parks as examples. "We are also using this knowledge to map out things like the locations of ancestral village sites to ensure important cultural areas are protected from things like forestry activity. Everything we are doing with this project filters into our decisions about protecting the things that matter to us," she says.

From indigenous laws to ancestral governance

The Indigenous Law Project was a real catalyst for this work, says Megan. "It let us hire people and really stimulated a lot of new ideas. It definitely helped us think about how we manage and make decisions in our territory as Nuxalkmc. It gave us the capacity to get moving."

Elaborating further Megan explains, "This is huge for us, but it is a lot of work and it is progressing slowly. I want to make this project a permanent entity in our office. We won't accomplish enough if we have just six months here or there. It is critical that the Nuxalk are integrally involved in decision-making on issues that involve us and our territory. This project is empowering us to get closer to that goal. The response from our community has been really enthusiastic. We just need to secure funding to continue this important work."

Iris Siwallace and Clyde Tallio at Indigenous Law Gathering in Maple Ridge BC, hosted by The Nature Conservancy (TNC) Canada

Clyde Tallio reviewing historical Nuxalk village map with Peter Tallio at Nuxalk Nation open house.

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About This Newsletter

Our Nations created CCIRA to build upon our success in working together to develop and implement our Nation-level marine use plans. Today, CCIRA is involved in a wide array of projects and initiatives across the central coast. The Common Voice is one source of information about CCIRA's activities in our communities. Each issue will highlight specific projects that are underway in our communities with updates on projects and policies that CCIRA is working on. The Common Voice is distributed to all central coast First Nations and is one way we are working to ensure that our communities stay connected with each other. For more information about CCIRA and what we do, please visit our website www.ccira.ca or contact us at info@ccira.ca

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How to Get Involved

- Visit your Community Coordinator or Resource Stewardship Office and ask about your Nation's marine use plan.
- Attend local marine use planning open houses and community meetings.
- Take advantage of training and employment opportunities.

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