

Reprint **Island Tides**

Visit www.islandtides.com for more interesting articles on other BC, national & international topics

Reprint from Volume 23 Number 23

November 17, 2011

Winter herring quota could be 'catastrophic'

The unusually large quota set for the 'food and bait' herring fishery in the Strait of Georgia this winter is garnering considerable public opposition, although the decision was never announced publicly. The fishery opened November 7 with a target quota of 6,000 tonnes, a massive increase over last year's catch of 283 tonnes.

Conservationists are asking Minister Ashfield to not only stand down the herring fleet, but also impose a moratorium on the herring fishery until stocks recover in the Salish Sea, especially in light of the newly-declared boundary of the proposed National Marine Conservation Area reserve.

In early November, the Raincoast Conservation Foundation (RCF) wrote to Minister of Fisheries Keith Ashfield, expressing doubt that the resident herring populations were taken into account in the quota decision.

'A fishery at this time and in this region could have catastrophic consequences for resident herring, as well as for other marine species,' the letter states. A group of professors from UBC, UVic and SFU also wrote to the minister in support of RCF's comments.

Industry Decision

The Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) indicates, in its draft 2012 *Integrated Fisheries Management Plan* (IFMP), that the quota decision was made because industry asked for it:

'As a result of increased interest in this fishery and development of global markets, and as recommended by the Herring Industry Advisory Board, the allocation to this fishery will be 6,000 tons (one hundred licenses) for the Strait of Georgia area for the 2011/2012 season.'

However, the 'precautionary principle,' now adopted by DFO, determines that there should be scientific justification for any fishery, the identification of a surplus, or reallocation into areas and time periods sensitive for declining stocks, before there can be a harvest.

Currently, it is impossible to establish science-based quotas for the 'resident' herring; DFO considers the fish part of one 'metastock' that also consists of migratory herring.

In the USA Salish Sea, the herring are now managed as ecological keystone species through local distinctive stocks.

The Cherry Point herring population that was nearly extirpated from overfishing is now protected federally.

Herring-Dependent Industries

The 'resident' herring populations are of central importance to the diverse Salish Sea ecosystem. The economies of the sport fishing, whale watching and birdwatching industries depend upon the rational management of this ecosystem. These are huge economic activities, although they have decreased considerably as the 'resident' herring populations have declined.

One of the major contributing factors of the sport fishery decline has been the decline of the local herring populations that attracted and fed local chinook and coho salmon in all areas of the Salish Sea.

Orca, chinook and herring are all closely linked and interdependent in the ecosystem, as noted on the DFO website. Just as the major food of chinook is herring, the major food of the resident orca is chinook. The 'resident' herring are also vital to other wild fish, such as the severely depleted rockfish and ling cod that DFO is mandated to rebuild.

Winter vs Roe; Migratory vs Resident

The winter herring fishery is a food and bait fishery that is carried out between November and February, and can take place throughout the Strait of Georgia region with some small exceptions.

The roe herring fishery starts in March, and is set where the large migratory stock still spawn, such as in the Hornby Island to Qualicum Beach area. This is the population that the DFO says is at 'historic levels' and 'still healthy.'

DFO researchers have never fully identified the complex biology of the migratory and 'resident' herring stocks. Current data gaps raise huge questions around the reckless nature of increasing a winter fishery that would distribute the catch over a much earlier time period and a much larger area—moving into areas and time periods where these resident populations are only just recovering.

The single paper assessing abundance of resident herring populations, published in *Canadian Technical Reports of Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences* (1990), concludes that they

© Island Tides Publishing Ltd. This article may be reproduced with the following attribution, in its entirety, and notification to Island Tides Publishing Ltd.

'This article was published (November 17, 2011) in 'Island Tides', an independent, regional newspaper distributing across the Southern Strait of Georgia from Tsawwassen to Victoria to Nanaimo.'

Island Tides Publishing Ltd., Box 55, Pender Island, BC V0N 2M0 • 250-629-3660 • islandtides@islandtides.com • www.islandtides.com

were at very low levels.

The quota set for the March roe herring fishery targeting these 'migratory' stocks, is still set at 20% of catch, despite declining biomass and decreasing size of fish. The fishery must now be left open over a longer period, and over a larger area, than at any time in the past.

Ecological & Economic Value

For millennia, herring spawned in Ganges and Fulford Harbours with resident herring populations schooling during the fall and winter in places like Sansum Narrows. The herring brought salmon, huge flocks of seabirds and marine mammals to the area, as evidenced in the archaeological record 'Traditional Ecological Knowledge', and historical accounts from older fishers and scientists.

The Ganges area spawn was a significant and distinctive one because it came so early. Many groups travelled to the area as early as January for some of the first 'spring' food of these oily fish, rich in Omega-3.

Other struggling or recovering populations in the south Salish Sea, including Cowichan, Saanich Inlet, Pender Harbour, Howe Sound, Boundary Bay, Sechelt, Chemainus and other traditional spawns were once important economically for local sustainable fisheries such as the First Nations spawn-on-kelp, a non-kill method of collecting a percentage of eggs on seaweeds.

Loss of First Nations Access

Herring are a constitutionally-protected food source of First Nations, but the First Nations of the Salish Sea are unable to harvest herring and herring roe. Recently, a university/First

Nations group called the 'Herring School', has documented this loss of access, while at the same time providing much valuable new archeological evidence that observes long periods of Aboriginal past use, by location.

If DFO allows this newly acquired knowledge to be integrated with modern fisheries science, it could provide a basis for a comprehensive rebuilding process, and a much better understanding of the herring populations.

Next Steps

Some have suggested that Minister Ashfield meet personally with BC communities, First Nations, and those involved in the herring-dependent industries, to plan long-term rebuilding and gain firsthand knowledge of the fishery.

The net public revenues that could be generated from a fully rebuilt and well-managed 'resident' herring resource are very large, and Minister Ashfield is being encouraged to make this the the most important policy goal at this time.

The Raincoast Conservation Foundation issued a caution to Minister Ashfield that his decision may put these resident populations at risk. The Minister, at time of writing, had not responded. ✉

Island Tides *thanks Briony Penn for providing the files used in compiling this article.*