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Salish Sea's Salmon - Adam Olsen

The Fraser River Panel's July reports feature a glum forecast for the 2016 salmon run. River volumes and sockeye returns are lower than average, water temperatures are higher than average, and the commercial fishery remains closed.

Despite increasing challenges for the Pacific salmon, their importance to our coastal ecosystems and our identity has not diminished. So what can we learn from our past to inform the Pacific salmon policy for today and the future?

The Pacific salmon play a central role in the cultural, economic and spiritual life of the Straits Salish. The EN E I moon, the sixth in the WSÁNE calendar, celebrates the return of the sockeye to earth and when the Ocean Spray blooms in early June the WSÁNE prepare for the coming salmon harvest.

The salmon give life to the creeks, streams, and all the flora and fauna of British Columbia. To the WSÁNE, salmon are revered, they are honoured and deeply respected for their sacrifice. The salmon are our relatives and our stories tell of how they saved our lives.

The annual fishing season of the WSÁNE began from our winter villages on the Saanich Peninsula. We moved our families to our harvesting sites located throughout the Southern Gulf Islands, just as the salmon's journey was ending, completing the sacred cycle of another generation.

Our stories tell us of a gift given to the WSÁNE, the SXOLE (reef net), which allowed us to harvest the sockeye in the open ocean. Ancient knowledge of tides, timing and salmon migratory routes allowed the WSÁNE to undertake an expansive enterprise that rivals the modern commercial salmon industry, but with distinct differences.

The Straits Salish harvest was the epitome of a sustainable industry and not because our ancestors lacked the capacity to

catch fish. Reef netting families returned to their SWÁLET (location) to re-establish a large scale operation capable of catching thousands of sockeye each day, in each net, with several nets lined up side-by-side at each location.

A reef net operation consists of two canoes anchored parallel to each other with a net strung tightly between. In front, a lead net gradually inclining from the ocean floor is attached to the front of each canoe, drawing the schooling sockeye between the two canoes and into a large net that billowed behind. This stationary fishing technique was efficient, accurate and generated tremendous wealth.

Once the nets were full, salmon were either selected for harvest or released. Reef netters saw greater value in the fish they released to spawn a new generation in their sacred lineage than the fish they harvested. A reef netter's inheritance was the fishing location, so great care was taken to not upset the delicate balance. Sustainability was enshrined in practice, in ritual and in law. It was not a law of the people, it was a law of nature.

That law and relationship are broken. Modern harvesting techniques are aggressive and they have degraded the sacred lineages of our relatives. The habitat once fed by the salmon throughout the entire Fraser River system, deep into the heart of British Columbia, has changed. The climate has changed.

The WSÁNE held the Pacific salmon and their relationship with the fish in the highest regard because they saved the people when they were poor and hungry. Now it is time for people to save the salmon, who are poor and hungry.

We can learn from our past to build a resilient and sustainable home for future generations, but we must embrace an ancient relationship, a delicate balance and the restraint of the Straits Salish people. ✍

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Island Tides Publishing Ltd, Box 55, Pender Island, BC V0N 2M0 • 1-250-216-2267 • islandtides@islandtides.com • www.islandtides.com