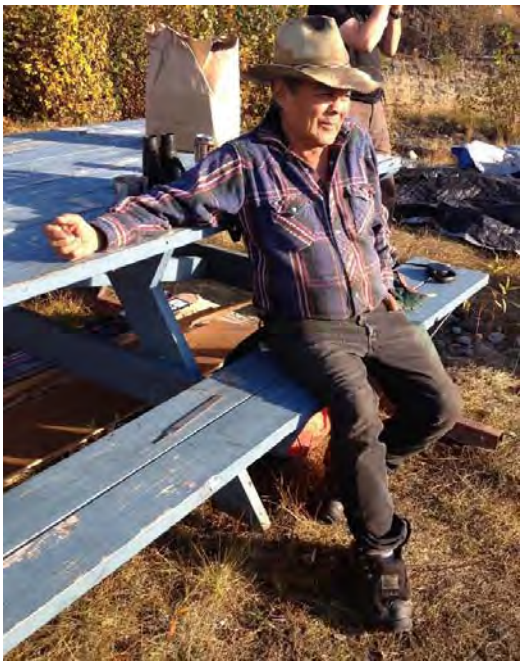
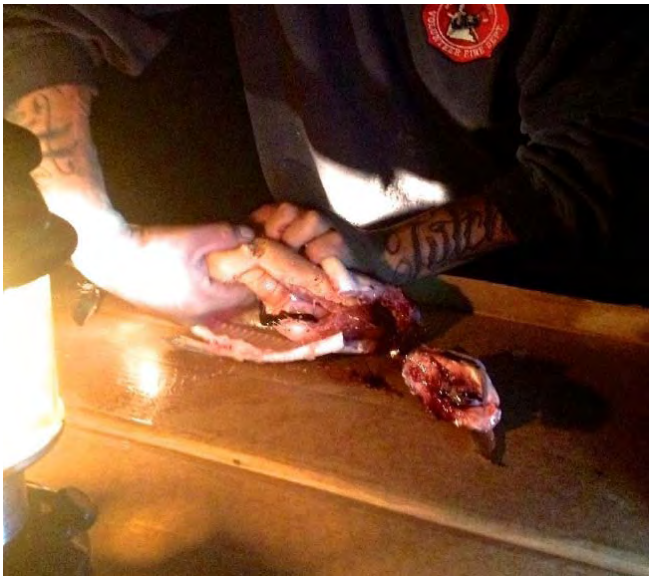
Yukon River Cultural Fisheries Project





Prepared by Erin Linklater for the Yukon Salmon Sub-Committee
November 26, 2014

YUKON SALMON SUB-COMMITTEE

YUKON RIVER CHINOOK SALMON STOCK RESTORATION

Table of Contents

"In the past there were many fish camps.
Now there are less and nobody visits anymore".
Agnes Charlie, Carmacks, Yukon

"Moose and caribou do not replace King salmon"
Frank Patterson, Mayo, Yukon

"They used to be big—you could hold them up and their
nose would touch the ground."
Frank Patterson, Mayo, Yukon

"Town is not for us. If you want to be Indian you need to live out.
People today don't got nothing"
Betty Lucas, Mayo, Yukon

"You can cut whitefish same way as salmon."
Betty Lucas, Mayo Yukon

"My dad lets me drive the boat…yes, he shows me the channels."
Sommer Mervyn, Mayo, Yukon

"It's important so that those coming behind us have their turn with this
precious resource that has kept us healthy and strong."
J. Roger Alfred, Pelly Crossing, Yukon

Introduction

Long Ago…

This report, written from a First Nation's perspective, is not based in scientific principles, technical reports or data collection. It is a broad approach to explore concepts related to a collective cultural fishery.

First Nations people fished Chinook salmon for thousands of years. They fished for their subsistence needs and because they followed nature's law, they did not strain the fish.

The people were nomadic, and travelled to their Chinook fishing camps in the summer months. They used tools fashioned from the land to fish, such as: birch or caribou skin boats, spears or gaffes, and sinew or babiche rope nets.

Chinook have the highest oil levels of any salmon species and are very nutritious. This made them extremely valuable to First Nations people. They would catch and dry the fish for the long, cold winters. Salmon skin was used to make water containers.

Salmon have ensured survival and fish camps have been a focus of learning, family, and happiness in First Nations communities for thousands of years. For this reason, the message to respect salmon is found in the ancient stories of Indigenous peoples along the Yukon River and its tributaries. Salmon are an integral part of First Nation culture and identity.

Culture is a way of life and of viewing the world held by a group of people, and passed on through time. It encompasses values, practices, language, beliefs, and heritage. It attaches a person with his/her heart to a certain place and certain people. In this way belonging to a certain culture forms one's identity.

First Nations culture varies from nation to nation, but most indigenous peoples share certain principles inherent to their culture. An example is living in a way that does not upset the balance in nature by respecting other living things. This includes not taking more than what is needed and a sense of responsibility and stewardship for the land and water so these things remain for the generations to come.

First Nation culture is important when thinking of the concept of a cultural fishery. A cultural fishery is a fishery that is integral to a culture and an individual and collective identity. It can be called a cultural fishery because it has been passed down through generations. It is important to keep First Nations cultural fisheries alive if we want Yukon River Chinook salmon and habitat to be protected and valued as the people value themselves. In other words, the persistence of First Nations cultural fisheries could ensure that there will always be a voice for the salmon so there remains salmon for generations to come.

Cultural Fisheries in Yukon

Yukon River Chinook salmon are a shared resource, between different peoples, cultures, and countries. There are many human, natural and commercial pressures on salmon stocks. They can travel over 3,000 kilometres along the Yukon River and are valued by individuals, communities and cultures throughout that entire journey.

This shared resource comes with a great responsibility to ensure that these salmon are here for generations to come. Fish camps all the along the Yukon River have been sharing stories, food, and culture for generations. Elders took their place, doing what they know, what comes naturally to them and passed it on to the youth. Yukon River Chinook salmon were always the best reason for families to get together at fish camp to work together, cutting and smoking fish.

Cultural fisheries in this report are defined as a collective harvest of fish with the goal of maximizing the transfer of knowledge and minimizing the impact on the resource.

In times of crisis…

Yukon River Chinook salmon are at all time lows. The last decade has seen the salmon run down to a third of what it used to be. Fishing restrictions are in place and not being able to “meet needs”, is the new normal. As a result, First Nations people are not able to participate in their culture, and in Canada, their right to harvest.

Yukon First Nations communities at the end of the Yukon River Chinook run have been dealing with this crisis for more than a decade. Many Yukon First Nations have stopped fishing all together. Others fly-in other fish from far away places, at a great cost and hardship. There are some children in First Nation communities that now think fish “comes from planes”.

These non-native fish (usually Sockeye from B.C.) are flown in and then taken out in bins to fish camps to still be able to cut, smoked and dried. They are often without heads and guts, two things that are very important to the elders.

First Nations that have been paying for these fish at a great cost and it has come at a great economic hardship. Paying for fish means fewer resources for other programs and services for the First Nation and less income available for individuals. That is how high a priority salmon are for Yukon First Nation communities.

In times of conservation…

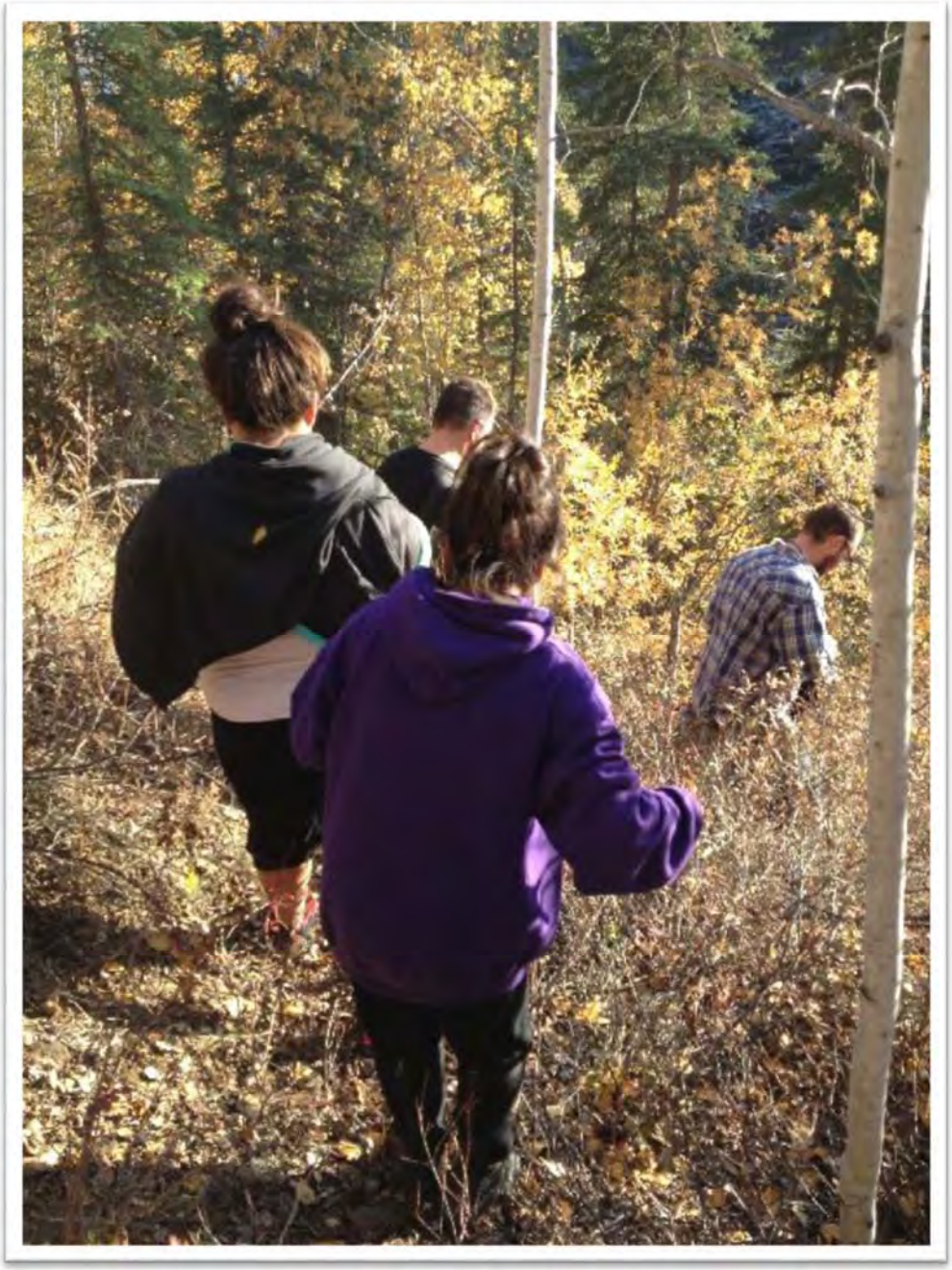
In these times of Yukon River Chinook conservation one of the biggest concerns is the fact that fish camps are sitting empty, people are not out fishing and the next generation is losing their capacity to fish.

It is essential that Yukon First Nations be supported when fishing collectively as a community. By taking only a few fish, other fish, other species and holding cultural based fish camps, there is still fishing and the knowledge is being passed on from one generation to the next. People will continue to value a resource they participate in.

As stated, cultural fisheries are characterized as a group of people fishing together, sharing together and passing on their knowledge collectively. They are maximizing the transfer of knowledge and the benefits of culture, fish and harvest camps, while minimizing the impact on the resource.

The following is a list of Yukon First Nations and a description of their efforts at hosting fish and culture camps. By sharing these initiatives it is hoped that Yukon First Nations, and ultimately all along the Yukon River Drainage will participate in cultural fisheries.

Yukon First Nations Initiatives



Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Fish Culture Camp

Overview

The Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Fish culture camp has now been operating for thirteen years. The Hän people of around Dawson City, Yukon and Moosehide village have always considered Chinook salmon to be a staple in their diets. The relationship between salmon and the Hän has been passed down through generations, and the First Fish culture camp ensures these values continue to be passed on to Hän youth despite (and especially because of…) the declining numbers of Chinook salmon passing by Dawson City and Moosehide. The camp is dedicated to conservation and stewardship of Chinook salmon to ensure sustainability in the long term. This is done by educating youth in a fun and hands-on way so that they will care about the well-being of salmon and their habitat as much as previous generations.[1]

Every summer, about 10-15 youth, ages approximately 10-16, are invited to attend a week-long fish camp at the traditional village of Moosehide north of Dawson City.[2] Some children attend for multiple years. They travel via the Yukon River by boat. Accommodations, food, and necessary supplies are provided at the campsite.

What do the youth learn?

- Hän fishing values and commercial fishing values and methods
- Cleaning, filleting, stripping, smoking, and drying methods
- Setting nets, pulling nets, untangling nets
- Discussions and presentations on history
- Salmon life-cycle
- Long ago fishing stories
- What is fry habitat
- Habitat management
- Stock assessment
- Conservation and Protection techniques
- Boat and River safety on the Yukon River
- The concept of reducing harvest in times of necessary conservation
- Traditional and biological knowledge of salmon
- Berry-picking and harvesting of traditional medicines
- Bear safety
- Sharing First Fish with Elders and the community[3]

Conclusion

At the end of camp, youth walk away with a lot more knowledge and experience. The camp ends with a closing ceremony with many members of the community attending. The youth respectfully give away their first fish to the Elders and are honored. Everyone in the community is involved in lifting up the young people, and the youth are proud to give back to the community. These are invaluable lessons.

Figure 1: 85 pound salmon caught in Dawson City, August 1924

How is it funded?

The Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Fish culture camp is funded by the Yukon River Panel Restoration & Enhancement fund, as well as Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Nation (THFN). Staff at THFN are in charge of organizing and running the camp. Community members are paid to be boat operators and cooks. Elders receive honorariums to attend. Professionals, such as conservation officers and Department of Fisheries and Oceans employees, attend as part of their jobs.[4]

Na-Cho Nyak Dun Fall Fish Camp

Overview

Normally, the Northern Tutchone people of the Na-Cho Nyak Dun First Nation (NNDFN) around Mayo would have been attending fish camps in the months of July and August to fish Chinook salmon with their families. Chinook salmon and moose are staples in the traditional diet of Northern Tutchone people, and the tradition of going to fish camp has been upheld for thousands of years. However, the numbers of Chinook salmon returning to their spawning grounds has become critically low, and in 2014 the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) and the Yukon Salmon Sub-Committee (YSSC) placed a ban on Chinook salmon fishing along the Yukon River even for subsistence harvesters.

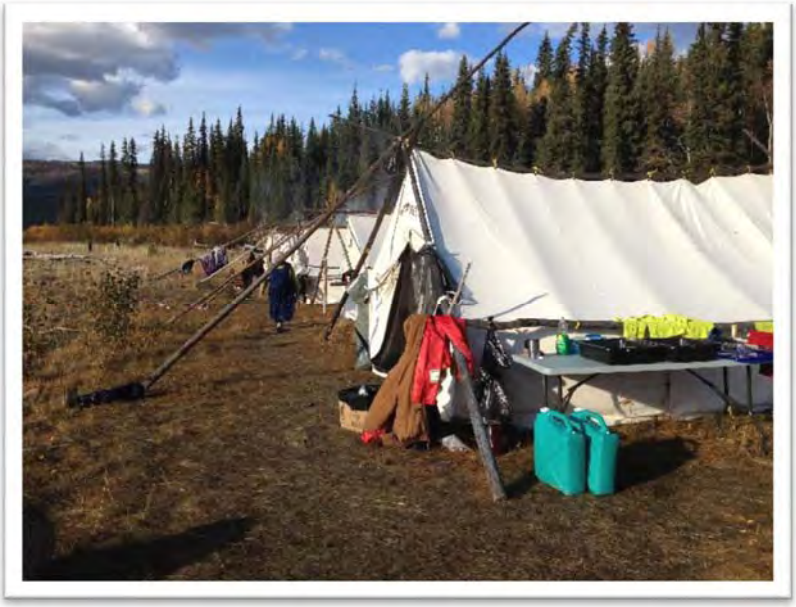


Figure 2 - Betty Lucas at Fraser Falls Camp, Stewart River, Sept 2014

In a response to the ban, NNDFN did three things:

1. Passed a resolution at their General Assembly to continue the ban on Chinook salmon fishing for an entire life cycle (8 years).
2. Ordered a metric ton of Sockeye salmon from Hazelton, BC on the Skeena River. The cost was shared with the Selkirk First Nation of Pelly and in total the order was six tons. Each family in Mayo received three salmon and individuals received two. The funds for this came out of NNDFN's fish and wildlife department's Traditional Pursuits budget that normally helps people with their fish camps.
3. Organized a fall fish camp at Fraser Falls up-river from Mayo on the Stewart River in late September.

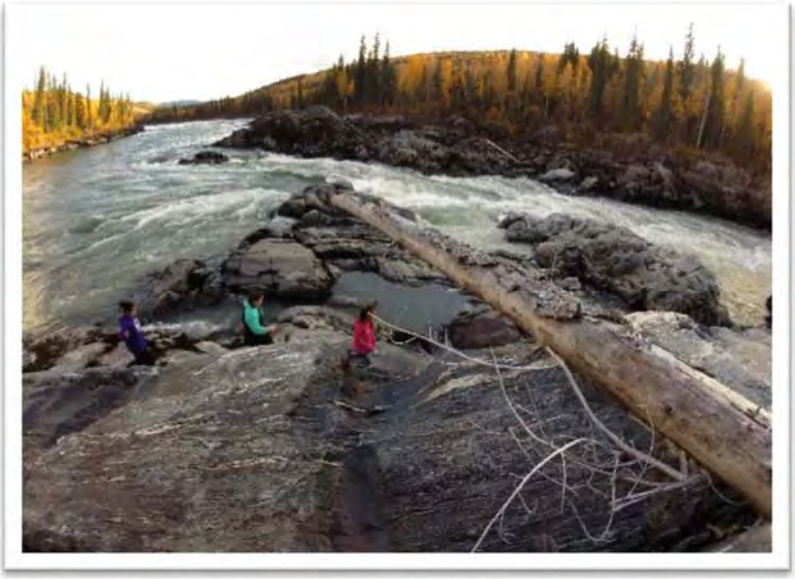


Figure 3: Christiana Hager, Sommer Mervyn and Jazmine Charette play by the falls where their ancestors used to gaffe

The camp was held in early fall (September 15-19) instead of summertime. Because Chinook fishing season had already passed, the camp focused on harvesting other species and animals including: whitefish, chum salmon, and Moose. The idea behind this camp was to have elders and youth present to continue on the passage of traditional knowledge that includes everything from reading the river, setting

up camp, setting nets, knowing the area, cutting fish, drying fish, building smoke shacks, etc. The funds for this camp also came from the NNDFN Traditional Pursuits budget.

Some youth were allowed to leave school to attend; however, better coordination with the school in future years will ensure greater attendance. About five youth aged 10-14 attended. Elders and parents came out to support, participate and teach, and some younger adults were hired to help run the camp and to participate. The camp was organized by Matt McHugh, the Fish & Wildlife Officer with NNDFN, and with help from community members and staff from the Lands & Resources Department of NNDFN: Ray Sabo, and Matias. NNDFN staff drove boats between Mayo and Fraser Falls every day to make sure everyone that wanted to attend had a ride. Some of the youth drove boats up with their parents. Wall tents, cook tent, food, and hunting and fishing supplies were provided.

What did youth learn?

- How to navigate the Stewart River.
- Traditional knowledge of Fraser Falls including: stories, geography, trails, traditional medicines, fishing techniques.
- How to set nets, check nets.
- How to set up a smoke shack.
- Camp duties and responsibilities: maintaining the smoke shack, cleaning the dishes, getting water, setting up a tent, getting fire wood.
- Stories from elders in English and Northern Tutchone.
- Cleaning, filleting, stripping, smoking, and drying methods.
- Cutting whitefish is still good practice for cutting salmon.
- Cutting, hanging, and smoking moose meat.
- The best time to hunt moose.

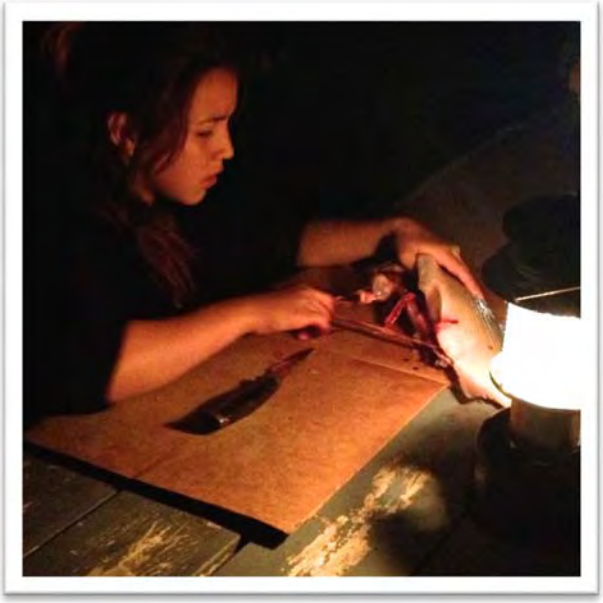


Figure 4: Jazmine Charette cutting whitefish after a late net check

Reflections on the camp

I had the opportunity to attend the Fraser Falls Fish Camp and I will never forget it! The campsite at Fraser Falls is a breathtaking spot, right below the roaring falls, about a four-hour boat ride up the Stewart River from Mayo.

Fish camp is so much more than the act of fishing. It is about being together with family and friends, sharing food and stories, and learning from each other. The best times out there were when we were hanging out with the kids, hiking to the falls and picking juniper. At night we would sit around the fire and drink tea while the elders would tell stories and sing songs.

Important political discussions happen when the kids go to bed. Early in the morning the men went out and got a moose, and the women cooked fresh meat for everyone. I had tea with Elder Betty Lucas in her wall tent by the fire all morning and listened to her amazing stories and how she raised all her children at No-Gold just above Fraser Falls.

All of the kids that attended the Fraser Falls fish camp have attended other fish camps, such as the Hager camp at McQuestin, for many years of their lives.

Figure 5: Elder Frank Patterson teaching kids about juniper berries

At the prospect of Chinook fishing being closed for many years, they felt very sad. However, they had the opportunity to attend this fish camp and were enthusiastically checking nets and filleting whitefish to hang to dry. They were helping to find rotting wood for the smoke shack, and helping around camp. Elder Betty Lucas explained that cutting whitefish is still good practice for cutting salmon.

I have a lot of hope that the fish camp culture will continue through initiatives like the Fraser Falls Fish Camp. It takes community support, cooperation and innovation to survive in hard times, but that is how First Nations people have always had to survive during hard times.

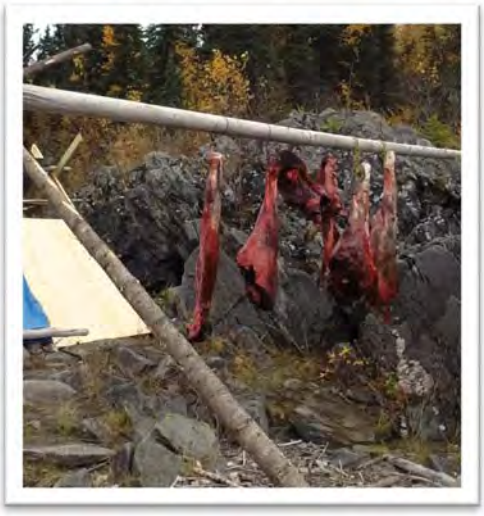


Figure 8: Moose meat hanging at camp

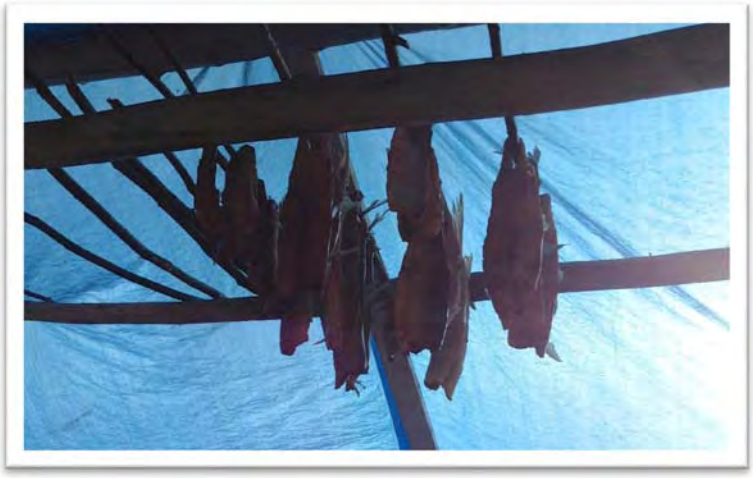


Figure 7: Whitefish drying in smoke shack

Figure 6: Sunset at camp

Teslin Tlingit Council Initiatives

Overview

If there is any place that will be sensitive to the health of the Yukon River Chinook, it is at the end of the run. It is 3000 km (1864.11 miles) from the Bering Sea to Teslin Lake. The community of Teslin has been noticing the decline in Chinook salmon runs for decades.[5] Salmon has always been integral to the culture and subsistence needs of Teslin Tlingit people. For this reason, Teslin Tlingit Council (TTC) has been very proactive in salmon conservation and have barely fished for over a decade.[6]

In 2009, the community decided to restrict fishing to weekends, with a total limit of 225 for the community. In 2010, citizens passed resolution *Chinook Salmon Fishing Limitations 2010*.[7]

The resolution acknowledges that "…Yukon River Chinook are experiencing a major crisis." Furthermore, Teslin created a Salmon Working Group to create the *Teslin Tlingit Salmon Management Plan: a plan to address the crisis of the Chinook Salmon population decrease 2010-2015.* [8]

Out of this plan came the following recommendations, and only the second recommendation was adopted by the Teslin general assembly:

1. A seven year closure and international campaign to raise awareness of the Chinook Salmon crises.
    - One year cautious limit followed by a seven year voluntary closure.
    - International campaign starting from the ground up to get all users on board.
    - Simultaneous focus on maintaining cultural activities and identity related to salmon.
2. Cautious limits with international campaign.
    - Implement voluntary cautious limits.
    - Develop thresholds above DFO's based on traditional knowledge and implement voluntary harvest limits.
    - International campaign starting from the ground up to get all users on board.
    - Simultaneous focus on maintaining cultural activities and identity related to salmon[9].

Teslin Tlingit Council (TTC) also brings in Sockeye and Coho from the Taku River every summer. TTC citizens and staff are eligible to place orders with TTC for a minimum of 50 pounds and TTC pays for the freight from Atlin B.C.[10]

The salmon is used by each family so that knowledge of working with salmon is passed on.[11] TTC does not hold a community salmon fish camp.

Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation, Old Crow

Overview

The fly-in community of Old Crow is the most isolated in Yukon and is situated on the banks of the Porcupine River, a Yukon River tributary. To the Vuntut Gwich'in, Chinook salmon are important culturally and for subsistence. There is no commercial harvest in Old Crow.

When Chinook salmon fishing is open, the community of Old Crow collectively harvests around 350-400 fish. A single family may harvest around 40-50 and share it with the community as well.[12]

Gwich'in fishermen have been practicing conservation through personal restrictions or individual management plans based on what they see. This can include simple measure like letting larger females go and pulling the net once they have what they need.[13]

Knowledge about fishing Chinook, cutting them, and preparing or preserving them is usually passed down through individual families. If Old Crow is experiencing a healthy run, the Vuntut Gwitchin Government normally hosts a community event demonstrating how to cut and smoke salmon.[14]

Since there was a Chinook salmon closure in 2014, no such community event occurred.

Vuntut Gwich'in people are now focusing on fishing chum and coho. However, chum loses most of its oil content by the time it reaches Old Crow, and therefore is used almost exclusively to feed dogs. In 2014, fishermen reported chum being very healthy and edible for humans, albeit this is an anomaly.[15]

Coho is fished in November, and fishermen require good solid ice on the river to access these salmon. For the past number of years, VG fishermen have not been able to fish coho due to the freeze conditions on the Porcupine River.[16]

When conditions are good, one fisherman may catch as much as 20 coho.

Because Old Crow is so isolated, having the chinook fishery closed has a sizable impact on food security. Not having chinook in the freezer, especially if coho are also unavailable, takes a lot off the table.[17]

The probability of having the chinook fishery closed for up to two cycles is very sad for residents. The main impact they feel this will have is on the culture, especially the passing on of stories, knowledge, and skills intergenerationally.[18]

Figure 9: Archie Linklater at Rampart House on the Porcupine River, 1929. Archie was a tall man of about 6'-2"

Selkirk First Nation Initiative

Northern Tutchone girls carrying Chinook salmon at a fish camp in the Pelly River area, 1929.[19]

Overview

For the Northern Tutchone people of Pelly Crossing, going to fish camp is an integral part of their culture as well as "family bonding time."[20] The people have noticed a decline in salmon populations for years and have agreed to reduce their catch for the last 15 years.[21] The people of Selkirk First Nation know there is a need for conservation.[22] Salmon fishing is also important as a food source, and because of this, the citizens of Selkirk First Nation voluntarily imposed a full closure to ensure that there continues to be salmon in future.[23]

With the Chinook salmon fishing closure in 2014, Selkirk First Nation partnered with Na-Cho Nyak Dun First Nation, Capstone Mining Corporation and Western Copper and Gold to purchase six tons of Sockeye salmon from Hazelton, British Columbia on the Skeena River.[24]

Selkirk First Nation then distributed the salmon to active fish camps in the Selkirk traditional territory. Every camp received salmon to ensure the tradition and intergenerational teachings continues to thrive, and salmon is shared among the whole community. Extra salmon was bought for ceremonial purposes and potlatches.[25]

Selkirk First Nation will also begin focusing more on other species, such as freshwater fish.[26]

Though people found the Sockeye salmon to be much different to process, all generations still managed to spend time together out on the land to share knowledge and practice their traditional lifestyle.

Champagne and Ashihik First Nation

The Southern Tutchone people of the Champagne and Ashihik First Nations (CAFN) have fished sockeye, coho, and chinook for thousands of years for subsistence and cultural reasons.[27] They have also been noticing the decline in Chinook salmon runs for years and have been proactive in conservation efforts. CAFN has voluntarily closed fishing on many occasions in order to ensure more salmon make it to their spawning grounds with the future generations in mind.[28]

2014 Summer Education Camp

Despite the Chinook fishing closure, CAFN hosted a Summer Education Camp 2014. Seventeen kids, three youth, ten adults, and two elders participated.[29] The kids, youth, and adults hiked 104 kilometres from the village of Shadhäla (Champagne) to Chu'ena (Hutchi).[30]

What the kids learned and experienced

- Setting and checking fish nets
- Hiking traditional trails
- Preparing fish
- Picking berries
- Speaking the Southern Tutchone language
- Spent a long time out on the land
- Camp chores
- Canoeing through the creeks on their traditional territory and canoeing techniques and safety
- Survival techniques
- The history of their people through stories
- Working as a team out on the land

Concerns for the Future

Elders

- That the younger generation will not be able to fish and live the traditional lifestyle.
- That young people do not speak their native languages.
- Elders fear the development of the land will affect traditional way of life, issues such as the Peel Watershed, Eagle Plains and mining.
- The modern school system takes First Nations youth away from their culture like residential schools.
- That First Nations people are happier and healthier on the land.
- Worried about the effects of drugs and alcohol on First Nations values and way of life.
- Worried about the effects of technology, media and popular culture on youth.

Youth

- Youth feel sadness that they may not be able to learn traditional skills.
- Are sad that the Chinook salmon fishery may be closed for years to come, "it sucks".
- Wish they could speak their language, but have not really been taught in many cases.
- Are eager to learn.
- Are happy when they are out on the land.

Notes

[1] Roberta Joseph, "Yukon River Panel Restoration and Enhancement Fund Stage II Detailed Application Form 2014: Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Fish Culture Camp."

[2] Roberta Joseph, "Yukon River Panel Restoration and Enhancement Fund Stage II Detailed Application Form 2014: Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Fish Culture Camp."

[3] Roberta Joseph, "Yukon River Panel Restoration and Enhancement Fund Stage II Detailed Application Form 2014: Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Fish Culture Camp."

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[5] Teslin Tlingit Council, "Salmon," http://www.ttc-teslin.com/salmon.html. Web Nov 10, 2014.

[6] Emmie Fairclough, Personal Interview. 17 November 2014.

[7] Teslin Tlingit Council, "Salmon."

[8] Teslin Tlingit General Assembly, "Resolution #8: Chinook Salmon Fishing Limitations 2010," http://www.ttc-teslin.com/documents/TTC-AGA-signed-resolution-number-8.pdf.

[9] Teslin Tlingit General Assembly, "Resolution #8: Chinook Salmon Fishing Limitations 2010."

[10] Emmie Fairclough.

[11] Teslin Tlingit Council, "Salmon."

[12] Lance Nagwan. Personal Interview. 14 November 2014.

[13] Lance Nagwan.

[14] Lance Nagwan.

[15] Lance Nagwan.

[16] Lance Nagwan.

[17] Lance Nagwan.

[18] Lance Nagwan.

[19] Yukon Archives, Claude and Mary Tidd Fonds, YA#7184, Whitehorse.

[20] Selkirk First Nation, "The 2014 Chinook Salmon Harvest Closure Has Huge Impact on Selkirk First Nation." *SFN News*, Volume 10, Issue 2, p. 17.

[21] Selkirk First Nation. Selkirk First Nation Community Meeting on Salmon. 10 June 2014, p.3.

[22] Selkirk First Nation, "The 2014 Chinook Salmon Harvest Closure Has Huge Impact on Selkirk First Nation."

[23] Myles Dolphin, "Miners help Selkirk First Nation fly in fish," *Yukon News*, August 15, 2014.

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[26] Selkirk First Nation. Selkirk First Nation Community Meeting on Salmon. 10 June 2014, p.4.

[27] Champagne and Ashihik First Nations, "CAFN History," http://www.cafn.ca/history.html, web, 2 Nov 2014.

[28] "Yukon River shuts down Klukshu River fishery over record low salmon numbers," *CBC News* 29 July, 2008.

[29] "2014 Education Summer Camp," *Dàkwäní: What people are saying,* Fall 2014, p. 9.

[30] "2014 Education Summer Camp."

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