

Written Submission on the State of the Pacific Salmon To the Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans

Respectfully Submitted By:

Bev Sellars, Senior Leader, Indigenous Leadership Initiative

Frank Brown, láłíyá sila, Heiltsuk (Bella Bella) Hereditary Chief;

Senior Leader, Indigenous Leadership Initiative; and Adjunct Professor in
Resource and Environmental Management at Simon Fraser University

Andy Olson, “Oowaatin”, Executive Director, The Native Fishing Association

Marilyn Slett, Káwáził, Chief councillor of the Heiltsuk Nation;

President of Coastal First Nations; and Co-chair of the Wild Salmon
Advisory Council to British Columbia

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Each year we hear more alarming reports about collapsing salmon stocks and declining returns and 2020 was no different. In fact, for some rivers along B.C.'s North and Central coasts, 2020 was the worst salmon return in recorded history.

Although the factors causing salmon declines are varied and complex, we know the main causes. Cumulative impacts from more than a century of mismanagement, industrial logging and overfishing, plus climate change, have led to these record-low salmon returns.

Salmon are an iconic species that indicate the health of our ecosystem. First Nations people have maintained an inalienable relationship to salmon as a source of food and for social and ceremonial purposes as affirmed in the Supreme Court of Canada's Sparrow decision.¹

Modern ethnology has shown that different cultures have different reasoning systems and different ways of interpreting their experiences. The way we see the world, the way we conceive reality, is relative to the culture in which we have been raised.

The worldview of most newcomers/settlers to the Americas since 1492 recognized only human beings as deserving of moral and legal consideration. An image of this can be found in the form of a pyramid in which human beings are situated at the top and all other beings or things below exist for their benefit.

Indigenous Peoples had their own distinct beliefs that were completely contrary to the new arrivals. Indigenous Peoples knew that everything was connected and that everything is alive. A circle describes the Indigenous way of thinking. There is no one place in the circle that is dominant because everything on Mother Earth is equal.

Over the centuries, Indigenous Peoples have developed intimate knowledge of the land and waters in their territories. While Western Science is important, without the corresponding Indigenous knowledge it is like trying to put together a puzzle with many of the pieces missing.

The early history of the newcomers in what is now known as Canada indicates they relied on Indigenous Peoples to survive. For example, when Simon Fraser was "discovering" the river later named after him, Indigenous people took on the responsibility of guiding him. Fraser himself acknowledged he would never have made it without them.

¹ *R v Sparrow*, [1990] 1 S.C.R. 1075

Salmon and other foods processed by Indigenous Peoples helped the newcomers survive in a foreign environment. Forts and trading posts relied on Indigenous Peoples for their foods and exchanged different foods with each other. Dried salmon was sent East and wild rice, maple syrup, and buffalo meat were sent West, for example.

Unfortunately, once Indigenous people were no longer needed in this way, racist laws were passed to remove us from the lands and waters we depended upon. At the same time, practices of the newcomers that were destructive to the environment were allowed almost unhindered until recently.

Global warming, depletion of natural resources and the disappearance or drastic decline of many animals provide evidence of a loss of connection to Mother Earth. Human beings may think they can control nature and bend natural laws to suit their purposes but that is impossible. We protect ourselves with air conditioning, filtered water and other “comforts”, but this creates chaos for non-human communities that live in the water, air or on the land. They do not have the same protections and struggle to survive in the pollution humans create.

Indigenous people know they have a responsibility to speak up for Mother Earth and we are happy to see others realizing that they too need to do the same.

First Nations along B.C.’s North Pacific Coast have made progress, through the Great Bear Rainforest agreements and others, toward ending destructive logging practices and reducing exploitation of fisheries through limiting catches and enforcing strategic closures. We have protected important salmon-bearing watersheds and implemented ecosystem-based management in others, while establishing new stock assessment and catch monitoring programs across our territories.

Yet the decline in salmon populations has surpassed the crisis point. It is not just a tragedy for the species itself, and the globally unique ecosystems of which it is a part, but a major threat to our ability to exercise our rights as Indigenous Peoples. Without immediate action to restore the species, we will see long-lasting, devastating consequences, not just for salmon, but for a long list of other species, including human beings. Our response to this crisis will say a great deal about our resolve and capabilities as collaborative managers of this vital species.

Five salmon species — chinook, chum, coho, pink and sockeye — help shape the entire coastal food web along the Pacific Coast, from the open ocean to freshwater streams and rivers that reach far inland. As keystone species, salmon are integral to the health and survival of a diverse range of species — from endangered orcas that patrol coastal waters to bears and wolves that bring nutrient-rich carcasses deep into forested habitats.

Our sustainable future depends fundamentally on healthy and thriving salmon populations. We offer, as a start, these recommendations:

- 1) Canada wants to reconcile with Indigenous Peoples. *The first step for everyone is to reconcile with Mother Earth.* Everything we do on the land, no matter where we are, affects the water.

That connection has to become a part of all decisions. ***Reconcile with Mother Earth. Recognize that everything we do on the land is connected to and affects the health of the water. Reflect this in decision-making.***

- 2) The Heiltsuk were on the coast when the last ice age ended ten thousand years ago and salmon populated the river systems. Resource management included transplanting salmon from salmon-bearing to non salmon-bearing streams in the territory. Both rock and wooden weirs were used to harvest salmon. ***As First Nations people we are willing and able to continue stewarding salmon and working collaboratively with Canada and British Columbia.*** We expect the Governments and their agents to uphold the doctrine of priority. This would include conservation, First Nations food, social and ceremonial needs, commercial and commercial/recreational. ***First Nations people to continue stewarding salmon and working collaboratively with Canada and British Columbia. Governments and their agents to uphold the doctrine of priority including conservation, First Nations food, social and ceremonial needs, commercial and commercial/recreational.***
- 3) Indigenous Peoples need to be involved on an equal basis. It is about power sharing and ending environmental racism. ***Transition from DFO Central management to Collaborative Local Area Management groups.***
- 4) ***Transition to and support Indigenous participation in all levels of management and fisheries science,*** inclusive of model development, test fishery planning and execution, and inclusion of Indigenous Traditional Knowledge. If fisheries (salmon) regulations are changing, Indigenous Peoples need to be included in decision making as per priority access after conservation.
- 5) *Environmental standards* are too weak. ***Rework environmental standards with Indigenous people involved. Look at projects on a cumulative basis,*** not as a single entity but for all projects. Also, for some industries, such as Placer Mining, there is little or no enforcement or regulation by governments. ***Pay attention to enforcement or regulation by governments.***
- 6) Put environmental concerns ahead of money. Don't allow companies to cut corners to save money. Resource extraction should have to prove there is a need. Right now "need" is based on the TSX. ***Account for the real price of resource extraction and continued pollution.***
- 7) ***Treat salmon with the respect they deserve as culturally important and more than a commodity.***
- 8) Seals and sea lions pose a huge threat to the survival of salmon in the future of BC and a *managed harvest should be considered to reduce their impact and provide economic opportunity to First Nation harvesters in the spirit of reconciliation.* ***Consider a managed harvest of seals and sea lions to reduce their impact as a threat to the survival of salmon in***

BC and provide economic opportunity to First Nation harvesters, in the spirit of reconciliation.

- 9) First Nations have a constitutionally protected right to access salmon for food, social, and ceremonial purposes and our access takes priority over all other uses after conservation needs are met. We have organizations in place that can help with the salmon issue but they need equal power to make change. Indigenous people are working together from Alaska to Oregon on ocean issues. Canada needs to ensure Indigenous people in BC are fully equipped to be a part of this important alliance. ***Ensure Indigenous Peoples in BC are equipped to work as allies on the salmon issue with Indigenous organizations from Alaska to Oregon.***
- 10) Indigenous Guardians are trained experts who care for the land and water. They work with provincial and territorial governments, industry and regulators to support monitoring and implementation of environmental agreements. Indigenous Guardians need to be in every territory. ***Support the development of a National Indigenous Guardians Network.***
- 11) DFO is in a conflict of interest by supporting the wild salmon policy while simultaneously investing in finfish aquaculture which negatively impacts wild salmon through habitat impacts, escapement and disease. ***Remove open pen fish farms from Pacific waters.***
- 12) As we endure climate change, big blobs and ocean acidification we must firmly encourage staying committed to the precautionary principle of maintaining what genetic biodiversity remains with salmon. ***Stay committed to genetic (wild) biodiversity with salmon.***

In truth, there are no silver bullet solutions to this crisis. Restoring salmon populations will require a comprehensive effort from all governing bodies — a mix of planning and management actions that will immediately reduce impacts from both commercial and sport fishing, protect important freshwater and ocean salmon habitats, and increase monitoring and data collection. Funding has been committed by Canada and B.C. but money alone is not enough.

We must act now for the sake of future generations.

Summary of recommendations:

- 1) *Reconcile with Mother Earth. Recognize that everything we do on the land is connected to and affects the health of the water. Reflect this in decision-making.*
- 2) *First Nations people to continue stewarding salmon and working collaboratively with Canada and British Columbia. Governments and their agents to uphold the doctrine of priority including conservation, First Nations food, social and ceremonial needs, commercial and commercial/recreational.*
- 3) *Transition from DFO Central management to Collaborative Local Area Management groups.*
- 4) *Transition to and support Indigenous participation in all levels of management and fisheries science.*
- 5) *Rework environmental standards with Indigenous people involved. Look at projects on a cumulative basis. Pay attention to enforcement or regulation by governments.*
- 6) *Account for the real price of resource extraction and continued pollution.*
- 7) *Treat salmon with the respect they deserve as culturally important and more than a commodity.*
- 8) *Consider a managed harvest of seals and sea lions to reduce their impact as a threat to the survival of salmon in BC and provide economic opportunity to First Nation harvesters, in the spirit of reconciliation.*
- 9) *Ensure Indigenous Peoples in BC are equipped to work as allies on the salmon issue with Indigenous organizations from Alaska to Oregon.*
- 10) *Support the development of a National Indigenous Guardians Network.*
- 11) *Remove open pen fish farms from Pacific waters.*
- 12) *Stay committed to genetic (wild) biodiversity with salmon.*

Referenced materials:

Káwáził Marilyn Slett: Governments must act now to save wild salmon: As the bottom has dropped out of salmon abundance, we've also seen a drastic reduction in monitoring programs by the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans. Chief Marilyn Slett. January 29, 2021.

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DFO is making new fishing rules. Will they work? Marc Fawcett-Atkinson, Local Journalism Initiative Reporter National Observer. January 29, 2021.

<https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2021/01/29/dfo-is-making-new-fishing-rules-will-they-work.html>

Presenter of this brief:

*The **Indigenous Leadership Initiative (ILI)** is dedicated to facilitating the strengthening of Indigenous Nationhood for the fulfillment of the Indigenous cultural responsibility to our lands, the emergence of new generations of Indigenous leaders, and helping communities develop the skills and capacity that they will need as they continue to become fully respected and equally treated partners in Canada's system of governance and its economic and social growth. www.ilinationhood.ca*