

# People of the **Nass River**

There is no single resource as closely tied to Nisga'a life and culture as salmon. For thousands of years, the rich salmon runs of the Nass River were harvested in a manner that allowed the Nisga'a people to build and sustain their villages and to develop a trading empire that extended into the interior and ranged up and down the coast. In addition to salmon, the Nass River is home to oolichan, a finger-sized member of the smelt family. A mainstay of Nisga'a culture and a historic staple of Nisga'a trade, oolichan are also known as candlefish because, when dried, they retain enough oil to burn like candles.

## **Fisheries Management**

Nisga'a control of their own fishery is vital for both cultural and economic reasons. That is why, in 1992, Nisga'a Fisheries was established to manage the resource in partnership with Canada. Currently, thirty people are employed full-time in Nisga'a fisheries management. At the height of the season, this complement rises to 85.

Under the terms of the treaty, Canada and British Columbia each contributed \$5.9 million to support Nisga'a participation in the general commercial fishery.

Canada managed the reallocation of the salmon resource resulting from the Nisga'a Final Agreement through a voluntary licence retirement program. Canada and the commercial salmon fishing industry agreed on the number and type of licences to retire.

During its first year of operation, the Joint Fisheries Management Committee — the main tripartite fisheries body established by the Final Agreement — recommended the Nisga'a annual fishing plan to the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans. In 2000, NLG established a new application and permit process for the Nisga'a inland commercial salmon fishery. Almost 900 applications were received and approximately 450 permit holders participated.

Nisga'a Fisheries enjoyed a successful year with an above average return. In 2000, Nisga'a fishers were able to harvest just over 35,000 salmon, which represented some \$900,000 in revenue. The treaty allows for the commercial sale of salmon and this new revenue has enabled the communities to benefit significantly. The domestic harvest, for internal Nisga'a consumption, reached the target of 25,000 salmon.

In addition to fish, Nisga'a citizens have the right to harvest intertidal bivalves from designated areas for domestic purposes. British Columbia, responsible for regulating the harvest of oysters, established Intertidal Bivalve Harvest Areas in Observatory Inlet, Nasoga'a Gulf, and Winter Inlet.

#### **New Partnerships**

Since the Effective Date, Nisga'a Fisheries has been building partnerships outside the Nisga'a Nation. In 2000, NLG entered into an alliance with Canadian Fishing Company (Canfisco) to process Nisga'a commercial fish. Canfisco supplied Nisga'a Fisheries with personnel, fish totes, and expertise in processing fish. Five percent of future annual catches will be utilised for value-added products, including premium, specially labelled, Nisga'a wild sockeye.

### **Lisims Fisheries Conservation Trust**

As a result of the Final Agreement, Canada and the Nisga'a Nation established the Lisims Fisheries Conservation Trust, which is managed by trustees appointed by the Nisga'a Nation, British Columbia, and Canada. Its mandate is to promote conservation and protection of Nass Area fish species, facilitate sustainable management, and support Nisga'a participation in fisheries stewardship for the benefit of all Canadians. Under the terms of the treaty, Canada contributed \$10.4 million to the trust while the Nisga'a Nation contributed \$3.1 million.

### **Resource Assessment**

In 2000, the Nisga'a Nation continued to assess fish stock on the Nass River's tributary system. Nisga'a Fisheries also conducted a number of scientific studies at Meziadin Lake on sockeye, chinook, coho, chum, and pink salmon. Since the Effective Date, Nisga'a Fisheries — in partnership with the Department of Fisheries and Oceans — has also been assessing the potential value of other fish species.

Although steelhead, trout, and shellfish are not part of the Nisga'a Nation's responsibility, Nisga'a Fisheries chose to study these species because their importance to both the environment and the future of the overall fishery.

### **Exporting Nisga'a Expertise**

Nisga'a expertise in building fish wheels is much in demand. The wheels — an important tool in salmon stock assessment — are used to catch salmon travelling upstream so they can be counted, measured, and weighed. Improving upon the traditional design and wood construction, Nisga'a Fisheries developed an all-aluminum version of the fish wheel which requires little maintenance. Nisga'a workers construct the fish wheels in the Nass Valley, in Terrace, and at various on-site locations. This Nisga'a innovation can be seen at work in Rivers Inlet, Yale, Skeena, Alaska, and as far away as North Carolina.

"The negotiation days are over. The implementation is here... which is in many ways even more difficult than the negotiation. That is why all of us who have been supporters continue to be supporters as the self-determination of the Nisga'a takes shape — and the young people have an opportunity to shape their own lives."

— The Honourable Iona Campagnolo, PC, CM, OBC,  
 (Lieutenant Governor of British Columbia)  
 Speaking as former MP Skeena,  
 Chair, Fraser Valley Basin Council

### **Wildlife Management**

The Nisga'a Nation is blessed with a rare natural bounty. Located on the edge of the Pacific, the Nass Valley enjoys a privileged position on the migratory routes of many birds and fish, and is the year-round home of many mammals. Up from the banks of the Nass River, deer, moose, black bear, grizzly bear, beaver, wolf, and mountain goat are all found in abundance and have helped sustain the Nisga'a people for thousands of years.

Created under the Nisga'a Final Agreement, the tripartite Wildlife Committee provides advice about wildlife management and harvesting within the Nass Wildlife Area. British Columbia uses this information to establish the total annual harvest levels and approves the annual Wildlife Management Plan.

The annual Nass Wildlife Management Plan focuses on three designated species: moose, grizzly bear, and mountain goat. Before the treaty was completed, research was undertaken to determine the population of these target species. Just under 1,500 moose were counted and, under the terms of the treaty, the Nisga'a allocation was 120 per annum. A scientific survey of the grizzly bear population concluded that there were approximately 1,000-1,200 on Nisga'a Lands. With conservation as the overriding principle, the Nisga'a allocation was two per annum (although none were hunted in 2000). The mountain goat population was found to be over 4,000 strong. Although this gave Nisga'a hunters a total allocation of 65, only six were taken in 2000.

As with Nisga'a fishers, hunters must carry the Nisga'a citizenship card. Previously, this had also served as a license. Starting in the 2001 season, however, a separate hunting license was required. Public education about wildlife harvesting has intensified to ensure that Nisga'a citizens are aware of new regulations.

To monitor the implementation of the Nass Wildlife Management Plan, and to ensure compliance with the new regulations, four part-time monitors were stationed in each of the four Nisga'a villages. Although Nisga'a citizens are now required to pay licensing fees, compliance is high because it is widely recognised that the Nisga'a Nation is entrusted with the management of these resources for future generations.





