

Everything is One

Case Study: Salmon

Overview

There are five different types of Pacific salmon: Chinook, Sockeye, Pink, Coho and Chum. Each starts its life in freshwater rivers, spends years feeding in the ocean as an adult, and then returns to the stream of its birth to spawn and die. Salmon is the most important food to the First Nations peoples along the coast and along salmon-bearing rivers, as well as an important part of the culture, identity, and spirituality. Each First Nation has its own beliefs, fishing technologies, and spiritual connections to salmon. But there are some general beliefs and practices that they have in common.

Salmon are treated with great respect and are considered gift-bearing relatives who were once people. The first salmon that returned to the streams of their birth are traditionally celebrated in a First Salmon Ceremony with singing, dancing, and prayers, to thank the salmon for their gift to the people. This is a way to greet and welcome the salmon home. The celebration would last for days and would give many of the fish an opportunity to spawn, ensuring a healthy population of salmon for years to come. Once the fish was caught it would be carefully prepared and shared among the people. The head of the fish would be left to point upriver to show the salmon's spirit the way home. The bones would be carefully cleaned and returned to the river, so that the salmon could continue its journey and to ensure the salmon would be bountiful and continue to return the following year.



Fishing Methods

First Nations were highly experienced and knowledgeable fishers. They had special harvesting technologies and practices that have successfully sustained both people and salmon for thousands of years. Leaders carefully monitored stream health and salmon populations and had a detailed knowledge of their own community population size and needs. Based on the conditions, leaders determined who could fish, when fishing could occur, the fishing methods that could be used, and how much fish could be taken. Fishing methods selectively took some fish while leaving others to survive and reproduce. In the Fraser River

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canyon, fishers stood on rocky cliffs or wooden platforms, expertly catching fish from the rapids below. In shallow, slow-moving rivers and streams, salmon were channeled into fence-like traps, called weirs, where fishers could selectively harvest the fish they wanted, while letting others go. Where salmon congregated in estuaries (tidal areas at the mouth of rivers), stones were positioned in an arc to trap salmon at low tide into shallow pools. Then certain fish could be harvested.

The Straits Salish peoples on southern Vancouver Island didn't have salmon-bearing rivers in their territory. But they had a unique, reef net technology, called SXOLE, to catch salmon in the ocean as they made their way towards the rivers. SXOLE required a deep knowledge of salmon migration routes and ocean currents. The nets, made of woven willow and cedar, were weighted by special rocks passed down through generations. In the centre of the net, a hole was woven, called a SHELIS, that allows some salmon to escape capture. These salmon can keep swimming up to their home rivers and spawn, to ensure that salmon keep returning to Straits Salish territory year after year. They also took care of the water where they caught the salmon each year. Each family's SWÁLET, or Reef Net Fishing site, was cared for and passed down through generations.

Invasive Species Impacts

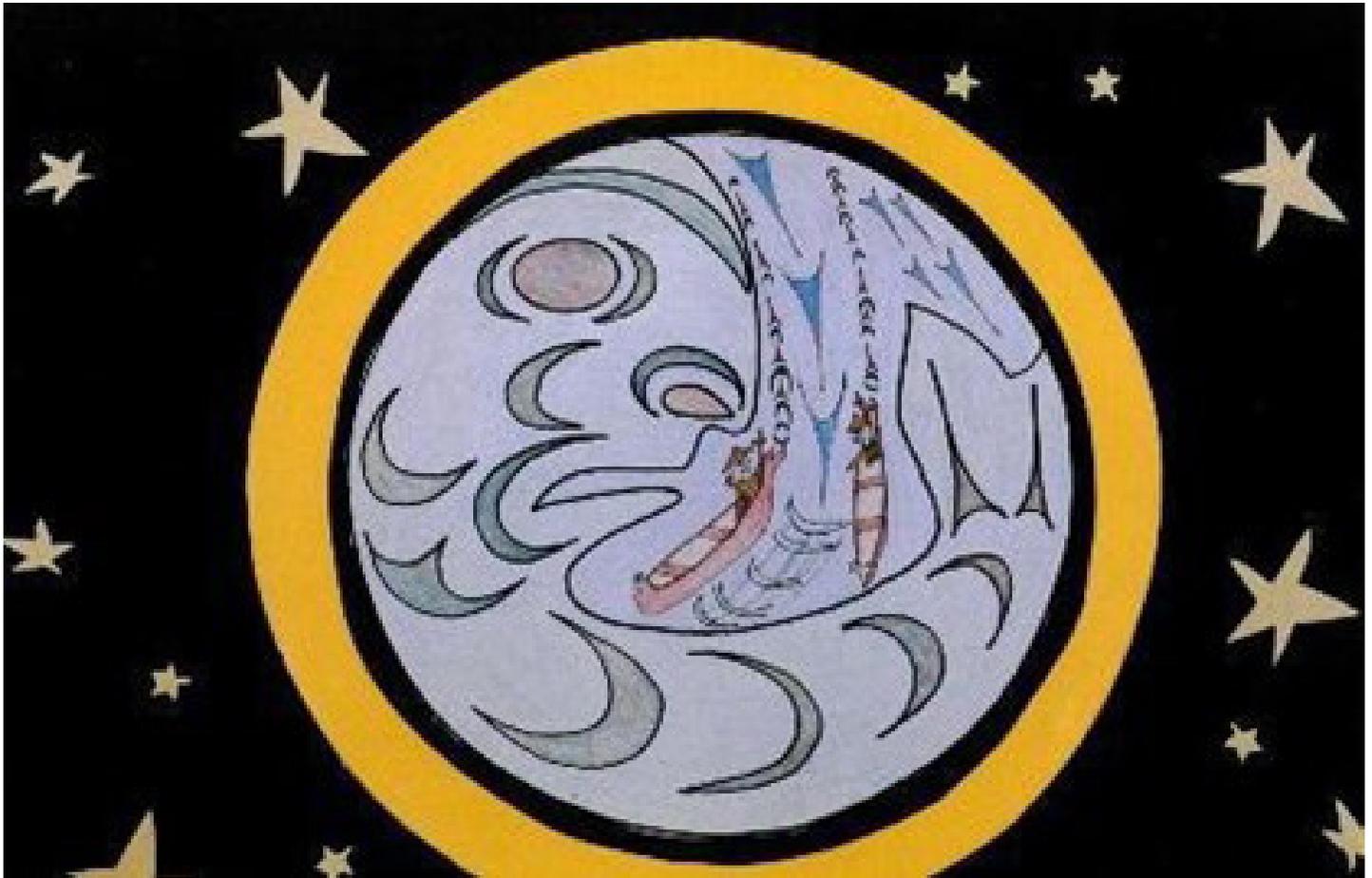
Salmon are negatively impacted by many forces, such as commercial overfishing, by climate change affecting water temperature, and by many activities that affect water quality, including logging, mining, and development. Invasive species also affect salmon, especially during their egg and young stages when they live in freshwater streams. During this time they require high levels of dissolved oxygen in the water, clean cool water, and streamside vegetation that provides shade, places to hide, and supports aquatic insects that the young salmon eat.

Knapweeds, knotweeds, and Himalayan balsam take over stream sides. They lack fibrous roots systems that native plants like willows and red-osier dogwood have. This allows banks to erode and soil to be deposited in the stream, increasing sedimentation, which can decrease the level of oxygen in the water, bury eggs, and destroy spawning areas. Yellow flag-iris and Purple loosestrife also can take over wetland habitats, forming dense thickets around ponds, lakes and streams that young salmon need to grow up in. They slow the flow of water and trap sediment. Purple loosestrife has thick matted roots that can fill in wetlands and cause erosion and sedimentation of streambanks, impacting stream quality. Invasive fish, such as Yellow perch, eat young salmon and European green crab cut up eelgrass, an important habitat and protective "nursery" for salmon fry.

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The Sockeye Moon **ĆENŦEŦI** (May-June)



Credit: The Saanich Year: [13 Moons of the WSANEC Nation](#). Dave Elliott Sr., Earl Claxton, Sr. and John Elliott.

This moon is the same colour as the pale grey sockeye salmon. The sockeye returns during this moon. The Salish art design represents the tide running swiftly through the reef net which is tied to the two canoes (SXELSCET). Our history tells us that we were once very poor, but the Salmon People took pity on us and gave themselves to save us. At the beginning of the **ĆENŦEŦI** moon and with a special ceremony, reef net anchors were dropped and our ancestors fished hereditary family locations throughout the four salmon months. The medicine man (ŚNÁEM) would paddle to the furthest point east and called on our ancient relative (the salmon) to come and feed the **ŦSÁNEĆ** people. He prayed, sang, and mentioned all the family reef net locations (SWÁLET) that the salmon would pass.

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Weather

Warm summer breezes and dry weather are most evident during the ĆENFEKI season. The WEWELEŚ (Swanson's Thrush-- the ripener of the summer berries), arrives. His song put color into the berries. The DILEK (wild strawberries) and ELI,LE (salmon berries) begin to ripen.

Economic Activities

Trading catches from all the salmon runs began. The WSÁNEĆ People would trade with the inland tribes. Because we caught salmon in the Straits we were the first people each year (about a month ahead of other tribes) to have salmon; others had to wait for the river runs. The early run and high quality of the bright salmon gave us a trade advantage over other people.

Cultural Activities

The Saanich People paid homage to the salmon with a very special song and ceremony to honor the salmon and show respect to its new generation. After the first sockeye salmon (known as the S,HIWEK leader) was caught, all fishing would cease and the ceremony of prayer and feast would begin. As part of the salmon ceremony, the children would walk with a limp and carry this hook nose salmon as one would carry a baby. This was to look pitiful in the eyes of the honored salmon. Only the children would eat this salmon, after which the adults could then feast on the sockeye.

Teachings of the Salmon

- **Through the Eyes of Elders**, [Video \(1:59\)](#). Through the Eyes of Elders is a riverside conversation with Secwepemc elder Mike Arnouse and was filmed on the Adams Lake reserve during the great 2010 salmon run. Mike shares Aboriginal wisdom and reminds us that we are all part of a larger circle of creation. We are as indigenous as the salmon.

Teachings of the Salmon

- **Living Legends, The Teachings of the Salmon**, [Video \(1:43\)](#). Elder Ralph Phillips of the Xat'sull First Nation talks about how the salmon not only provides food, but also offers wisdom to those who approach it with respect. Indigenous Tourism, BC.

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Additional Exmaples

- **Sacred Salmon Journey**, by Clayton Gauthier. This mural is an indigenous representation of the salmon lifecycle and the connections of salmon to land, water, sky and people. The artist, Clayton Gauthier, is a Cree/Dakelh Artist who resides in Prince George, BC.



Poster and description available for download from Department of Fisheries and Ocean, [Stream to Sea Program](#)

- **To Fish As Formerly: W̱SÁNEĆ Nation Brings Reef Net Fishing Back After 100 Years**, Video (5:35). Nick Claxton (XEMFOLTW), Tsawout community member and PhD. Candidate in UVic's Department of Curriculum and Instruction, has made it his life's work to revitalize the reef net fishery (S̱OLE) in his community. Over the past year he built a reef net model alongside students and teachers in a local school, ŁÁU, WELNEW Tribal School. The project was so successful that teachers throughout the school—math teachers, science teachers, socials teachers—began to teach their subjects through the model net. Meanwhile, with the help of their relatives at the Lummi Nation (Washington, US) who had recently undergone a process of reef net resurgence, Nick and members of the W̱SÁNEĆ Nation began to build the first W̱SÁNEĆ -made reef net in over a hundred years. In an act that will go down in history as the resurgence of a core part of the W̱SÁNEĆ Nation's social, economic, spiritual, and educational society, the reef net was set at a hereditary fishing location (SWÁLET) off of Pender Island on August 9th, 2014. This short video will give you a sense of the power of that day and what it means to “carry on our fisheries as formerly,” as agreed to in the Douglas Treaty signed by the Saanich people in 1852.