



THE VALUE AND IMPORTANCE OF HERRING TO INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

Herring are the foundation of the marine ecosystem which coastal Indigenous people have respected and honoured since time immemorial. This is illustrated by the significant role that herring play in the culture and society of coastal communities. Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) shared by elders indicates that as children they were taught to have the deepest respect for herring because it was a *“gift from the creator”*. *“Herring is the basis of the food chain. If we kill all of the herring we kill all of the salmon, we kill all of the halibut, and we kill all of the whales and so on.”* The value of herring for Indigenous people goes much deeper than an economic or monetary value, instead the value of herring is looked at as a part of a much larger picture in which *“everything is one and connected”*. This is the earliest form of what is referred to today as, Ecosystem Based Management.

Traditional harvest, knowledge and handling methods, passed down through the generations, varied from families and language groups. These methods were performed in a way that ensured there was the least amount of disturbance to the spawning herring, and their habitat, to make sure they returned every year. Today, Indigenous communities, on and around Vancouver Island, practice a multitude of adaptive harvest methods:

- Nuu-chah-nulth (West Coast of Vancouver Island): elders indicate that when the herring arrived to spawn, the entire community was engaged, from harvesting to processing. Tree boughs for the harvest of roe, (Qwikmiss), were placed in the water very quietly and carefully, so as not to disturb the schooling herring. The roe was collected from boughs and dried. Historical observations indicate the spawn used to be ten layers thick. Today, it varies from one to three layers in thickness. Harvesting methods utilized today involve using cedar trees and canoes whereas the tree is left in the water for about a week until the herring spawn. The roe is removed and salted or frozen to preserve it. Local observations on the West Coast indicate that herring are spawning in deeper water and in different locations compared to where they spawned historically.
- Kwakwaka’wakw (North Coast of Vancouver Island): elders indicate that individual groups from the community would harvest herring using nets made out of spruce roots and kelp. The harvested herring would be brought back to the community to share and primarily eaten fresh or preserved using salt. The spawn used to be over six inches thick. Today, northern Vancouver Island communities must rely on Central Coast or Haida to provide herring roe because of the limited spawn in the area and the lack of resources to access the herring.
- Coast Salish (South Coast of Vancouver Island): elders indicate that herring was traditionally harvested by individual families, rather than by the entire community. A herring rake (a long pole with spikes), was used as the primary traditional harvest tool. This method was successful because the herring were so abundant in this area. Captured herring would be smoked or eaten fresh. Herring roe was traditionally, and

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currently, harvested by using trees or boughs placed in the water allowing the herring eggs to collect on the boughs. Today, some of the Hul'qumi'num can't harvest herring at all because a very small number of herring spawn in this area, and where they do spawn, it is in very low densities. Community members must travel north to Comox or Deep Bay to harvest herring and roe, and often it is harvested from kelp, which is not the method/source preferred by elders.

Herring provide more value than just the individual fish or their roe. When the herring returned to spawn in the winter, they brought with them sea birds, chinook salmon, lingcod, halibut and other groundfish species, which could then be harvested by the people to feed their communities, or to trade with other people. TEK shared by some elders indicate that Vancouver Island Indigenous people bartered and traded smoked herring with interior communities as far as northern Alberta and down into the United States. During other times of the year, many other species were sometimes not accessible to harvest locally, but as the herring returned to spawn, so did the species that fed on them. This meant there was a much easier access for local Indigenous People to harvest these other resources. Various Indigenous people across the Island would use canoes and traditional circle hooks, baited with the available herring, to troll or jig for animals such as halibut and salmon. When European settlers arrived, they learned how to fish from local Indigenous people. This has formed the basis of modern recreational fishing methods and techniques we use today.

The physical connection to the resource, and the ability to harvest fresh resources brought physical, emotional, spiritual and mental well-being to entire communities. Herring, and the resources that herring brought, provided a nutrient-rich food source to sustain communities throughout the year. This is what wealth means to Indigenous people. Wealth also means sharing within and outside of the community. West coast of Vancouver Island communities would plan their feasts and ceremonies to coincide with the spawning of the herring. This would showcase their "wealth" to other communities, who were invited to come and share in the festivities. Within the traditional hereditary system, wealth meant giving and sharing. Without being able to share the wealth, communities and leaders would feel de-valued.

Often, today, you hear Indigenous people speak of wanting to "own" the herring in their traditional territory. By this, they mean that they want the ability to manage the herring in their territory as they had since time immemorial, so that they have a voice in how the "wealth" is brought to the community; both to the families and the ecosystem. There is an utmost respect for herring because it feeds the entire marine ecosystem as well as Indigenous people.

Traditional use, harvest and processing methods vary by families and language groups, but the importance and the value of herring is shared by all coastal Indigenous people. Indigenous culture teaches to take only what is needed (need being related to sustainability), and to respect and honour the ecosystem and the resources. In doing so, this will ensure access to the resource for generations to come. Indigenous People culture teaches to be the stewards of the land, to manage in a way that ensures enough for everybody and for generations to come.

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