



THE VALUE AND IMPORTANCE OF PRAWN TO INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

Prawns are an important part of the marine ecosystem which coastal Indigenous people have respected and honoured since time immemorial. The value of prawns to coastal First Nations is highly complex and varies by individual communities. This importance and role of the species in individual Indigenous culture, society and diet is influenced by traditional territory location, access to and harvest of other preferred species, and traditional trade and barter with other Nations and communities. While the significance and prevalence of prawn in traditional diets may vary, the value of prawn for coastal Indigenous people goes much deeper than an economic or monetary value. Instead, the value of prawn 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, varies from families and language groups. Today, Indigenous communities, on and around Vancouver Island, practice a multitude of adaptive harvest methods.

For the most part prawn is preferred to be eaten fresh, although reports from Kwakwaka’wakw (North Coast of Vancouver Island) elders indicate that prawns were sometimes smoked or dried and then soaked in water prior to consuming. For Nuuchahnulth (West Coast of Vancouver Island) elders indicate that prawn is more of a delicacy in their culture, which is likely related to the location and possible logistic difficulties with accessing prawns traditionally in a number of locations within Nuuchahnulth territory. Here, prawns were and still are traditionally reserved for special ceremonies and events. Elders also indicate that due to location, a significant amount of other marine species were available year-round for food, including salmon, urchin, deer, elk, etc.

Community members harvest prawns regularly throughout the year, but for some Nations, there are specific times of year that are significant. For example, for Coast Salish (South Coast of Vancouver Island) October through March are the most important time to collect prawns, as this was a time when traditionally there would be ceremonies and celebrations held weekly with surrounding tribes. Community members would make their own traps weaved out of cedar and spruce; these were circle or square traps with weeds in them to weigh them down. Cedar and willow branches were also weaved into floating balls that were used as the buoys. Every family and fisherman would have a unique way to identify their buoys (by the design weaved on the buoy). Those harvesting would rotate where they harvested, never harvesting the same area continuously; this was done to avoid depleting the prawns in a specific area and females carrying eggs were always released.

Coastal Indigenous communities have traded prawns (both within and outside of their own community) for whatever they didn’t have, including other food items, tools, or even labour. Kwakwaka’wakw elders indicate that they would trade prawns and eulachon grease with

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Nations as far north as Great Slave Lake in the Northwest Territories. Once European settlers arrived, this trade expanded beyond just Nation to Nation trade, Indigenous communities traded with the settlers to acquire new tools and food.

Through traditional Indigenous teachings community members take only what is needed, with need not being primarily related to an economic need, but rather a more holistic sense of the word, one in which spiritual and cultural needs were first and foremost. As well as the recognition that need was not an individual need, but rather a communal need. The ability to provide for family and community. The importance of taking only what is needed is rooted in the respect and responsibility of being stewards of the land - to manage in a way that ensures enough for all creatures for generations to come. Understanding that the ecosystem and the animals within the ecosystem serve highly complex and important functions, beyond simply being something for humans to consume and extract.

The physical connection to the resource, and the ability to harvest fresh resources brings physical, emotional, spiritual and mental well-being to entire communities. The access to prawn means that food is always plentiful, and with that comes emotional health and feelings of safety and security. Prawns were once a guaranteed food source during the times of the year when other food sources like salmon, herring, and elk, may not have been available. These other food sources were plentiful because of strong management.

While traditional use, harvest and processing methods vary by families and language groups, the importance and the value of prawns is shared by all coastal Indigenous people.



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