



*Collaborative expertise uniting knowledge
and action for First Nations fisheries*

IMAWG

ISLAND MARINE AQUATIC WORKING GROUP

2026-2029 STRATEGIC PLAN



MESSAGE FROM OUR PRESIDENT

Looking back to IMAWG's first Strategic Plan in 2012, Members came together to talk about what Island Marine Aquatic Working Group (IMAWG) should and could be: how they wanted to see the organization grow, and how they wanted others to understand the value of working with IMAWG. These initial plans were the formative years for IMAWG as a non-profit society, reflecting the structural process of building an organization with the intent to engage Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) — and to remind DFO of its obligation to engage First Nations bilaterally. Even then, the principles that would become enshrined in the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP) and Canada's implementation plan were the motivating force behind that work.

Moving into our second Strategic Plan 2016–2019, we wanted to highlight our approach to building an organization that was effective, organized, and well-run. This was foundational work, getting our own house in order so that we could show up with credibility and consistency for the First Nations we serve.

Our 2020–2023 Strategic Plan reflected the growing awareness of the scope of work and engagement required of First Nations in resource management. IMAWG promoted collaboration and a unified voice for Vancouver Island First Nations on high-level concerns and priorities, while affirming that local management remains the business of the local First Nation. This was the first plan to include a message from the IMAWG President, and it reflected a commitment to strengthening communications: sharing advice, technical insights, and recommendations with First Nations across the region. It was an evident time of growth and change for IMAWG.

The 2023–2026 Strategic Plan looked back over IMAWG's history and the collective growth of our Members and Board of Directors as both contributors to and beneficiaries of that journey. It marked a deepening of our reconciliation work and a more intentional approach to how IMAWG shows up as a regional voice: one built over years of relationship, trust, and shared purpose.

Looking forward in the 2026–2029 Strategic Plan, we begin to see how a well-built and efficient organization can evolve and better serve Vancouver Island First Nations. Providing technical insights, support, and advice for bilateral engagement with DFO remains a large and growing focus of IMAWG's work. First and foremost, DFO must acknowledge and act on its obligations under UNDRIP and the Government of Canada's implementation plan. This is not optional, and IMAWG will continue to assert that plainly. Where needed, IMAWG also seeks to serve as a convener and collaborator, bringing the right people and perspectives together in service of First Nations priorities. The evolution of regional collaboration is reflected in the Vancouver Island Salmon Committee (VISC), the "We All Take Care of the Harvest" (WATCH) program, our ongoing policy engagement with DFO, and the IMAWG loaner equipment program.

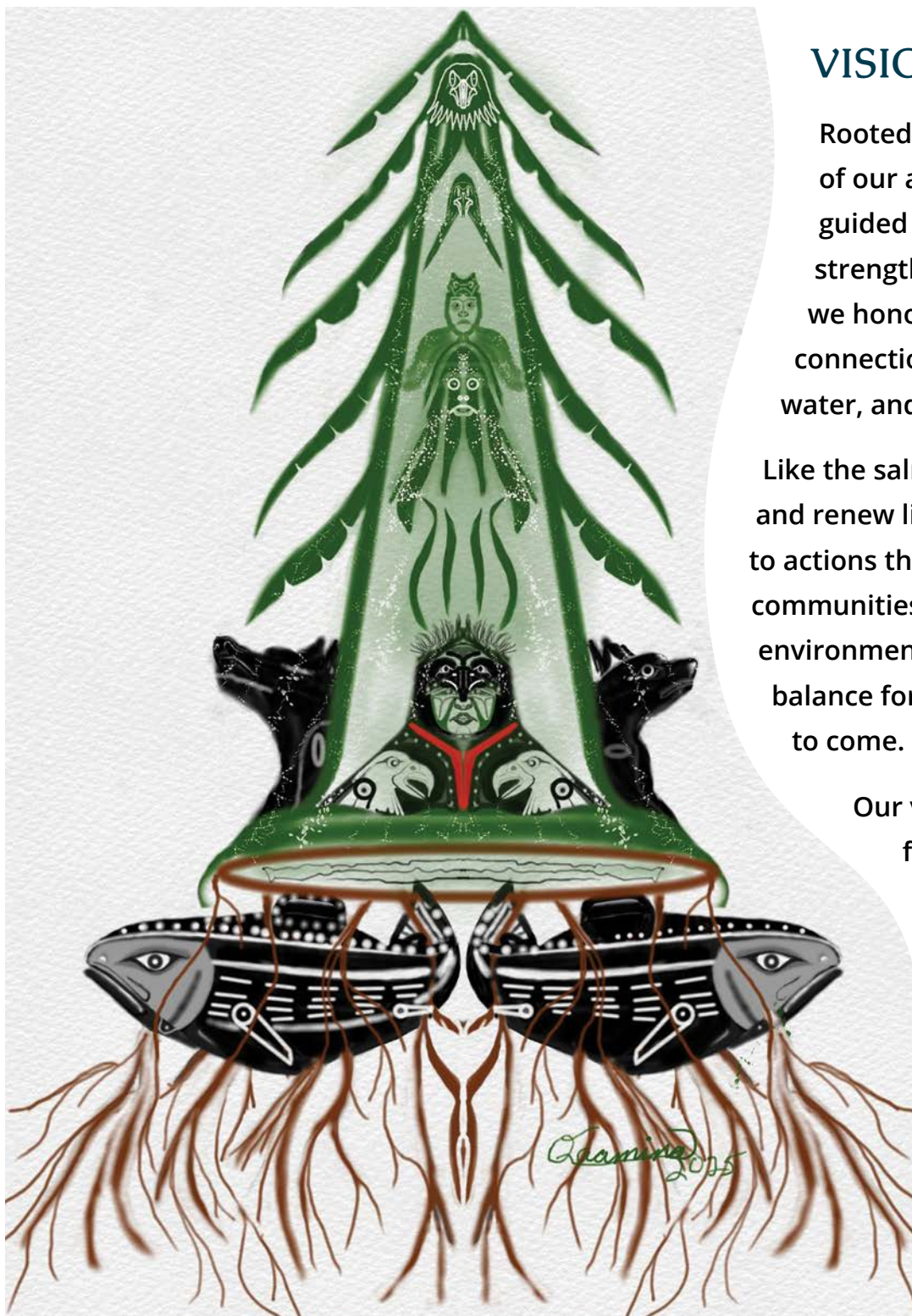
As we move into this next chapter, our Members and Board of Directors continue to seek ways to grow IMAWG and better serve the regional First Nations. It is a privilege to do this work, and we remain committed to being of service to First Nations across Vancouver Island and the mainland inlets.

— **Nick Chowdhury** (Oomaglaees), *President*



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— Qaamina, Eddie Sam, Ahousaht

VISION

Rooted in the wisdom of our ancestors and guided by the enduring strength of the cedar, we honor the sacred connection between land, water, and all living beings.

Like the salmon who sustain and renew life, we commit to actions that nourish our communities, protect our environment, and ensure balance for generations yet to come.

Our vision is to walk forward with respect, unity, and purpose — grounded in culture, sustained by nature, and inspired by those who came before us.

VALUES AND PRINCIPLES

IMAWG embraces First Nation values to ensure its work respects knowledge, inherent rights, and stewardship practices. These values guide our work, foster trust and collaboration, and help maintain the health and abundance of marine resources.

By aligning our collaborative with these principles, IMAWG supports sustainable, equitable, and culturally informed practices that benefit both communities and ecosystems for generations to come.

1. **Animals, air, lands and waters are gifts and relations from the Creator**, to be used with respect and to be maintained by careful stewardship.
2. **Animals, air, lands and waters are integral to culture and well-being** of communities and relied on since time immemorial.
3. **Everything is one; everything is connected**; animals, air, lands, waters and people are cared for together holistically, not as separate.
4. **Take only what is needed** to ensure that fish remain abundant, communities remain fed, and ecosystems stay balanced.
5. **Honour, protect, harvest, and manage animals, lands and waters** in line with inherent rights, First Nations knowledge, traditional laws and governance, supplemented by modern science.
6. **Harvest practices and governance that show respect** to the animals, lands, waters, and ancestors with responsibility to future generations.
7. **Management, jurisdiction and inherent rights of fisheries within territories are the held by Nations and cannot be alienated**; stewardship responsibilities are clearly defined in traditional law.



PURPOSE

Bring together First Nations, technical experts, IMAWG members, partners, and communities to protect fish, habitats, and First Nation fishing inherent rights across Vancouver Island and surrounding waters. By uniting knowledge, sharing expertise, and providing advice and guidance, we help drive collaborative solutions that support sustainable, culturally grounded management of animals, air, lands and waters. IMAWG facilitates engagement on policy and management priorities, enabling Nations to work together with a unified voice, and provides practical support and technical expertise for habitat and resource stewardship for local communities and partners.



IMAWG

ISLAND MARINE AQUATIC WORKING GROUP

STRUCTURE AND OPERATIONS OF IMAWG

IMAWG

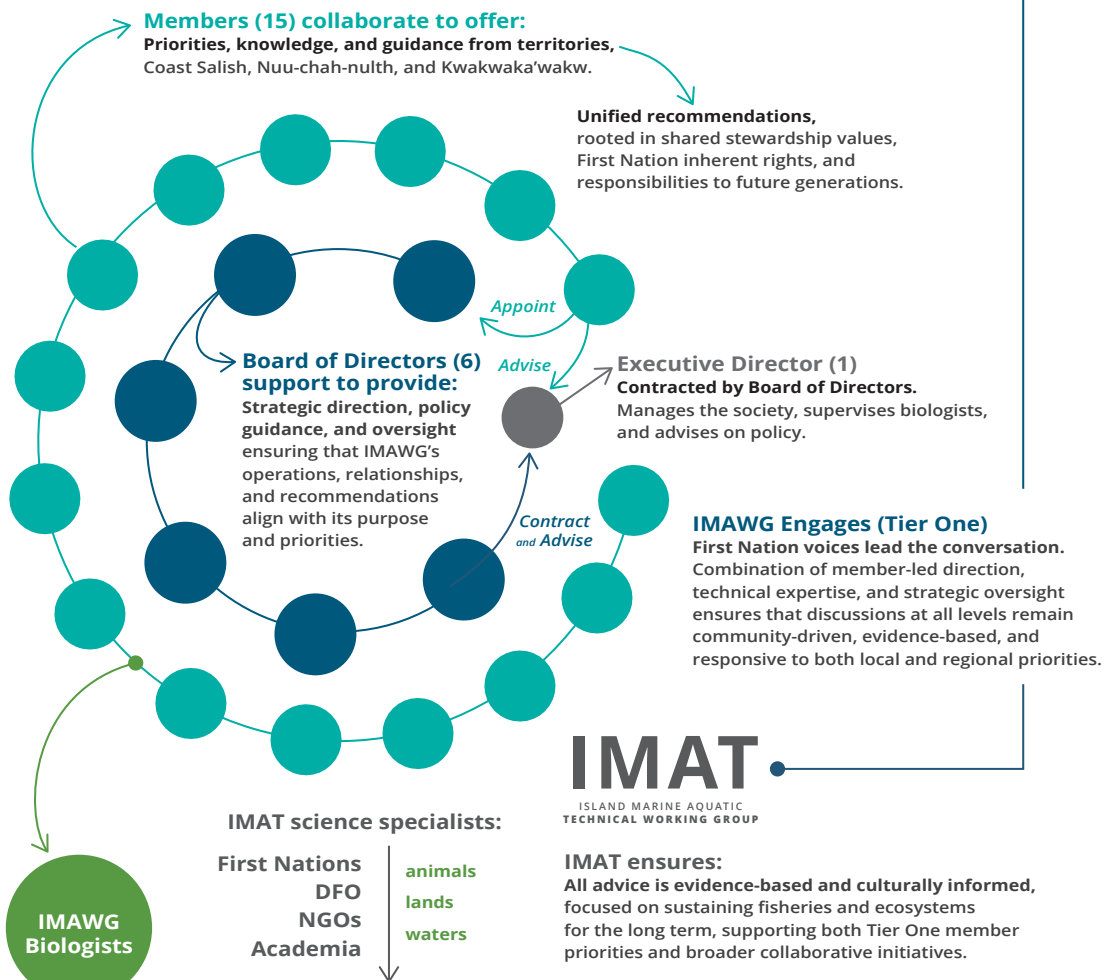
ISLAND MARINE AQUATIC WORKING GROUP

IMAWG operates:

Independently and objectively, rooted in serving both the fish and the people who rely on them.
Advice and recommendations are guided by technical and policy information, First Nations knowledge, and principles of sustainability and equity, ensuring IMAWG remains a trusted steward of marine resources.

IMAWG communicates:

Through formal reports, policy advice, and collaborative meetings with Nations, governments, partners, and fisheries organizations. Public communications (email, social media, website), and internal updates ensure transparency, knowledge sharing, and alignment with conservation and community priorities.



Biologists play multi-faceted role:

- Organize and run IMAT, coordinate technical discussions and projects.
- Collect, analyze, and interpret data, integrate First Nations knowledge and modern science.
- Provide technical advice on fisheries management, policy, and regulatory documentation.
- Participate in fishery engagement meetings, science reviews, and collaborative processes.
- Work with ED to support engagement, communication, and member-directed priorities.

Executive Leadership and Governance

- IMAWG is guided by an Executive Director, supported by a six-person Board of Directors appointed by the members.
- The Board provides strategic direction, oversight, and policy guidance, ensuring that IMAWG's operations, relationships, and recommendations align with its purpose and priorities.

Membership

- IMAWG's membership comprises 15 delegates representing Coast Salish, Nuuchah-nulth, and Kwakwaka'wakw territories.
- Members collaborate to bring forward priorities, knowledge, and guidance from their territories, producing unified recommendations rooted in shared stewardship values, First Nation inherent rights, and responsibilities to future generations.

Island Marine Aquatic Technical Working Group (IMAT)

- Led by IMAWG biologists it brings together science specialists in animals, lands, waters, from First Nations, DFO, NGOs, and academia.
- IMAWG biologists play a multi-faceted role:
 - Organizing and running IMAT, coordinating technical discussions and projects.
 - Collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data, integrating First Nations knowledge and modern science.
 - Providing technical advice on fisheries management, policy, and regulatory documentation.
 - Participating in fishery engagement meetings, science reviews, and collaborative processes.
 - Working closely with the Executive Director as a team to support engagements, communications, and member-directed priorities.
- IMAT ensures that all advice is evidence-based, culturally informed, and focused on sustaining fisheries and ecosystems for the long term, supporting both Tier One member priorities and broader collaborative initiatives.

Communications and Engagement

- IMAWG communicates through formal reports, policy advice, and collaborative meetings with Nations, governments, partners, and fisheries organizations.
- Public communications and internal updates ensure transparency, knowledge sharing, and alignment with conservation and community priorities.

Independent and Objective Stewardship

- IMAWG operates independently and objectively, with its work rooted in serving both the fish and the people who rely on them.
- Advice and recommendations are guided by technical and policy information, First Nations knowledge, and principles of sustainability and equity, ensuring IMAWG remains a trusted steward of marine resources.

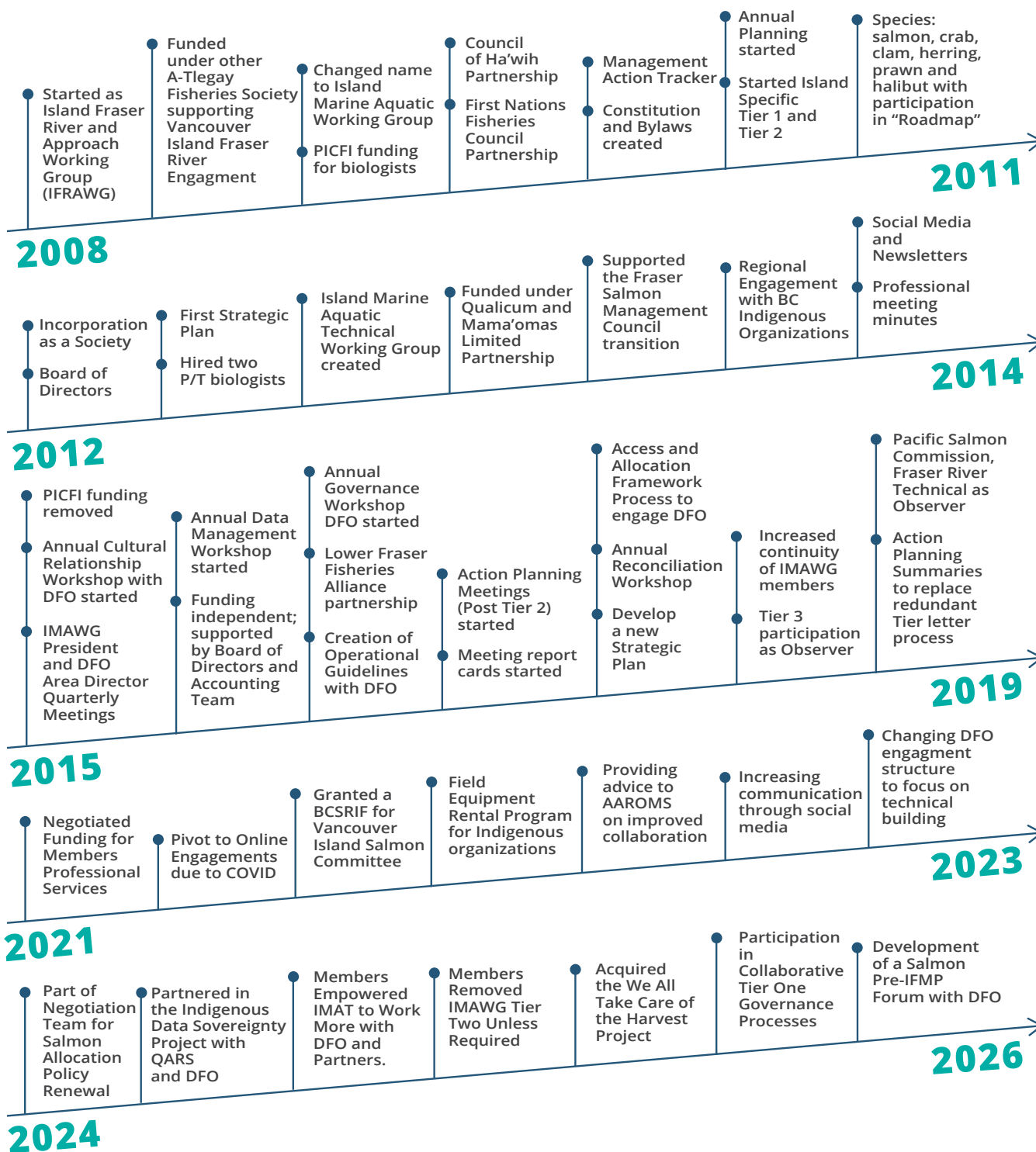




IMAWG

ISLAND MARINE AQUATIC WORKING GROUP

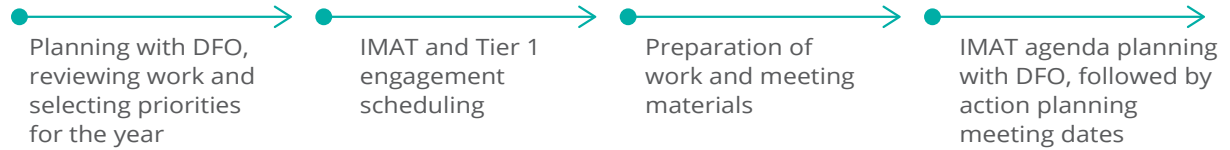
EVOLUTION TIMELINE OF THE ORGANIZATION



ANNUAL PLANNING

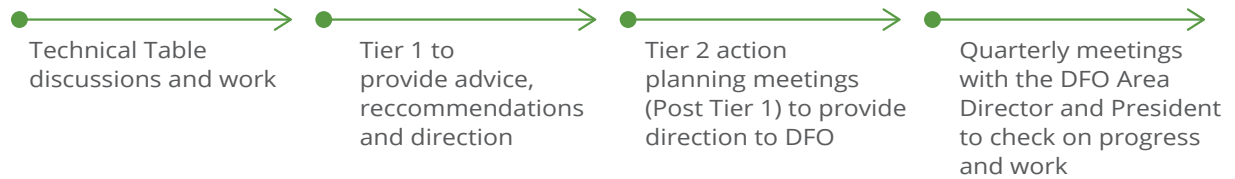
PRE & POST PLANNING

Typical engagement time frames



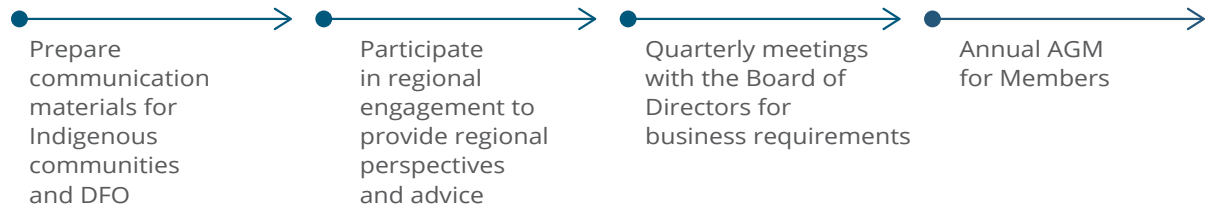
VANCOUVER ISLAND ENGAGEMENT

Typical engagement time frames



BUSINESS & COMMUNICATION

Typical engagement time frames



IMAWG ENGAGEMENTS AND HOW TO GET INVOLVED

Island Marine Aquatic Technical Working Group

IMAT is the scientific arm of the IMAWG. IMAT brings together fisheries specialists, marine biologists, habitat experts, and ecosystem scientists from First Nations, Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO), NGOs, and academic institutions. **The group's purpose is to combine First Nations knowledge and western science to support informed, balanced, and sustainable management of aquatic resources.** IMAT provides the scientific backbone for IMAWG's collaborative - analyzing data, assessing ecosystem trends, and developing advice for IMAWG members and partners that guides policy, conservation, and co-management initiatives.

How People Can Get Involved

There are several ways to participate in or contribute to IMAT's work:

1. **Join as a Science/Technical Advisor or Expert:** Individuals with experience in fisheries biology, ecology, environmental science, or habitat management may be invited to collaborate on studies, review data, or contribute technical insight to IMAT engagements.
2. **Share Traditional Knowledge and Local Observations:** Knowledge holders, fishers, and community monitors play an essential role. By sharing local knowledge, seasonal patterns, and on-the-water observations, community members directly inform IMAT's understanding of ecosystem changes.
3. **Participate in Workshops:** IMAT and IMAWG regularly host technical workshops, regional meetings, and collaborative sessions where participants can learn about ongoing research, provide input, and help shape recommendations.
4. **Student or Youth and Research Partnerships:** Students and researchers interested in marine science, fisheries policy, or First Nation stewardship can connect with IMAT for opportunities to contribute through academic projects, internships, or research collaborations.
5. **Stay Informed and Share Insights:** Follow IMAWG's memos, social media updates, and emails to stay informed about IMAT's work and upcoming engagement opportunities.

Tier One Engagements

Tier One Engagements form the foundation of IMAWG's collaborative work with First Nations on Vancouver Island and surrounding coastal waters. These sessions provide a First Nations only forum for open dialogue, information sharing, and collective guidance on fisheries, habitat, and marine management priorities.

Tier One meetings ensure that First Nation voices lead the conversation — identifying priorities, developing unified recommendations, and strengthening collective capacity before engagement with government or other partners. In this space, Nations share updates, knowledge, and perspectives to build consensus and align on regional strategies. Tier One is a space for relationship-building, learning, and collaborative problem-solving, grounded in First Nation laws, inherent rights, and responsibilities to the resource.

The topics and priorities for Tier One are dictated by IMAWG members, ensuring that discussions reflect community-led direction. IMAT plays a central role in this process by providing updates on all engagements, delivering technical analyses, and offering informed advice to support member discussions and recommendations. The Executive Director also provides updates on organizational business, policy developments, and engagement with broader-level fishery processes, ensuring members have the information needed to make decisions that are fully informed, strategic, and aligned with both community priorities and fisheries management frameworks.

This combination of member-led direction, technical expertise, and strategic oversight ensures that Tier One discussions remain community-driven, evidence-based, and responsive to both local and regional priorities.

Tier One Engagements serve to:

- **Support Nation -to-Nation collaboration** — allowing communities to discuss fisheries and marine priorities directly with one another.
- **Develop shared positions and recommendations** for co-management with DFO and other partners (before Tier Two and Tier Three discussions).
- **Integrate First Nations knowledge** with scientific research and policy development.
- **Strengthen collective stewardship capacity** across Coast Salish, Nuuchah-nulth, and Kwakwaka'wakw territories.

Ways for Nations and individuals to take part in Tier One engagements:

1. Attend Tier One Meetings

- Meetings are supported by IMAWG member open to any Nations, fisheries organization or partner.
- Dates and locations are shared in advance through IMAWG's communications channels.
- Participation allows communities to share priorities, discuss challenges, and shape regional recommendations.

2. Join Working Sessions or Committees

- Between Tier One gatherings, smaller technical or advisory working groups may form to address specific topics (e.g., salmon management, shellfish, habitat restoration).
- These groups provide additional opportunities for hands-on engagement and knowledge sharing.

3. Share Local Knowledge and Updates

- Community fishers, harvesters, and knowledge keepers are encouraged to share their insights, seasonal observations, and concerns through Nation representatives or directly with IMAWG staff.

4. Engage Youth and Emerging Leaders

- IMAWG encourages youth participation to help build capacity and intergenerational learning within fisheries and stewardship.



PRIORITIES | SUMMARY LIST

SPECIES CONSERVATION AND MANAGEMENT

- Responsibility to First Nation Inherent rights and
- Identifying Fisheries Priorities
- Providing Science, Technical and Policy Support
- Participating in Scientific Reviews
- Supporting Ongoing Compilation of Data
- Engagement in Federal Management Processes
- Integrating First Nations Knowledge
- Policy Review and Guidance
- Species Rebuilding and Recovery

ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATION

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PARTNERSHIPS

- Functioning and Transparent Partnerships/Processes
- IMAWG and DFO Partnership Support
- AAROM Engagement and Collaboration
- Leadership Relations with IMAWG and DFO

CAPACITY

- Own Source Revenue
- AAROM National Commitments
- Public Outreach
- Tracking Priorities and Recommendations
- Provision of Field Equipment

PRIORITIES | SPECIES CONSERVATION & MANAGEMENT

1. Responsibility to First Nation Inherent rights and Title

Upholding accountability and responsibilities to Section 35(1) of the Canadian Constitution Act and ensuring related legal obligations concerning First Nation inherent rights and title, are identified and brought to light.

2. Identifying Fisheries Priorities

During strategic planning and IMAWG Tier meetings, determine and advance priorities related to First Nation s fisheries, ensuring management approaches align with First Nation values, food security, and long-term sustainability.

3. Providing Science, Technical and Policy Support

Through various information collection and external engagements, deliver technical, analytical, policy advice and professional expertise for IMAWG members, communities and First Nation s organizations involved in fisheries management and conservation.

4. Participating in Scientific Reviews

First Nation perspectives, local data, and ecological insights to scientific assessments and technical review processes.

5. Supporting Ongoing Compilation of Data

Analyzes, review, and interpretation of ecological, fisheries, and habitat data to inform management advice and recommendations.

6. Engagement in Federal Management Processes

Participating in new and ongoing implemented management processes, providing feedback and advice where IMAWG's expertise and First Nation perspectives are requested.

7. Integrating First Nations Knowledge

Collecting and incorporating First Nation advice, direction, and traditional knowledge to inform technical analyses, recommendations, and policy development.

8. Policy Review and Guidance

Reviewing and providing guidance and advice on existing and newly formed fisheries policies, ensuring they reflect First Nation priorities and stewardship principles.

9. Species Rebuilding and Recovery

Supporting holistic species rebuilding efforts, combining science, traditional knowledge, and cultural values to restore abundance and ecosystem balance.

PRIORITIES | *ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATION*

1. **First Nations Involvement in Fisheries Engagements**

Regular communications through email, IMAWG website and social media where First Nations/ organizations can access/attend upcoming fisheries engagements (either by IMAWG or partners).

2. **Safe, Accessible and Consistent Engagement Processes**

Develop and provide a standardized process for IMAWG led engagements that includes culturally grounded, physical accessibility, nutritionally adequate, safe practices, clear agendas, facilitation, identified objectives with ability to attend either in person or virtually.

3. **Empowering a Unified Voice**

Hold regular IMAWG led meetings to receive technical and policy information, advice and guidance, allowing for collaborative discussions, aligning priorities, draft unified positions, and share key messages to support bilateral consultations.

4. **Bolstered Technical Engagements**

Hold technical lead meetings that are founded in IMAWG led priorities and supported by various technical information and partnerships to strengthen First Nation expertise in fisheries science, policy, and management.

5. **Communication System to First Nations**

Develop, utilize, expand multi-channel communication system to a listserv of up-to-date contacts of emails, social media, web portal, and standardize communicate to distribute timely information, supporting materials, and summaries.

6. **Communication System to Non-Nation Partners**

Provide standardize templates and process to communicate advice, recommendations and feedback to requested guidance from IMAWG members depending on the content and venue.

7. **Briefing Notes on IMAWG Meeting Outcomes**

Develop and maintain a scheduled briefing note process, producing concise, actionable updates for technical staff, managers, and Chiefs/Leadership ahead of key meetings or decisions, ensuring informed leadership and staff.

PRIORITIES | *PARTNERSHIPS*

1. Functioning and Transparent Partnerships/Processes

Establish and follow an agreed upon jointly developed partnership frameworks for any IMAWG led/involvement engagement that includes protocols, objectives, capacity support, communication, actions/outcomes, performance metrics, and transparent reporting out.

2. IMAWG and DFO Partnership Support

Facilitate priority alignment sessions where DFO partners, IMAWG members and IMAWG support staff can collaborate to discuss on priorities, messaging, relationships support and improved engagement.

3. AAROM Engagement and Collaboration

Participate in regular engagements and processes with other AAROMs to discuss regional priorities, align strategies, and foster peer-to-peer networking, to foster a strong, resilient network that enhances capacity, reduces duplication, and improves the quality of First Nation-led fisheries management while respecting the autonomy of each organization.

4. Leadership Relations with IMAWG and DFO

Maintain a quarterly formalized engagement process between IMAWG President and DFO Area Director, supported by the ED and AAA, that discusses relevant business processes, relationships, engagements and support.



PRIORITIES | *CAPACITY*

1. **Own Source Revenue**

Develop and implement a diversified funding strategy that includes grant applications, fee-for-service opportunities, and partnerships with organizations aligned with First Nation fisheries priorities.

2. **AAROM National Commitments**

Assign a dedicated IMAWG liaison to actively participate in National forums, advocate for resource allocation, and report back to IMAWG on opportunities and commitments.

3. **Public Outreach**

Launch a targeted communications campaign using social media, webinars, community events, and media partnerships to share stories, highlight successes, and build public support. Outreach focuses on how we can best support nations by aligning expertise, knowledge, and action to advance Nations' fisheries priorities.

4. **Tracking Priorities and Recommendations**

Implement and maintain a standardized tracking system that logs priorities, recommendations, and follow-ups, with dashboards for monitoring progress and generating reports for members and leadership.

5. **Provision of Field Equipment**

To provide First Nations with access to loaned fisheries equipment that supports monitoring, assessment, and fisheries management activities."



ENSURING INHERENT RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITY: *LEGAL, MANDATE, AND DATA GOVERNANCE IN FISHERIES*

IMAWG operates within the framework of laws and court decisions, which affirm First Nation inherent rights and title. These legal protections, anchored in Section 35 of the *Constitution Act*, 1982, ensure that First Nation fisheries inherent rights are recognized and cannot be infringed without justification. Key court decisions provide guidance on the scope, limits, and management of these inherent rights, including the prioritization of First Nation access and the conditions under which regulation is permissible. By grounding its work in this jurisprudence, IMAWG ensures that all engagement and activities respect both established legal precedents and new, emerging laws, while supporting co-governance, collaborative management, and the recognition of First Nation-led fisheries initiatives.

IMAWG is a non-mandated advisory body and does not speak on behalf of any individual First Nation or First Nation organization. Its role is to facilitate dialogue, provide technical and policy support, and encourage government-to-government decision-making between First Nations and federal or provincial governments, without substituting for the authority or decisions of individual communities.

IMAWG works within the OCAP® and CARE frameworks to support First Nation governance over fisheries and related environmental data. This includes promoting best practices in data collection, sharing, and use, ensuring communities retain authority and benefit from their information, and supporting FN-led decision-making in fisheries management and policy.



Legal References:

- *Constitution Act, 1982 (Canada)* — Section 35(1) states that “The existing Aboriginal and treaty inherent rights of the Aboriginal peoples of Canada are hereby recognized and affirmed.” This is the constitutional anchor of First Nation fisheries inherent rights.
- *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)* - Affirms Indigenous Peoples’ rights to self-determination, lands and resources, culture, and participation in decisions that affect them.
- *R v Sparrow, [1990] 1 S.C.R. 1075* - Held that First Nation (Aboriginal) inherent rights to fish for food/social/ceremonial purposes exist under s. 35 and cannot be infringed without justification. Established that such inherent rights take priority over other uses of the resource (after conservation). Introduced the Sparrow “infringement/justification” test.
- *R v Van der Peet, [1996] 2 S.C.R. 507* - Confirmed a structured test for establishing whether an Aboriginal right exists (“the Van der Peet test”) was the practice integral to the distinctive culture prior to contact.
- *R v Gladstone, [1996] 2 S.C.R. 723* - Held that the Heiltsuk Nation (British Columbia) held a non-treaty Aboriginal commercial right to fish for herring spawn (sale) under section 35. Infringement test modifications for commercial inherent rights were discussed.
- *R v Marshall (No 1) and R v Marshall (No 2)* — [1999] 3 S.C.R. 456 and [1999] 3 S.C.R. 533 - These decisions concerned the peace and friendship treaties of 1760-61 (Maritime provinces) and affirmed a treaty right for Mi’kmaq/Wolastoqiyik to fish, hunt and gather for a moderate livelihood.
- *Lax Kw’alaams Indian Band v Canada, 2011 SCC 56* - The Supreme Court denied the claim of an Aboriginal right to large-scale commercial fishing by that First Nation .
- *Douglas Treaties* - Nations retained their villages and rights to hunt and fish on unoccupied lands, while limited lands were transferred to the Crown for settlement.

MEANINGFUL AND COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIP

At the core of our work at IMAWG is a network of [15 Aboriginal Aquatic Resource and Oceans Management \(AAROM\) organizations across British Columbia](#). Our First Nation led watershed and coastal groups span from the North Coast to the Interior and Vancouver Island, providing scientific, technical, and cultural capacity for fisheries, aquatic resource and oceans management.

We partner across multiple sectors:

- First Nations-led organizations (AAROM departments, First Nations communities).
- Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) (environmental, fisheries, habitat-based).
- Academia (universities, research institutions).
- Provincial government (e.g., BC ministries).
- Federal government (Fisheries and Oceans Canada and other agencies).
- Multilateral bodies (e.g., Pacific Salmon Commission).

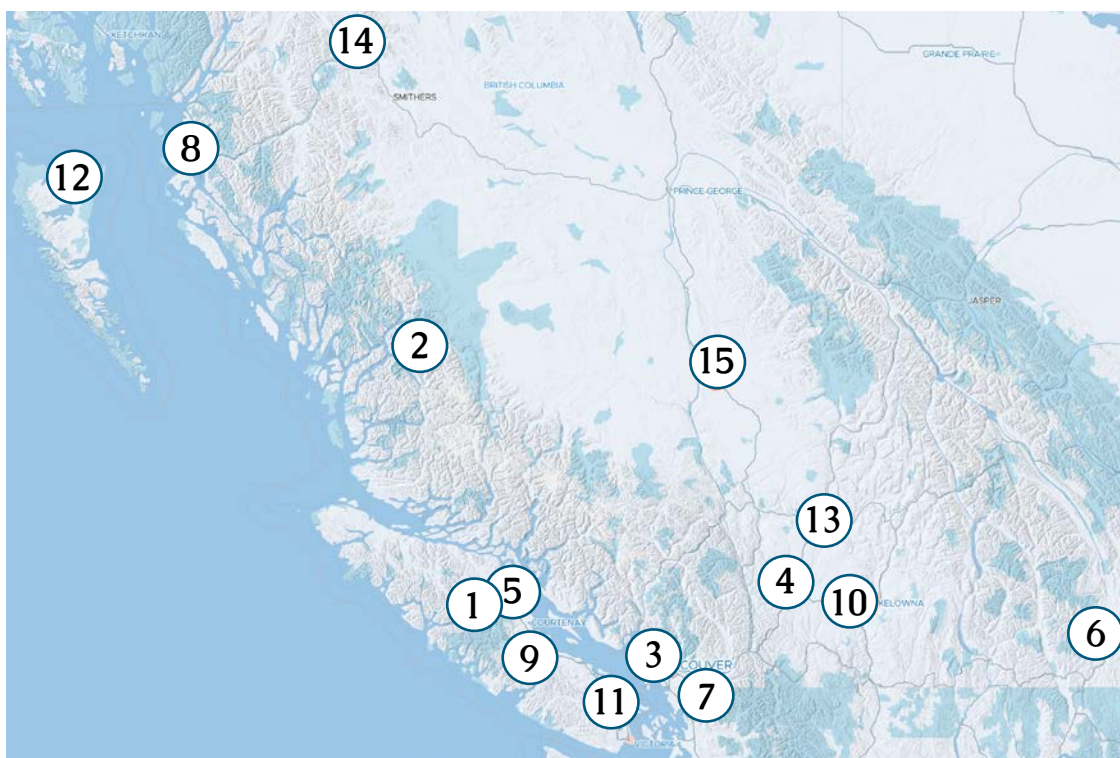
Collaborative Technical Integration with DFO

IMAWG functions as a technical advisory and coordination body, providing DFO with actionable insights and support to enhance First nations-led fisheries management. Our services include:

- Delivering community-informed data analyses.
- Facilitating engagement with First Nations organizations.
- Identifying priority fisheries and conservation needs.
- Advising on policy or regulatory approaches that align with First Nation inherent rights and governance frameworks.

DFO is one partner within a rich network of First Nation organizations, NGOs, academia, and government. IMAWG welcomes DFO's participation in these collaborative efforts while maintaining community-driven leadership and decision-making. Within this diverse network, DFO is an invited partner contributing to IMAWG's collaborative approach, ensuring First Nation communities remain at the center of fisheries management decisions.

IMAWG encourages bilateral government-to-government discussions between First Nation communities and federal or provincial authorities. While IMAWG facilitates dialogue, provides technical advice, and supports coordination, we do not replace or speak for individual First Nations. Our role is to ensure communities have the information, capacity, and support to engage directly in meaningful, community-driven bilateral negotiations.



ABORIGINAL AQUATIC RESOURCE AND OCEANS MANAGEMENT (AAROM) ORGANIZATIONS ACROSS BRITISH COLUMBIA

1. A-Tlegay Fisheries Society
2. Central Coast Indigenous Resource Alliance
3. First Nations Fisheries Council of British Columbia
4. Fraser Salmon Management Council (FSMC)
5. Island Marine Aquatic Working Group (IMAWG)
6. Ktunaxa Nation Council
7. Lower Fraser Fisheries Alliance
8. North Coast Skeena First Nations Stewardship Society
9. Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council – Uu-a-thluk (take care of)
10. Okanagan Nation Alliance
11. Q'ul-Ihanumutsun Aquatic Resources Society
12. Secretariat of the Haida Nation
13. Secwepemc Fisheries Commission
14. Skeena Fisheries Commission (SFC)
15. Upper Fraser Fisheries Conservation Alliance







IMAWG

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