

# FACTS, FIGURES AND LEGENDS

A Review of the Report, "Our Place at the Table: First Nations in the B.C. Fishery, May 2004."

BY TIM LYNCH

The report, *Our Place at the Table: First Nations in the B.C. Fishery, May 2004* provides a valuable compendium of facts and figures mingled with legends about the reality of First Nation peoples in BC fisheries. Authored by consultants Russ Jones, Marcel Shepert and Neil J. Sterritt, the report serves to reflect the vision of the First Nation Panel on Fisheries that was established by the First Nations Summit and BC Aboriginal Fisheries Commission in January 2004. The appearance of this document a few weeks after the The McRae / Pearce report, *Treaties in Transition* suggests there is some competition among the governing bodies for staking out their respective interpretation of the truth.

Most likely both camps spent the summer of 2004 analyzing each other's paradigm to see where they can win some brownie points in their soap opera negotiations. One can hope that there may be a game plan in the works that will see some transparent, neutral and systematic compare and contrast analysis of the two visions. So much of both documents speak to the same values and underlying principles, and both documents provide similar policy platforms from which to chart a course into the future. The simultaneous appearance of two reports prepared from different perspectives on the same public policy concerns should afford an opportunity for achieving some degree of reasonableness in addressing the obstacles, opportunities, pitfalls and challenges all parties face.

Jones, Shepert, and Sterritt, have produced a highly informative and easy to read publication documenting legendary, historical, political, legal, social and economic fishing policy concerns to First Nations people in BC. The report presents a valuable statistical profile of the First Nation fishing activities on the West Coast of Canada. Easy to interpret graphical presentations are provided on such issues as seafood landing weight and values, wild, farmed salmon and recreational salmon. Most notably Table 2 of the report, "Estimation of Licence and Quota Values by Fishery," provides an analysis of licenses and quotas for the Salmon, Herring, Ground fish, Shellfish, Dive and Shellfish Non-Dive Fleets with a total estimated value of \$1,771,987,917 as of December 31 2002, excluding native category licenses.

The Panel held hearings from grass roots First Nations fishing representatives in key communities across the province. The document comes alive with quotes of opinion expressed by individuals who talked to the Panel about observations, stories and legends they grew up with and how their relationship with the fish their ancestors relied on has changed so much. These quotes describe how the white man has exploited First Nation communities, and how they are no longer able to preserve their cultural values, customs and traditions in relation to the fish that occupy the rivers and coast lines they grew up with. The report acknowledges that First Nations people are active and successful in the commercial fishing business. However, the sample of opinions published did not include any insights from First Nation peoples who are successful in their business dealings. Consequently the report does not generate favourable role models that First Nation youth may look up to for guidance in order to survive in highly competitive market environment. Perhaps the intent is to encourage more of a warrior-like role model that is subservient to the Chiefs among First Nation youth

rather than that of becoming an independently minded, modern day, Canadian entrepreneur?

In contrast with the forty-one Recommendations in the Pearce / McRae report, the Panel's report lists seven Recommendations. These recommendations call on Canada to give accounting for fisheries management to First Nations people who are involved with fishing in BC, regardless of their treaty negotiation status. On their own these Recommendations read more like an ultimatum to all non-First Nation people living in Canada than advisory options for First Nation leaders to consider in their negotiations with the Government of Canada. The rationale supporting the Recommendations is that such actions will serve to reconcile aboriginal and crown title and be more efficient than proceeding through the courts.

The Panel has defined Allocation Principles in establishing a sustainable fishery for all Canadians that sound very reasonable. In its Management and Allocation Framework the Panel stresses the need for an independent science institution to define what constitutes a healthy fishing ecosystem. The Recommendations of this report promote a vision for future fisheries management by First Nations people in BC that seems very dependent on them frequently looking in the rear view mirror as they chart a course back to the future.

**Postscript: A non-fictional summer read.** I read this report between driving a Ford Mustang from Steveston BC to Montreal and Toronto before returning to Steveston. Reading a West Coast First Nation policy document about the management of a naturally occurring source of high protein food during this leisurely drive added sensitivity to the role that First Nations people play in defining Canada. Someone should organize a cross-country tour highlighting the history of First Nations people across this land. Certainly the languages of the Founding Nations were dominant and sometimes competed for attention. But they have not buried the ubiquitous presence of First Nation signage, culture and belonging that dot this land. Unfortunately scars in this landscape appeared while driving through, and sometimes getting lost in, the suburbs of Edmonton, Saskatoon, Winnipeg, Kenora, Thunder Bay, Sudbury, and North Bay. These experiences diminished the celebratory nature of the status ascribed to the First Nation contribution in "nation building" as portrayed in Ottawa. The scars on this landscape festered further as I listened to a discussion on CBC Radio while driving through Dryden Ontario about the high suicide rate among First Nation youth. These experiences cast a sense of depression and raised questions about the futility of attempting to rationalize public policy associated with First Nation peoples in Canada. It was a world-class dining experience at the Nk'Mip Cellars Winery overlooking Osoyoos during the return journey that provided the hope needed to continue the exercise. Evidently when First Nation leaders decide they can compete in modern-day Canada they can be very successful and create realistic role models for all First Nation youth.



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