

Walking with Salmon

A Bureaucrat's Guide to Seine Boat Salmon Fishing

A Political Analyst goes Aboard the **Good Partner** to Experience His First-ever Commercial Salmon Opening

BY TIM LYNCH

Since moving from Toronto to Steveston four years ago I have wanted to spend time on a commercial fishing boat. I dropped hints to this effect among all those I met that had anything to do with the fishing industry. When Bruce Lansdowne phoned and asked if I would like to join him the following day for the October 4, 2004 Johnstone Strait twelve hour Chum salmon seine boat opening - I cleared the deck. Finally someone took my bait.

We left Steveston at 9 am to catch the ferry to Vancouver Island and drive up the Island. We stopped for lunch at Roberts Lake Resort, a trout fishing retreat just north of Campbell River,

where I had a generous oyster burger. We arrived at Port McNeil in time for the 5 pm ferry to Alert Bay where Bruce was born and grew up and where his boat was berthed. It became apparent that he was home when we arrived at the ferry terminal. He knew most of the people heading in the same direction. This familiarity with surroundings and people continued all night. We went to dinner at the Old Customs House Restaurant with Bruce's ninety-two year old father, Edgar, who lives in Alert Bay. I can strongly recommend the stuffed halibut so graciously served at this establishment; the inclusion of smoked salmon with spinach in the stuffing truly

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educated the palate. The day concluded with my sleeping in the top bunk of a commercial fishing boat.

Preparation

In the early light of Saturday morning Bruce steered his 75-foot boat **Good Partner** out of the harbour amidst a layer of fog that would stay with us until we got to Port Hardy, a two hour journey. We were going there to get ice, fuel and to pick up Bruce's crew. At Port Hardy, Brian Moore of Cove Fisheries and Marine Services showed me how ice is manufactured, stored and conveyed onto fishing boats.

Bruce introduced me to his crew: drum-man Daniel Manson of Courtney; skiff operator John Macko of Kingcome Inlet, and tie-up man Rick Johnson of Gilford Island. Rick's nineteen year old daughter, Jennifer, agreed to come along as cook and general deckhand before travelling to Toronto where she is exploring a career in multi-media.



Sorting Table

pacific west refrigeration

pinnacle seafoods



A Good Set

On the wharf at Port Hardy I helped the crew change a large portion of the boat's net, the bunt, replacing a section with one that had larger mesh so that the smaller fish could get through the net as part of the fisheries conservation program. This experience gave me the opportunity to use a netting needle, something I have wanted to do since moving to Steveston. After fuelling up and getting food supplies we returned to Alert Bay where we docked for the night.

Strategic Reconnaissance

I was up in the wheel room with Bruce next morning as he steered the boat towards Johnstone Strait. Bruce explained that the Department of Fisheries and Oceans had mandated the date and time for the opening some two years previous. This one was scheduled for Monday October 4, 2004, from 7 am to 7 pm. In navigating his boat Bruce alternated between using the computer gadgetry that dominated the wheelhouse and relying on his own instinct. Having grown up in the neighbourhood he did not require charts to show him where to go. One piece of equipment I was particularly fond of was the "Alarm Watch." Set to go off every few minutes, it was impossible not to stay focussed on navigating the boat. I am trying to figure out how I can include such gadgetry in keeping me focussed on my work routine.

It was the beginning of a beautiful blue-sky day and the water was calm against the black images of the islands we passed. In the twilight hours Bruce would occasionally exclaim, "There they are." I could not see any sign of fish but Bruce assured me they were there. We met up with another fishing boat that emerged from behind a silhouetted island. In the early dawn light both skippers manoeuvred their vessels within a few inches of each other while they discussed where they thought the fish were and what they had heard other fishers were doing. This ritual was repeated several times throughout Sunday. I was amazed at the dexterity with which the boats were manoeuvred so close to each other. Each encounter was like a family gathering where, while the skippers engaged in serious discussion, the crew members, all of whom seemed to know each other, were catching up on news about their families and friends. The serenity of the setting was periodically punctuated with the sounds of talk and laughter.

Small islands create channels into and out of the Johnstone Strait, an expanse of water on the northeast side of Vancouver Island just south of Alert Bay. It is through these channels that the salmon have to travel on their journey to the spawning grounds. The channels create currents that make the stocks of fish move around in unpredictable patterns. The islands are dwarfed by majestic cathedral-like mountains penetrating the sky on the Mainland.

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Seemingly immune to the beauty that surrounded them the boats hurried around from one location to the next, studying the tides, wind and other signs for the presence of fish below the water. Periodically we would see one, or several, salmon jump out of the water, greeted with a chorus of cheers in confirmation that there were fish present. Under a majestic blue sky the boats would slow down to allow a pod of killer whales to exercise their prerogative in traversing the Strait. Watching young whales play together, while being protected by their parents, will be remembered by me as one of life's treasured moments.

The movement of the seine boats across Johnstone Strait was like a chess game in which the different pieces assume an independent intelligence in formulating strategy for the next day's battle. Besides sightings of salmon jumping, ripples on the surface, the direction of currents, the tide level for the time of day, and the relative geography of the area, as well as an eye on where the rest of the fleet was heading, were all included in strategising where the salmon may be swimming the next day. After a most memorable sunny Sunday, Bruce anchored his boat in a small cove of one of the islands. Jennifer served dinner and we retired for the night.

The Chum Salmon Opening

Next morning I joined the crew on deck a little after 6 a.m.



Jennifer

I stayed clear and watched as they went about doing a multitude of tasks. The most dominant equipment on board was the drum around which was coiled a 220-fathom long net. White floats dotted one side of the net while a rope weighted with lead ran along the other side. The objective was to uncoil and spread the net behind the boat such that the sides



redden net



mtc food equipment



Down the Hatch

with the floats were visible on top of the water while the heavier lead weighted sides sank to a depth of 26 fathoms in the path that the fish were taking. It was quickly evident to me that the skill of seine boat fishing is being able to determine where precisely these fish will travel and then being ready to set the net out at the right time.

The skiff, a smaller boat with an outboard motor, is used to take the net out and anchor the free end to the shoreline, or

hold it out at sea, and the skiff operator has to be ready to move as soon as the skipper gives the order. At about 7:20 am the first net was launched. This involved John and Rick taking one end of the net over to the shoreline while Dan cautiously managed the drum from which the net uncoiled. While John controlled the skiff, Rick tied the end of the net to the selected anchor point on shore. With the free end of the net set away from the boat the net was allowed to gradually form a semicircle in an attempt to surround the fish.

The process is made possible through the use of a powerful hydraulic system that rewinds the net at the same time the boat is being steered into position to take advantage of the currents and a multitude of assumptions about where the fish may be, not the least being the personal instincts of the skipper. In addition to turning the drum, hydraulics are used to turn a very powerful winch that is used to control the free end of the net which is drawn tightly closed along the bottom once the fish are encircled. Manoeuvring the boat and pulling on both ends of the net eventually corrals the salmon inside the net at the side of the boat.

One of the mysteries of living in Steveston has been the intriguing sight of what looks like a large butterfly net on the side of fishing boats. It always looked far too big for any individual to use in the context of possibly netting fish by hand at the side of the boat. I learned that this giant net is technically called a brailer. It is used to transfer fish enclosed in the seine net at the side of the boat onto the deck. Strategically moving the long handle hanging from the side of the boat, the brailer is plunged into the swarm of fish and lifts out large numbers of the flapping salmon onto the deck using the winch. The bottom of the brailer net is then opened and the fish fall onto a sorting table or on the deck, sometimes on the side where they were hauled from and other times onto the other side. Now I know what those giant butterfly nets are used for.

Initially the catches were sparse and didn't seem to justify the amount of effort. I was beginning to think that my presence on the boat had brought Bruce some bad luck. It was in this moment of concern that I noticed Jennifer pushing flapping salmon through a hole in the deck into the hatch

oki tackle

hi line

where they are stored. That looked like a job I could do.

Gradually I moved into position where I could offer Jennifer some help. The knee length Wellington boots that I was wearing I had bought for ice fishing on the lake outside my cottage in Georgian Bay, Ontario. I had included them along with my waterproof covering as a last thought before leaving Steveston. I discovered they proved very useful in moving the salmon along the deck and down into the hatch.

In the beginning it was a relatively easy task moving the salmon towards the hole. Then it happened. I knew something was different by the excitement of the crew. All of a sudden I found myself knee deep in large salmon flapping around me. I pushed them along with my feet and watched them disappear into the hatch. Then I turned to see more behind me. I had a vision of them pushing me into hatch along with their relatives. Holding on the side of the boat I walked back among the flapping salmon and then turning around, I proceeded to push them into the hole. This process of walking with the salmon I repeated numerous times.

Quite often salmon would become stuck in awkward parts of the boat and I would need to pick them up and put them into the hatch. Periodically members of the crew would pick up a salmon and throw it back into the sea or place it in the revival box. Obviously they could distinguish between Chum salmon and other species that were not supposed to be harvested on this occasion. To me they all looked the same.

Eventually the routine assumed its own rhythm as we repeated the ritual of letting out the net. Bruce would take his boat to his chosen spot and then order that the nets be run out. John and Rick would jump in the skiff if they were not already waiting. Dan controlled the drum and made sure the net would not get tangled as it was unwound. When they returned to the boat from spreading the net, John and Rick, with help from Jennifer, managed the winch and closing the net and feeding it to the drum as the fish were corralled alongside. It was Bruce who did the plunging of the brailer into the swarming salmon. They all supported him in making sure that the brailer net was as full as possible prior to it being hauled on board. Seeing these events happen was like watching a symphony of motion with Bruce as the conductor.



Brailing Chums

Clearly the process of netting fish was somewhat “hit or miss.” To my relief Bruce did succeed in hitting the jackpot often, which meant I wasn’t a bad omen after all. We caught 64,000 lbs of salmon that day. This single boat sampling, taken from selected areas of Johnstone Strait in a twelve-hour window, shows that many salmon traverse the area when the fishery is not open.

An Added Bonus

An added bonus to this experience was meeting some interesting people. Between them the crew had over one hundred years experience in the fishing business on the Canadian west coast that was most enlightening. Repeatedly I heard their frustration about government reports written by eminent academic theoreticians or high priced consultants, as well as regular government employees who had not spent any time on a fishing-boat. They were concerned that the decisions being made, particularly around quotas, do not consider preserving the true “art” of the commercial fishing business. The consensus was that quotas would take away the excitement associated with pitching man’s wit against the fish

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in the oceans. To them it would mean losing a way of life.

Listening to their concerns about government reminded me of a quote that Janice Stein refers to in her book, "The Cult of Efficiency." Discussing the State as the provider of private goods, Professor Stein cites Adam Smith, the father of modern day economics, as saying:

"The man of the system is apt to be very wise in his own conceit; and is often so enamoured with the supposed beauty of his own ideal plan for government, that he cannot suffer the smallest deviation from any part of it. He seems to imagine that he can arrange the different members of a great society with as much ease as the hand that arranges the different pieces upon the chess-board which have no other principles of motion besides that which the hand impresses on upon them; but that, in the great chess board of human society, every single piece has a principle of motion of its own, altogether different from that which the legislature might choose to impress upon it."

Being in the report writing business I am very aware how easy it can be for some people to produce reports about any topic under the sun, or in this case under the sea. Such documents usually have more sizzle than steak. A possible solution is to demand that authors of reports about fishing produce a logbook signed off by a skipper documenting the number of hours they have spent in the company of fishing people while at work. Only people who can produce such logbooks should



Another Day at the Office

be allowed to write reports on the fishing industry.

Besides criticising the ways of government, the crew engaged me more deeply in discussion about the meaning of life. I found this experience to be therapeutic in helping me come to terms with my Welsh-Irish, working-class, Catholic hang-ups. Growing up in Wales I had the impression that

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salmon came from tins and it was to be eaten on Fridays. Partly attributable to his Scottish ancestry, John Macko came across as somewhat of a philosopher prince; I understand most crews have one. He constantly challenged me about my values and beliefs. John seemed to understand that the coal dust one breathes as a child growing up in a mining community leaves its mark on one's soul. He appreciated my dilemma, having been born into the Welsh Nation, of Irish parentage, and having adopted a country where I am classified politically as an English-Canadian. We all agreed that each of us have demons that we need to tame in order to benefit from the bounty inherent in living in such a beautiful country as Canada.

Reflections

I was fortunate to have perfect weather for this maritime adventure. In addition to the daylight terrestrial vistas I had the opportunity to renew my acquaintance with starlit skies at night. On such occasions I realize I have spent too much of my life living in big cities. I found myself thanking God for giving me the opportunity to witness what it is that fishing people do. At the same time I was complaining to Him that He didn't facilitate such opportunities when I was younger.

The weather did get a bit choppy as we travelled through the Georgia Strait on the way back to Steveston, a journey

that usually takes twenty-two hours took an extra three. I didn't mind. The trip back gave me the opportunity to experience choppy seas.

Arriving in Steveston from the sea on a commercial fishing boat was kind of like seeing the world back to front. It was a grey rainy evening, which added to the epiphany I experienced as we navigated through one of the more complex waterways in Canada. As I recognised the contours of Garry Point through the binoculars I knew I was in my neighbourhood.

There was a line-up of other fishing boats in front of us. This meant I would not be around when the salmon I walked with would be taken from the boat. The dock where the salmon were being unloaded was a beehive of activity. The fish were being sucked up from the hatcheries, placed in containers, weighed and covered in ice prior to being put into waiting trucks ready for transportation to the processing plant. As I watched I thought how unfortunate it is that there are people making decisions on the future of the fishing industry who have not had the privilege of walking with salmon. Maybe they can talk the talk but they may not have walked the walk.



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