Lightning Boldts and Sparrow Wings: A Comparison of Coast Salish Fishing Rights in British Columbia and Washington State

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Recent court cases in British Columbia and Washington State have upheld the Aboriginal and treaty rights of access to the salmon resource. Although the Native peoples whose territories lie along the border between Canada and the United States provide the opportunity to explore the differing impact of political and economic changes, there are remarkably few studies that attempt this type of analysis. This article focuses on the impact of court cases that have resulted in an allocated Native share of the salmon fishery. The Boldt decision of 1974 in Washington State has brought significant changes to the political and economic life of Native peoples. These experiences are instructive for Native peoples of British Columbia who are just beginning to implement an Aboriginal commercial fishery.

Introduction

Since the 1970s important changes have occurred along the west coast of North America with respect to the Native people's use and control of natural resources. The Coast Salish of the Northwest Coast controlled a traditional fishery that not only met their needs for subsistence but also had the potential to develop into an integral part of the resource-based economy of northwest Washington and southwest British Columbia. Native people played important roles in the development of the commercial salmon fishing industry of British Columbia and Washington State (Knight, 1978; Boxberger, 1989), but this changed dramatically in subsequent years as technological changes and competing labour groups worked to marginalize Native participation. In addition to the economic forces at work, Native people were also subject to the assimilationist policies of Canada and the United States, which served to further limit Native access to the salmon fishery.

This article will compare the post-contact salmon fishery of the Coast Salish of British Columbia and the state of Washington, focusing especially on recent court cases which upheld the Aboriginal right of access to the resource. Particular attention will be paid to the comparative analysis of adjudicated resource rights in the "Boldt Decision" (United States v. State of Washington) and the "Sparrow Decision" (Sparrow v. The Queen).

While there have been several recent studies of the role of Native people in the commercial fisheries of the Northwest (for British Columbia see Pinkerton, 1987, and Newell, 1993; for Washington State see Cohen, 1986, and Boxberger, 1989; for southeast Alaska see Price, 1990), there have not been any attempts to compare the differing experiences in Canada and the United States for the purpose of providing insight into resource rights and policy. Although the Native people whose traditional territories lie along the border between Canada and the United States provide a perfect opportunity to analyze the different impact of the political and economic changes of the respective countries, there are remarkably few studies that attempt to do so. Samek (1986) called for comparative analyses in order to avoid duplicating misguided reforms in policy. Her comparison of Native policy in respect to the Blackfoot of Alberta and Montana represents a seminal work in the field of comparative political analysis (Samek, 1987). Recently Miller (1992) presented an analysis of the role of women in the formal political structures of the same groups under consideration here.

The Coast Salish of North Puget Sound and the Lower Fraser River, including the Sto:lo and Lummi, are in a situation similar to that of the Blackfoot. Having become subject to different political bodies, they have nevertheless maintained strong ceremonial and kinship ties across the border. Their differing experiences with political and economic forces are therefore instructive, particularly in respect to the interpretation of Aboriginal rights.

The Traditional Coast Salish Fishery

At the time of European contact the Coast Salish were engaged in a well developed salmon fishery that not only met their needs for subsistence but also provided a surplus for trade and ceremonial feasting. The technology employed represents one of the most sophisticated traditional fisheries in the world. Five different species of salmon were harvested; the most important, the Fraser River sockeye, formed the main economic focus for Native people throughout the Fraser River system and the adjacent salt water areas. According to data provided by Beringer (1982), the centre of technological sophistication for Northwest Coast Native salmon fishing was the area around the mouth of the Fraser River. Hewes's (1973) estimates for Aboriginal consumption rates indicate that those of the Sto:lo and Lummi were among the highest on the Pacific Coast. The Fraser River sockeye runs were

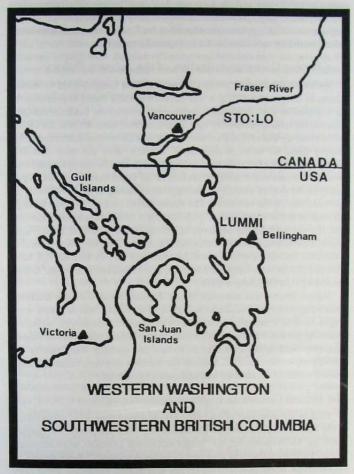


Figure 1: Western Washington and Southwestern British Columbia

especially important for Native groups along the lower Fraser River and in the adjacent Gulf and San Juan Islands.¹

The reliance on salmon that characterized traditional Coast Salish culture continues to this day, although varying degrees of access have been evident over the past century. It is no coincidence that early non-Native developments in commercial fishing also concentrated on the Fraser River runs: abundance and accessibility made this an area of special importance.

Non-Native Commercialization of the Salmon Fishery

Although the Hudson's Bay Company at Fort Langley tried to market salmon as early as the 1820s, it was not until reliable forms of preservation were available that large-scale commercial operations became feasible. Salmon canneries appeared on Puget Sound and the Fraser River in the 1870s, but the industry was off to a slow start until it was discovered that Fraser River sockeye could be taken in abundance. Sockeye were the most desirable species for canning because of their bright red flesh. The entrepreneurs who developed the salmon industry in the late 1800s found a seemingly unlimited supply of the species and the lack of regulatory measures meant virtually an unbridled use of the resource.2 The Fraser River sockeye migrate through U.S. waters before entering the Fraser River just north of the border, and they form the mainstay of the commercial fishing industry of both north Puget Sound and southwest British Columbia. Thus, they have long been a point of contention between the two countries, resulting in two treaties that have allocated the resource between American and Canadian commercial fishers since the 1930s (Boxberger 1988).

Native labour was essential in the formative years of the industry. Possessing the requisite skills as fishers and processors, Native people were sought by the commercial interests. The earliest commercial operators purchased the majority of their fish from Native fishers while Native women were employed in the canneries as cutters and packers. Very rapidly the Native people were incorporated into the industry and their economic lives became a mix of subsistence and seasonal wage labour.

The British Columbia Experience

During the latter part of the 1800s efforts aimed at directed assimilation of the Native people of British Columbia were well underway. As Tennant (1990, pp. 74-75) points out, the "traditional beliefs, practices, and institutions required active dismantling if assimilation was to succeed." Nevertheless, as the industrial development of the fishery accelerated, beginning about 1880 and continuing until after the turn of the century, the Native people remained a significant force in the industry. In fact, the fishing industry was the "only

economic sector in the province in which Indians were well paid and able to maintain a substantial presence" (Tennant, 1990, p. 73). By 1919 the British Columbia fishing industry employed nine thousand people, "the majority of whom were Indians. And more than one-third of all salmon fishermen were Indians" (Pearse, 1982, p. 151). The Native people adjusted remarkably well to the changes in the fishery and continued to participate as an integral part of the labour force. This participation meshed well with the traditional fishing economy in which the division of labour was between men and women, the former fishing and the latter processing the catch. As the fishery became industrialized the Native people fished for cash as well as subsistence and the traditional division of labour persisted.

During the 1920s and 1930s the development of larger and more expensive vessels caused the number of Native fishers to decline. This decline, however, was minor in comparison with the drastic decline after World War II. The displacement was caused by the consolidation of the canning industry and the adoption of more capital-intensive fishing technology. From 1950 to 1980, the number of Native-owned vessels fell by two-thirds. The number of Native people employed as crew and cannery workers also dropped. This decline in participation in the fishing industry was a severe economic blow to the Native communities. By 1980 Native fishers accounted for just 15 percent of the salmon fleet and most of the Native vessels were leased from the canneries. The Native people perceived the attrition of their participation in the fishery as the most serious threat to their economic wellbeing. Several organizations developed in an attempt to reverse this trend, denoted in reforms such as the Indian Fisherman's Assistance Program and the Indian Fisherman's Development Board.³

Since most British Columbia Natives never formally negotiated treaties with the Canadian government, it has long been the contention of Native bands and political organizations that Aboriginal rights to resources remain. The Constitution Act of 1982 has marked an important turning point for Native people in British Columbia. Although British Columbia Natives have a long history of political activism designed to clarify Aboriginal rights to land and resources (Fisher, 1977; Tennant, 1990), their efforts have generally been thwarted by the province until recently.

Native fishing rights were tested in the 1980s by several court cases, the most important of which was the Sparrow case. Ronald Sparrow, a member of the Musqueam band near the mouth of the Fraser River, was arrested in 1984 for using a net longer than allowed by the Fisheries Act. As early as 1868 the Fisheries Act has regulated the Native food fishery in British Columbia and this case was one of the first to question whether the Native fishery was an existing Aboriginal right or whether the Aboriginal right to fish had been

extinguished by the Fisheries Act. In May 1990 the Supreme Court of Canada ruled in Sparrow v. The Queen that the Coast Salish right to fish is an existing Aboriginal right protected by Section 35(1) of the Constitution Act, 1982. This included the Aboriginal right to fish for food for social and ceremonial purposes, a right that takes precedence over other user groups and is second only to conservation of the resource. The court, however, was silent on the right to sell fish commercially. Since this ruling, there have been a number of lower court decisions concerning the sale of fish by Native people, some in favour, some against. As a result the Fisheries Minister initiated a policy to allow the sale of fish by Native people on a seven-year trial basis (1992 to 1998). In addition to the Sto:lo this policy is being extended to other Native fisheries throughout the province. Despite much criticism in its first year, the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy will continue but will likely be very controversial (Newell, 1993, p. 179).

The Sparrow case hinged on the wording of Section 35 of the Constitution, which states that "the existing aboriginal and treaty rights of aboriginal peoples of Canada are hereby recognized and affirmed." This has been interpreted to mean rights in existence in 1982. Since the Coast Salish had continued to fish for salmon continuously since British Columbia joined Confederation, albeit under federal provisions allowing a Native food fishery, the right was nevertheless an existing one and gained constitutional authority in 1982 (Sanders, 1990, p. 126).

The Washington State Experience

Unlike the Native people of British Columbia, most Washington Natives have treaty-protected rights to resources. Nevertheless, parallel historical developments in the state of Washington led to the nearly total exclusion of Native people from participation in the fishing industry. As the Washington fishery became increasingly capital-intensive and as the labour of other ethnicities came to replace Native labour, the Native people attempted to assert treaty rights to fish. The policy of the federal government at the time, however, discouraged activities deemed "traditional" and instead pressured Native people to pursue farming as a means to bring about assimilation into the dominant society. Nevertheless the Native people held to the contention that treaties gave them assured rights to fish, but the state of Washington consistently refused to recognize Native fishing rights.

In the early 1900s the Coast Salish of Washington came to be restricted to fishing on their reservations, and even this activity was suppressed by the state and federal governments. By 1935 the total salmon harvest by Native fishers accounted for less then 3 percent of the total in Washington. For a short time during World War II and for a few years after, the Native people enjoyed

a brief reincorporation into the fishing industry. Then in the 1950s the increasing technological changes and increasing participation by non-Natives led to the exclusion of Native fishers from the industry. This has been attributed to general discrimination and an inability of Native people to access capital—Native property, for example, is held in trust by the federal government and cannot be used as collateral, so lending institutions will generally not make loans to Native people (Boxberger, 1989).

In the 1960s Native people began to question the manner in which the fishery had developed and contested the exclusion of Native people from exercising their treaty right to the resource. Through a series of protests and court cases, the Native people eventually gathered support to take the issue to court. Thirteen western Washington tribes entered suit against the state of Washington in 1973. In February 1974 Federal District Court Judge, George Boldt, ruled that the wording of the 1855 treaties was to be interpreted to mean that treaty tribes were to exercise not only a treaty right to fish but also a guaranteed allocation of the resource. Since the state of Washington was unwilling or unable to allocate specifically for a treaty fishery, the court set the allocation at 50 percent. This decision was upheld by the Supreme Court of the United States in July 1979. In the ten-year period following the Boldt decision, the Native people gradually increased the salmon harvest until they were able to reach the maximum allocation. Since that time the tribes and the state have co-operated to manage the resource in a manner that ensures compliance with the court decision.

A Comparison

Native policies in both Canada and the United States stem in theory if not in actual practice from the Royal Proclamation of 1763. Briefly stated, the Proclamation ensures that Aboriginal rights to land, and by extension to resources, continue until such time as these rights are extinguished by treaty or some other form of agreement. The concept of "extinguishment" thereby becomes a primary concept concerning Aboriginal rights and a major point of departure between Canadian and U.S. policy. In general the Coast Salish in Canada have had to demonstrate that Aboriginal rights have not been extinguished as a means of protecting those rights under the Constitution. The Coast Salish in the U.S. have had to demonstrate that rights have been extinguished as a means of reinstating those rights. This has resulted in similar ends but by very different means.

The fishing rights decision in Washington preceded the Sparrow decision by nearly two decades. I suggest here that a review of the experiences of the Coast Salish after the Boldt decision may enable the Native people of British Columbia to avoid similar difficulties that emerged. I identify four problems

that arose in the Native fishery of Washington State after 1974 (Boxberger, 1989) and suggest ways in which they can be circumvented.

The Issues

"Fishing With the Enemy," Vancouver Sun, 2 January 1993

"B.C. Fishermen Slam Native Fish Policy," Pacific Fishing, March 1993

"Salmon Battle Smells of Racial Intolerance," Vancouver Sun, 27 May 1993

"Tension Builds Over B.C. Fish Policy," Pacific Fishing, June 1993

This small sample of headlines from just a local newspaper and a regional trade magazine indicates the public emotions engendered in decisions on Native resource and land rights. Often, interest groups and individuals do not have a full understanding of the issues surrounding Native rights, and their reactions are often fuelled by hard economic times. Inevitably, backlash from industry and the (non-Native) public is harsh and seemingly unavoidable. To circumvent the emotional response, public education campaigns are essential. In the summer of 1993 such a campaign launched by the First Nations of British Columbia met with some success. These, however, are immediate issues. The deeper, and potentially more damaging, problems are yet to emerge.

Despite the fact that the Fraser River fishery is the healthiest it has been in years—the production of Fraser River sockeye has doubled since 1988—there has not necessarily been more room created for participation in the commercial fishery. Inevitably, as participation by Native people increases, the internal problems inherent in commercial fisheries will intensify. Overcapitalization, unequal build-up and user-group conflicts have plagued the Native commercial fishery of Washington. What does this tell us about the future of the Native commercial fishery in B.C.?

The Native people of B.C. have been assured of the right to sell salmon; they have not been guaranteed an allocation. Thus far, the allocation for a Native fishery is about the same as the historic food fishery and will not likely increase during the next few years. This is a major oversight that appears to be missing from the ongoing negotiation process. Over-capitalization of commercial fishing fleets is a phenomenon that results in increased harvests by individual fishers. Investing in more expensive, more technologically sophisticated gear requires an increase in individual harvest to cover the increased expenditures—often as high as 80 percent of the gross yield.

The post-1974 build-up of the Lummi fleet illustrates this problem. In

1974 thirty-five to forty Lummis engaged in gill-netting with small skiffs on or near the reservation. Two Lummis operated purse seine vessels. Suddenly faced with the opportunity to harvest many more fish than in previous years, the Lummi fleet was physically incapable of expanding its take. Nevertheless, by 1985 the Lummi were the strongest fishing tribe in western Washington, taking in some years close to half the entire treaty allocation. The Lummi fishery after the Boldt decision used three vessel types. The common method of fishing at the time of the Boldt decision was the gill-net skiff which was used for river and in-shore fishing. These boats are about seven metres long, are powered by twenty-five to forty horsepower outboard motors and use hand-pulled nets. Such skiffs are operated by one person, although the fisher will sometimes take along a family member for crew. These fishing boats represent a capital investment of from under \$1,000 U.S. to as much as \$5,000 U.S., with the nets costing another \$2,000 to \$5,000 U.S.

The most significant post-Boldt build-up was of the Lummi power gillnet boats. These boats range between seven and fourteen metres in length and represent a capital investment of \$35,000 to \$50,000 U.S., with the nets costing from \$10,000 to \$25,000 U.S. The power gill-netters use large inboard/outboard engines and hydraulic reels to work the nets. They are large enough for the fisher to live aboard for several days and therefore to fish a considerable distance from home port.

The present Lummi purse seine fleet consists of vessels ranging in cost from \$100,000 to \$750,000 U.S. each, with the net costing another \$40,000 to \$50,000 U.S. These vessels are drum-operated, are 15 to 25 metres long and require a crew of four or five. Purse seiners use a "power skiff," a four-metre long boat with a powerful diesel engine used to haul the net around in a circle. Power skiffs represent another sizeable investment, from \$15,000 to \$20,000 U.S. The Lummi purse seine fleet increased from two in 1974 to thirty-five in 1992. Needless to say, most vessels are heavily financed by non-tribal lending institutions.

With the increase in each gear type there was a concomitant need to increase catch to cover the capital investment and operating costs. It has been estimated that a purse seine vessel must yield over \$265,000 U.S. annually to meet minimal operating costs, a power gill-net \$50,000 U.S. and a skiff gill-net \$25,000 U.S. (Boxberger, 1989, p. 173). With a limited allocation of salmon, plus the other tribes seeking to increase their harvest of the allocation, it very quickly became apparent that the Lummi fleet had become seriously over-capitalized in a relatively short period. The major problem associated with over-capitalization is that most fishers operate at a deficit. It has been estimated that the average annual income of Lummi fishers is \$5,000 U.S., far below the yield necessary to meet minimum operating expenses and

achieve a moderate income (Boxberger, 1989, pp. 173-174).

In contrast to the guaranteed allocation in the Native fishery of western Washington, the Native people of B.C. have no guarantee that the right to harvest for sale will continue after 1998. Should the Native fleet build to the point where it will require a certain proportion of the resource to remain viable while access to the resource is restricted, the results could be devastating. Similarly, should uneven build-up of various band fleets go unchecked, the situation described for the Lummi could be replicated.

Commonly, conflicts within user groups emerge as a result of increased resource extraction. To use the Lummi example again, by 1985 the Lummi were capable of harvesting over half of the total Native allocation for the twenty-four tribes of western Washington. This was the result of economic, political and environmental factors. Once the Native treaty share was allocated, there was no mechanism to equitably allocate the resource among the treaty tribes. The Lummis entered the fishery with large-scale gear that put them at an advantage over tribes using smaller gear. In addition, the location of the Lummi tribe is such that it has access to the U.S. share of Fraser River sockeve and thereby takes most of the Native share of the U.S. allocation under the Pacific Salmon Treaty (see Boxberger, 1988, for a discussion of the effect of the Pacific Salmon Treaty on the Lummi fishery). The treaty tribes of western Washington are restricted to fishing within their traditional use locations, called "usual and accustomed areas." These areas are ideally situated to intercept many of the runs of salmon entering Puget Sound as well as the Fraser River runs.

The Fraser River system likewise presents an allocation problem, particularly for the up-river bands. Since Native fishing rights only extend to traditional use areas, those bands nearer the mouth of the river have the first opportunity to harvest. With the build-up of the Native fleet, the pressure to increase harvest will give an advantage to those down-river groups. To overcome the potential for inter-band conflicts, it is essential that a mechanism for allocation be adopted before unequal build-up occurs. In western Washington allocation among the twenty-four treaty tribes is facilitated by the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission. The commission, however, is advisory and has no regulatory powers and, should a tribe disagree with the management recommendations, the tribe can choose to pursue its own course of action. Having twenty-four tribes as well as the state of Washington involved in regulating the fishery, in addition to input from federal agencies, has created a regulatory nightmare. In British Columbia, where even more bands are involved, the allocation and management process will be even more complex.

Additionally, the allocation within bands is an important consideration. Management of the Lummi fishery is administered by the Lummi Fisheries Office which answers to upper levels of administration directly responsible to the tribal council. The council, however, is within the control of purse seine owners and their families who administer the fishery in a way that benefits themselves directly. Purse seine vessels take upwards of two-thirds of the total Lummi harvest, though they comprise less than 10 percent of the total number of fishers. Immediately after the Boldt decision the tribe was in a position to enter the fishery as a tribal enterprise, but the lack of an allocation process discouraged tribalism. On the contrary, it precipitated stratification brought about by differential access to the resource. Though the Boldt decision returned the resource to the Lummi, the fishery was developed through external financing, external technology and external management principles. The Lummi fishery replicated the structure of the non-Native fishery, especially its structural problems.

Increasingly the Lummi fleet has been unable to support itself through participation in the salmon fishery alone. As a result the tribes have pushed to extend their treaty rights to other species, such as halibut, crab and bottom fish, and have purchased permits to fish in other areas, such as Alaska.

Predictably, as the Native people of British Columbia increase participation in the salmon harvest, there will be movement to other species, such as halibut, herring, bottom fish and shellfish. This will inevitably generate similar problems that historically had occurred in the salmon fishery. It is essential that the resolution of these problem areas be dealt with before the build-up of the Native fleet makes it impossible.

Conclusion

For the past twenty years, the Coast Salish of western Washington have adjusted economically to guaranteed access to the salmon resource. While some individuals have prospered, the fishery has not fostered economic growth at the tribal level. Unemployment on the reserves remains high and tribes have had to seek other avenues of economic development. The First Nations of British Columbia can learn a great deal from the western Washington example and take precautionary measures to avoid the pitfalls of resource development. Particularly as the First Nations enter treaty negotiations with the federal and provincial governments, the nature of use and control of natural resources is a contentious issue. There must be some guarantees to the fisheries resource built into the treaty process and the bands must consider alternative models of resource development as a means of using the resource for the maximum good of all band members.

Notes

- 1 For information on the techniques employed by specific groups see Suttles (1990).
- 2 For the history of the British Columbia commercial salmon fishery see Lyons (1969) and Meggs (1991). For Washington State see Spencer and Pollard (1937) and Browning (1980). For a comparative analysis see Crutchfield and Pontecorvo (1969).
- 3 The study by Pearse (1982) gives a detailed account.
- 4 In keeping with common usage I use the term "bands" to refer to legally recognized Indian groups in Canada and "tribes" to refer to legally recognized Native groups in the United States. In Canada "First Nations" is increasingly becoming a more inclusive term for Indian peoples in general.

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