

Press Release

Environmental groups ignore impacts on Indigenous harvesters and rural communities, misrepresent data in calls for moratorium on BC herring fishery

February 27th, 2020 - In a few weeks, James Lawson will set sail on his father's fishing boat, the *Windward Isle*, and head into the Salish Sea for this year's roe herring fishery. The 31-year old Heiltsuk commercial fisherman is among the fleet of harvesters, packers, and plant workers awaiting the roe herring fishery. Opening for a few weeks in early March, the [\\$40-million](#) fishery keeps fishermen like Lawson afloat after the lean winter months.

Still, Lawson is apprehensive. In recent years, three BC environmental organizations – Pacific Wild, the Hornby Island Conservancy, and a local branch of Sea Shepherd – have been calling for a moratorium on the commercial roe herring fishery. However, peer-reviewed evidence indicates the current commercial harvest is both [ecologically sustainable and vital to the socio-economic and cultural well-being of small coastal and Indigenous communities](#). Lawson and other harvesters worry the groups' calls are unnecessarily threatening fishermen's livelihoods and ability to monitor and steward BC's marine resources while exacerbating tensions on the water.

“The campaign against the herring fishery is damaging to fishermen, our communities, and BC's marine ecosystems,” says Lawson. “It dismisses fisheries as destructive, discredits any science that says otherwise, and ignores the industry's socio-economic and cultural importance. For myself, and others in the industry, it's an important economic and cultural practice that goes generations. My family has always fished for a living – I'm the third generation to fish from this boat alone. We consider ourselves stewards of the coast.”

The commercial herring fishery Lawson and other independent commercial fishermen depend on to make ends meet is divided into five major stock management areas and two smaller ones. The Gulf (Strait of Georgia) management area targets a biomass of herring which spans the east coast of Vancouver Island roughly between Nanaimo and Comox. All other areas are closed.

In the Salish Sea, DFO data shows significant overall growth and [thriving populations](#) of herring stocks since a moratorium on the harvest in the 1960s and 1970s. DFO models vetted by the [Canadian Science Advisory Secretariat](#) have also kept pace with technological advances in computer modeling and data collection. They have consistently shown that a 20 percent harvest rate not exceeding 30 000 metric tonnes is sustainable.

Between 2010 and 2016, the Salish Sea saw a two-fold increase in spawning biomass, from 41 600 metric tonnes to 82 700 metric tonnes, followed by a modest decline between 2016 and 2019. Such variation is well within the range of natural fluctuation for herring according to the [Herring Research and Conservation Society](#). DFO estimates there will be 54 200 metric tonnes of spawning biomass in 2020 and it has allowed for up to 20 percent of these fish to be harvested, or 10 840 metric tonnes. The commercial roe herring fleet is comprised of [252 seine net licenses and 1 267 gillnet licenses](#) and a single boat – most are shorter than a tractor-trailer and are crewed by three to five people – can fish several licenses.

“I participate in both the harvest and the management of this fishery,” says Lawson. “My nation, the Heiltsuk, also charters my vessel to conduct their test fishing in our territory, and I dive on contract for them to collect herring spawn data. This data supports both DFO management coast-wide and our own fisheries management decision-making.”

He’s not [alone](#) in this perspective. Coastal First Nations hold [19 percent](#) of BC’s commercial roe herring licenses through the federal programs designed to increase First Nation’s access to the commercial fisheries. Generally, each nation will then allow their members working as commercial harvesters to use these licenses; an additional [21 percent](#) of licenses are owned outright by independent Indigenous commercial fishermen. These licenses maximise the fishery’s [impact](#) in rural, coastal communities, as harvesters re-invest in their communities while supporting the transfer of important inter-generational knowledge. Many harvesters also skipper or crew on vessels fishing roe herring licenses owned by corporations like the Canadian Fishing Co./CANFISCO.

The socio-economic impacts of the fishery reverberate beyond First Nations. It’s among the more accessible fisheries, explained Pender Harbour fishermen Dave Mackay, making it an ideal fishery for intergenerational knowledge transfer and building community bonds.

“The roe herring fishery is a gateway fishery for young harvesters,” he says.

It’s also one of [few sources](#) of [income](#) for commercial harvesters and fish processors in early spring when other fisheries are closed. In 2017, the fishery’s landed value was about [\\$18 million and wages for processing jobs accounted for about \\$10 million/year](#). This is particularly important in 2020 as many small-scale fishermen like Lawson and Mackay struggle to stay afloat after a [devastating](#) salmon season in 2019.

“Enforcing a moratorium for conservation concerns is only valid when it’s rooted in the best available science,” says Lawson. “Fishing herring is vital to our local economy, community, and culture – and right now, it’s not the herring that are endangered. It’s the fishermen.”

Contact info:

James Lawson, Fisherman - (778) 687-2922

Robert Morley, Herring Conservation and Research Society – rmorleyconsulting@gmail.com

Marc Fawcett-Atkinson, TBuck Suzuki Environmental Foundation and BC Young Fishermen’s Network – marc@bucksuzuki.org