

The Commercial Clam Fishery

The commercial clam fishery is over for another year, and many harvesters are looking back at the season and scratching their heads. Fewer clams combined with low market prices made 2009-2010 particularly challenging for Nuuchahnulth clam harvesters.

"It was a difficult season," said Errol Sam, a commercial clam harvester and Chairperson for the WCVI Clam Board. "Things were busy before Christmas because people were out getting food for the holiday. After that, things dropped off."

Typically running from late fall until early spring, the commercial clam fishery provides important harvesting opportunities for remote west coast communities. Clam harvesters fish during low tides, often at night, using rakes or scrapers to turn clams out of the sand and collect them by hand. Harvest areas are generally in their own backyard, so most don't need to travel.

The two main clam species harvested commercially by Nuuchahnulth are the native littleneck and the manila clam. Inadvertently introduced to the west coast in the 1930s through shipments of oyster seed from Japan, the manila clam has since dominated the market. Over 65% of clams harvested and sold today are manila clams, with native littlenecks making up just 10%.

A third species, commonly known as the varnish clam, also shows potential for commercial harvest. Also introduced from Japan, the varnish clam showed up in the Strait of Georgia during the late 1980's or early 1990's. "More work needs to be done to see if this clam will provide good commercial opportunities in the future," Sam said.

Holding about 70% of the available licences on the west coast of Vancouver Island, Nuuchahnulth are usually strong players in the commercial clam harvest. Unlike other fisheries, commercial clam digging doesn't require expensive overhead or infrastructure. Start-up costs average about \$100, not including the all-weather gear required for working outdoors in winter.

"It's the only non-capitalized fishery there is," said Uu-a-thluk biologist, Roger Dunlop. "All you need is a licence, a high-visibility vest, a rake, a bucket, sacks, labels, and a ride to the beach."

People interested in harvesting clams commercially generally apply to their Chief and Council to have one of their Nation's Aboriginal Communal Licences (or ACL's) assigned to their name. A follow-up application to DFO for the licence, along with a Fisherman's Registration Card and a conservation stamp make up the remaining costs.

Yet despite the low start-up fees, digging for clams isn't always a sure-fire business opportunity. This year, low beach productivity combined with what looked like increased predation by other species made harvesting more difficult in some areas. Low market prices due to a weak American economy also set the stage for short openings lasting no more than two days. (Longer openings result in more clams on the market, which processors are unable to sell quickly enough to maintain a high quality product.)

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"If the prices are low, it's not worth a lot of people's time," Dunlop said. "This happened in the late 80's... What diggers saw on the beaches may help determine the outlook for next year," he added, referring to the size of clams left behind by law to grow into adults.

Playing a role in the clam fishery's management is one way Nuuchahnulth harvesters can help craft a sustainable future for their fishery. Six Nuuchahnulth now participate in the WCVI Clam Board, meeting pre- and post-season to review the fishery's progress. Doug Sam (Tseshaht), Gladys Gus (Tseshaht), John F.K. Frank (Ahousaht), Roseanne Billy (Ehattesaht), and Tony Hansen (Kyuquot) take part, along with Sam who is the board's spokesperson. Working together with other representatives, they aim to manage the fishery to weather challenging years like this one.



Above: Native littleneck (L) and manila clams (R) are the most commonly harvested commercial clam species on the west coast of Vancouver Island.

At right: When clams are abundant, commercial clam digging can provide opportunity for many people living in west coast communities.



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