

Herring and herring spawn (pictured right) feed a multitude of wildlife.



Pacific herring is one of the most important food fish in the ocean, partly for humans, but also for other species. Chinook and coho salmon, Pacific cod, lingcod, halibut, sea lions and seals rely heavily on herring for their food. Other animals like gray whales and crabs thrive on herring roe, as do seabirds migrating through Nuu-chah-nulth Ha-ha-houlthee.

Known to Nuu-chah-nulth speakers as *ʔusmit*, herring have long been a critical food source for Nuu-chah-nulth people. Herring spawn on bough (*kʷaqmis*, *siihmuu* or *siihbuu*) is a favoured food of most Nuu-chah-nulth. Herring spawning sites were once included along with the locations of berry patches and hunting sites in the *hupukwannum*, (a collection of rights and privileges belonging to chiefly families). Along with eating whole herring and *kʷaqmis* for food, Nuu-chah-nulth also traded the fish, making it an intrinsic part of our early economy.

Newcomers to Nuu-chah-nulth territory also saw value in herring. After contact, commercial herring fishing began in 1877 with the majority occurring near Vancouver and on the east coast of Vancouver Island. Catches peaked in the 1950s and 60s, reaching more than 250,000 tonnes. By the late 1960s, B.C. herring stocks had collapsed and were temporarily closed to commercial fishing. Four years later, the B.C. herring fishery reopened with a focus on Asian markets. Recent annual harvests for the whole coast of B.C. average about 25,000 tonnes.

Today herring stocks on the west coast of Vancouver Island and Haida Gwaii are considered to be at historic lows. Until the population of west coast herring increases, DFO has implemented closures on WCVI herring fisheries, including the spawn-on-kelp fishery. In recent years, some Nuu-chah-nulth Nations have also forbidden any harvest of *kʷaqmis* in their territories.

The following fisheries make up the commercial herring harvest today in BC:

Herring Roe: Since 1972, the BC herring fishery has harvested roe for Japanese markets. Along with the roe, this fishery captures both male and female herring, turning about 88% of its harvest by weight into fertilizers and animal feeds.

Spawn-on-kelp: Four Nuu-chah-nulth Nations hold licences in this fishery, which involves impounding herring in net pens. Licence holders string kelp onto lines and submerge it in net pens with the herring. The captured herring spawn on the kelp and are later released from the net pens. Harvesters gather, trim, and brine the spawn-coated kelp before shipping it for processing. Most spawn-on-kelp is destined for Japanese markets.

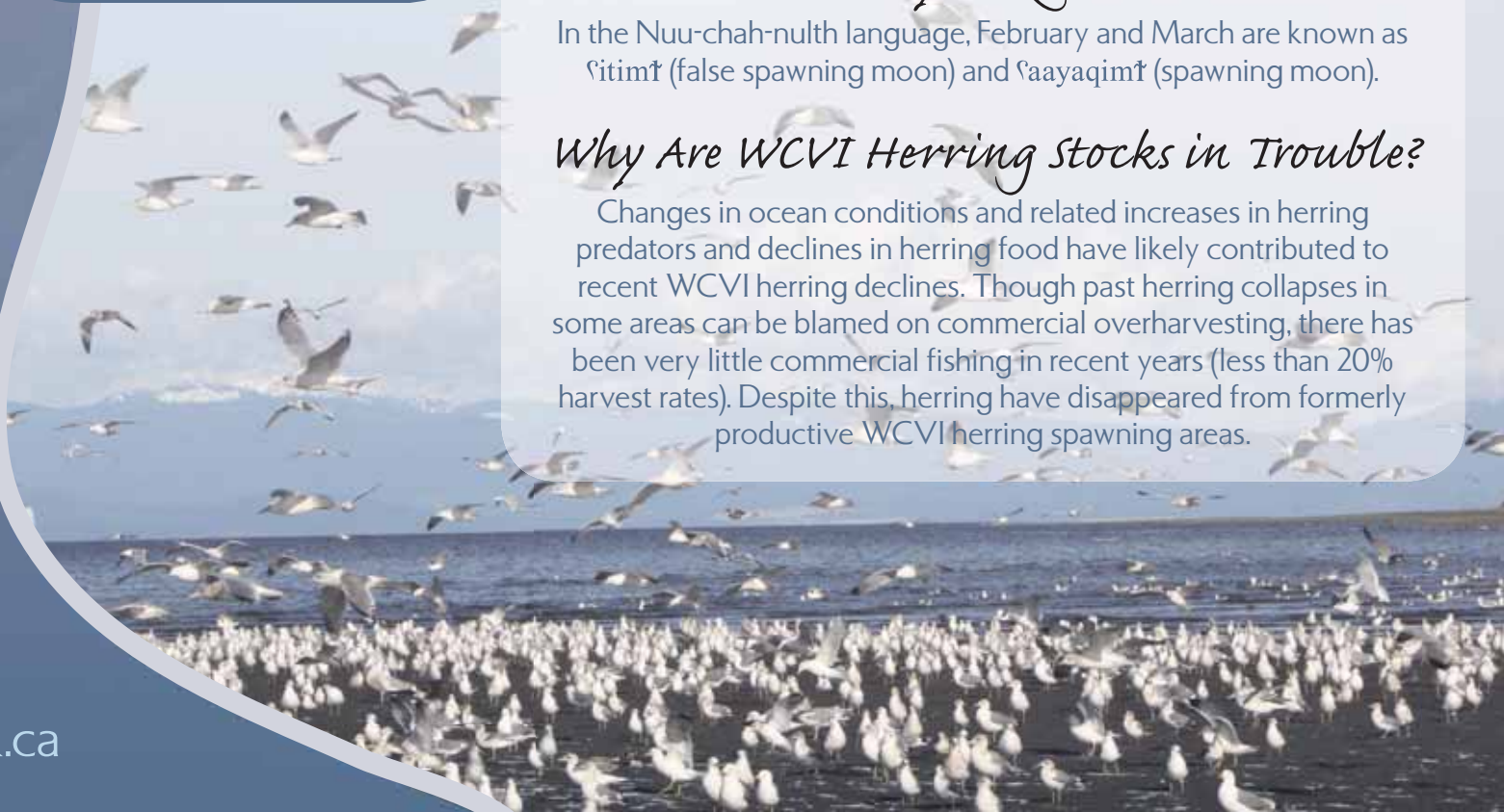
Food and Bait: This small-scale fishery operates mainly in the Strait of Georgia, with one additional licence fished in the waters off Prince Rupert. The fishery focuses on migratory herring stocks wintering in shallow inlets and bays, actively harvesting between November and January each year.

Food and Ceremonial Fishery: The First Nations food and ceremonial fishery focuses on harvesting *kʷaqmis* for community use. Individuals sink weighted hemlock or cedar trees in traditional harvesting areas and return later to gather the herring spawn-coated branches. This fishery is not normally affected by commercial closures, but Ha'wiih may set restrictions within their territories.

Larry Swan, Floyd Campbell, and Murray John of Ahousaht get ready to sink a weighted hemlock tree in a mock *kʷaqmis* harvest. The demonstration was organized to pass on traditional knowledge to youth.



When herring are abundant, they draw thousands of seabirds and other wildlife.



Did you know?

In the Nuu-chah-nulth language, February and March are known as *ʕitimʔ* (false spawning moon) and *ʕaayaqimʔ* (spawning moon).

Why Are WCVI Herring Stocks in Trouble?

Changes in ocean conditions and related increases in herring predators and declines in herring food have likely contributed to recent WCVI herring declines. Though past herring collapses in some areas can be blamed on commercial overharvesting, there has been very little commercial fishing in recent years (less than 20% harvest rates). Despite this, herring have disappeared from formerly productive WCVI herring spawning areas.

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