

# A Sardine Fishery Primer

The commercial sardine fishery opened June 1st with Nuu-chah-nulth Nations poised, once again, to take advantage of its burgeoning opportunities. Sardine populations have recently re-emerged, and Ehattesaht is one of the Nations participating in this season's commercial harvest.

Chief Councillor Fred Adams says his Nation's involvement has grown from one to three licences over the past few years, with the allowable catch nearly doubling in that time. Last year, about a dozen Ehattesaht members were employed on boats and as processors throughout the season. Ehattesaht is currently negotiating with the processor and fishers for this season. As well, "we've been working with Nuchatlaht on making sure their licence gets fished and last year we made sure that they had a member on the boat, too," says Adams.

Although the fishery is re-emerging, Nuu-chah-nulth Nations have a long tradition of harvesting sardines (λuuswi). According to Roy Alexander, board member of the First Nations Sardine Association, λuuswi was an important food source and a trade good when surpluses existed. European visitors once described Mowachaht canoes herding shoals of λuuswi until they were dense enough to scoop with baskets and rakes. By the 1890s, a non-Nuu-chah-nulth sardine reduction fishery existed, which by the 1940s was the largest single-species fishery in British Columbia. However, late in the 1940s the sardine reduction fishery collapsed.

The collapse may have been due to overfishing, but sardine populations are now thought to be cyclical. Uu-a-thluk fisheries biologist Roger Dunlop explains: "They're normally associated with a warm water mass off California. And when we started to get these El Niño events around the mid-nineties, the sardines—the larger

ones have larger body length and can swim faster and farther for that reason—arrived here."

Some scientists believe that the λuuswi and λusmit (herring) are inversely related in abundance. "When the water's warm, sardines are abundant, and then when the waters cool off again, they disappear, and then I think the WCVI herring populations may come back up," says Dunlop.

Uu-a-thluk biologist Jim Lane agrees that sardine populations are cyclical, but adds that humans still have an impact on their abundance. "Sardines were overfished in the 1920's-30's, leading to a dramatic collapse and a longer period of rebuilding than would have occurred if the population was larger," he says.

Whatever the case, sardines provide opportunity for Nuu-chah-nulth: of the 50 existing licences in the fishery, 25 are First Nations Communal Licences, and 18 of those are held by Nuu-chah-nulth Nations.

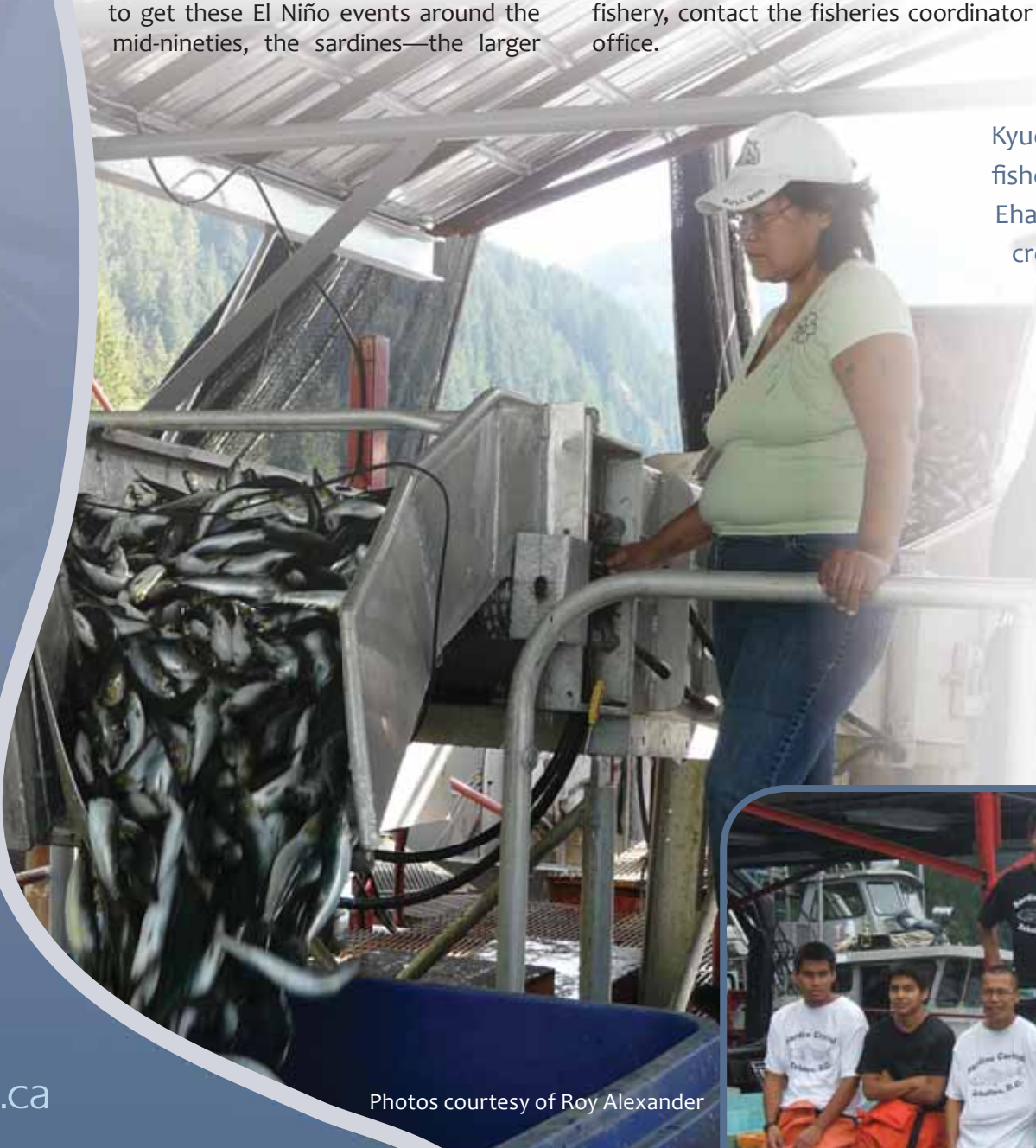
λuuswi are sold primarily in Asia as food and bait for long-line fishing, but prices have been low. Processing has also shifted from traditional canneries to (more expensive) freezing. On top of population, pricing, and processing challenges, there is some question about how allocations will be handled as a result of the recent Nuu-chah-nulth Fishing Rights decision. Negotiations between the Nations and the Government of Canada will determine what form the fishery takes in the future.

Despite uncertainties, many are hopeful for the future. Alexander mentions recent improvements to the fishing regulations, which allow Nations to harvest together, sharing resources for what might otherwise be a prohibitively expensive venture. The fish is high quality, he says, and "each licence now is almost one million pounds of fish and there [are] very few licences with that kind of abundance".

Chief Adams already sees benefits for his Nation. He mentions improved relations with neighbouring communities, whose businesses benefit from the economic renewal. And at home, as Adams says, "when there's lots of work, the esteem gets built." Adams hopes to increase Ehattesaht marine training; Uu-a-thluk helped arrange small craft operator training for ten Ehattesaht members, building capacity for future ventures. If the Nations see increased licensing certainty in the coming years, "we're going to lease a boat and hire a skipper and engineer and then crew it with Ehattesaht," says Adams.

To learn more about your Nation's participation in the sardine fishery, contact the fisheries coordinator at your administration office.

Clockwise from left:  
Georgina John from Kyuquot during the 2009 fishery; sardine fishing in Ehattesaht territory; the crew from the Zeballos plant dock of Mid-Island Ice.



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Photos courtesy of Roy Alexander