

# BC's Herring Fishery

Written by: Blaire Cameron

## The Fish

Herring has historically been a very abundant and important species on the Pacific Coast of Canada. They are an important food source for many large predatory marine species like Chinook salmon, pacific cod and harbor seals. Herring are very important for multiple coastal First Nation groups as the fish is a significant source of protein and has cultural significance. The fish are commercially harvested for flesh and for their eggs. Their eggs referred to as roe are especially sought after, they are harvested either from kelp where the fish have spawned or from the body of the fish itself. The roe can be lucratively sold in Asian markets, as has been the case for many decades.

Picture: Herring spawn-on-kelp roe

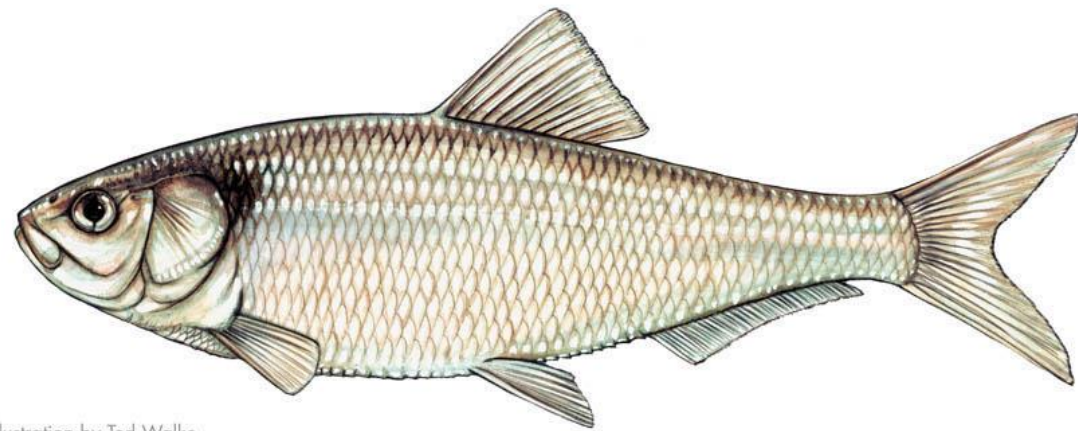


illustration by Ted Walke

## Close to Collapse?

The Pacific herring has seen dramatic decrease in the past in all five coastal stocks. The fishery was on the brink of collapse in the 1960's following decades of overexploitation and consequently all stocks were closed for four years. The stocks were able to rebuild, however declines returned in the 1990's up and till today. In 2007 the DFO reported coastal wide abundance decreases in the Central Coast, Haida Gwaii and the West Coast Vancouver Island stocks. These decreases have caused the longstanding commercial fishery closure of these areas. In 2014 and 2015 based on evidence of modest but still uncertain recovery the DFO reopened commercial fishing for these three stocks. This has been very controversial and the majority of First Nations are very opposed to it.

## Fishery Challenges

There is anger and concern in the First Nations groups. Many believe the DFO does not have strong enough evidence of the herring stocks recovery and feel they have been kept out of the management discussion: "We don't trust the DFO science. It's very industry driven" stated Carrie Hunchitt of the Heiltsuk. Retired DFO herring specialist agrees that the models used by the DFO are flawed in estimating the health of the herring stocks

The DFO only alerted the Heiltsuk that the fishery was opened after industrial boats had already got their nets in the water. This obvious lack of communications has led to lots of anger and frustration for First Nations and has displayed the influence commercial industry has on the DFO. Tensions are high in areas where industrial boats are fishing, RCMP have been called in but protest by the First Nations has been peaceful. The Heiltsuk First Nation group voluntarily suspended their commercial herring licenses for the most recent season, they did so out of concern for the fish, not fishing will allow stocks to rebuild.

## Recommendations

The First Nations need to have a stronger voice by the DFO in the management of this species. They have co-existed with this species for centuries and their communities would be face the largest impacts if the fishery were to collapse. A critical review of the models used by the DFO needs to be performed to determine whether their estimates are correct or not and whether management decisions can be based on them.

Picture: Nuu-chah-nulth children eating herring roe



## References

- BC Fisheries, & Government of British Columbia. (n.d.). *Roe Herring*. Retrieved December 1, 2015, from BC Seafood website: <http://www.bcseafood.ca/PDFs/fisheriesinfo/fishery-roe-herring.pdf>
- BC Seafood Alliance. (2015). *British Columbia's Herring Fishery: are we "fishing down the food chain"?* [Fact sheet]. Retrieved December 1, 2015, from Sustainable fishing Issues website: <http://www.bcseafoodalliance.com/documents/Sustainherring.pdf>
- Capital Regional District. (2015). Pacific Herring. Retrieved December 1, 2015, from Capital Regional District, BC website: <https://www.crd.bc.ca/education/our-environment/wildlife-plants/marine-species/pacific-herring>
- CBC. (2015, March 23). Heiltsuk First Nation says commercial herring fishery violated constitutional rights. *CBC Radio Canada*, British Columbia.
- Gillis, D. (2015, March 23). DFO uses stealth to open herring fishery despite First Nations ban. *The Commonsense Canadian*, First Nations.
- Hume, M. (2015, March 23). Worried about sustainability of herring stocks, First Nation protests commercial fishery. *The Globe and Mail*, British Columbia.