

Protect Pacific Herring in British Columbia

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The Issue

Pacific herring populations in British Columbia have been in decline for over a century, largely due to unsustainable commercial fishing practices. Despite efforts to reduce the harvest rate, herring populations are failing to recover in a meaningful way, with populations at historic lows.

Herring in the Ecosystem

Pacific herring is a keystone species that plays a vital role in the lives of nearly every coastal species in BC. They are a key prey species for many marine mammals, birds and fish

The History of Herring

Pacific herring were consistently abundant in BC for millennia and first Nations communities have a long history of maintaining a sustainable herring roe fishery. However, in the late 1800s, commercial fisheries began harvesting herring on a large scale for fertilizer and fish oil, eventually leading to a coastwide population crash. After a short closure, fisheries were reopened but herring no longer spawn in many of their former spawning sites on the coast, and those who do spawn in much smaller numbers.

Herring Catch Methods

Seine Nets/ Gillnets

- Harvest whole fish for roe extraction
- Male and female carcasses are processed into feed for aquaculture
- Herring are killed before spawning

Spawn on Kelp (SOK)

- Traditional method for roe harvesting by coastal First Nation communities
- Herring lay eggs on kelp, which is harvested
- No-kill method of extraction

Current Fishery Management

Four out of five herring fishing grounds are now closed due to stock collapse. The last remaining open herring fishery is a seine and gillnet commercial fishery in the Strait of Georgia.

The 2022 herring quota was reduced from 20% to 10% by Fisheries Minister Joyce Murry. However, the quota was not achieved during the season, indicating that the herring population is facing challenges. This was a move in the correct direction, however a full moratorium on herring fishing is required to ensure the recovery and stability of the herring population in British Columbia.

In recent years, fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) closed the commercial harvest of herring spawn on kelp (SOK) in the Central Coast, which has been a traditional method of fishing for thousands of years for the Heiltsuk people and many other coastal First Nations. The SOK fishery is a sustainable method of harvesting and should not be suffering while other commercial fishing methods, like seining and gillnetting, are still open in the Strait of Georgia.

Recommended Policy

- Place a **moratorium on commercial herring fishing** in the Strait of Georgia to allow pacific herring populations to recover.
- Allow First Nations to continue to collect roe using traditional, sustainable SOK methods

Sources

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