



CENTRAL COAST NATIONS SUPPORT RESEARCH ON PACIFIC SALMON

While the time Pacific salmon spend in the open ocean is still largely a mystery, scientists now hope the high seas will provide clues to declining salmon health.

Tristan Blaine, a field technician with the Central Coast Indigenous Resource Alliance (CCIRA), recently returned from a month-long expedition with Russian, American and Canadian scientists to study what factors impact salmon survival.

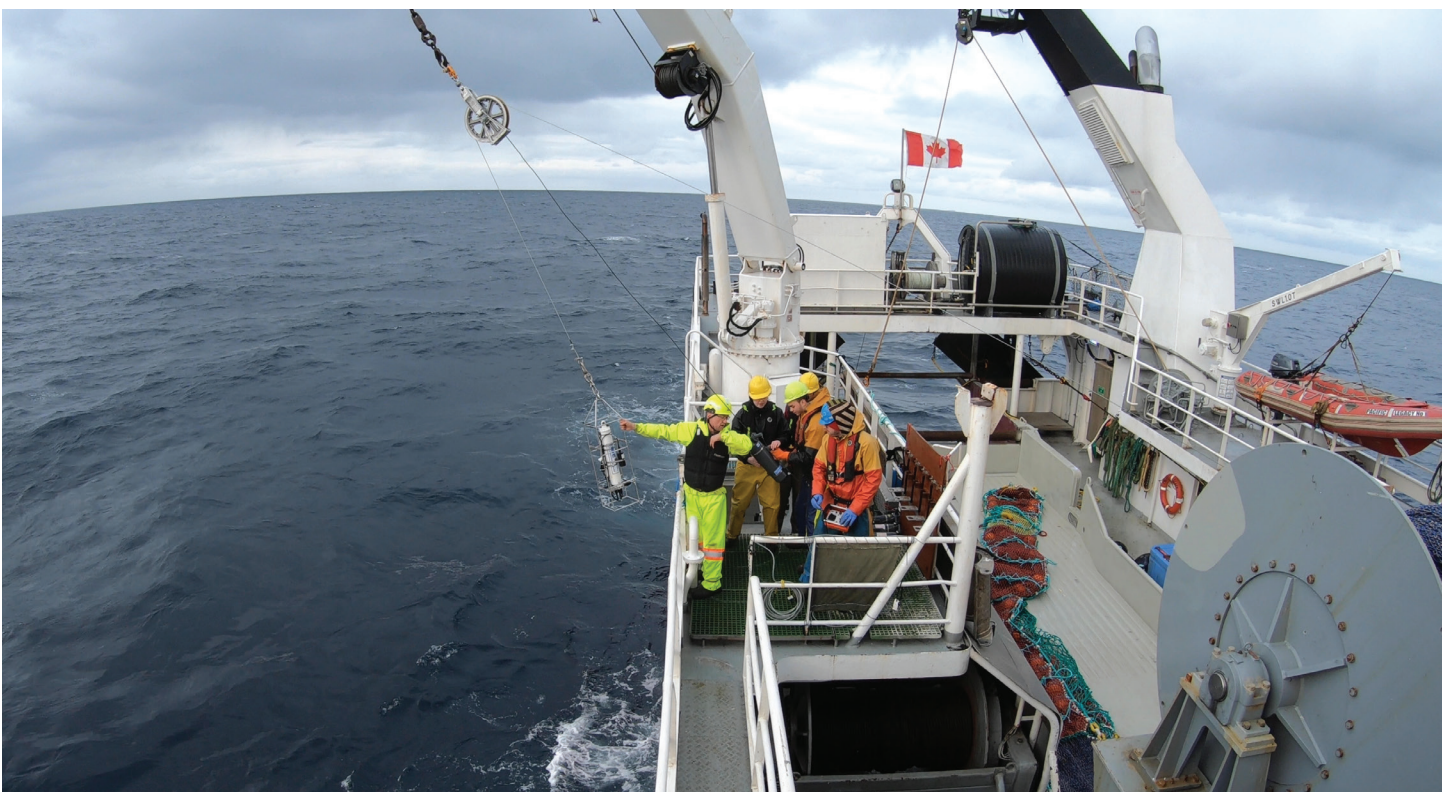
"We were hoping to fill in this grey area of where salmon spend the majority of their life," Blaine explains. "We know what's happening closer to shore but not in the important middle phase of the salmon's life."

The Pacific Legacy No. 1 trawler departed Victoria on March 1 for the second of two expeditions by Pacific salmon-producing nations – Japan, Korea, Russia, the United States and Canada. "This was an effort to get nations that care very deeply about salmon to start working together to share their knowledge and expertise," he says.

CCIRA joined the project after learning that one third of the salmon caught on last year's voyage came from the Central Coast. "Data collected by this research expedition fills essential gaps in the offshore ecology of salmon," says CCIRA Science Coordinator Alejandro Frid.

More is known about the lives of salmon in coastal waters, "then they go offshore and it's just a totally unknown world," says Blaine. "We don't know if they spend time in schools, where they go, what they eat."

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CENTRAL COAST NATIONS SUPPORT RESEARCH ON PACIFIC SALMON (cont'd)



While it's been assumed that salmon spend time individually at sea, he says, "at a few sites this year we found fish in schools of 100 and 200." The expedition caught pink salmon in the warmer waters of the southern leg of the trip and sockeye in the north – even though they eat the same food.

He says scientists were shocked to find very different results from one expedition to the next. "That means we need to do much more science."

The first leg of the trip took scientists 800 miles off the BC coast. Plans for a second leg to Alaska changed when COVID-19 struck; American scientists were recalled, and the vessel wasn't allowed to operate in US waters without them. Hurrying north to fish for a few days south of Alaska, the trawler hit 10-metre seas off the coast of Haida Gwaii.

Despite the setbacks, the expedition netted several hundred fish from five Pacific salmon species. Scientists extracted DNA samples, otoliths (the inner ear bones), and tissue samples. These were sent for analysis to laboratories in BC and across the Pacific.

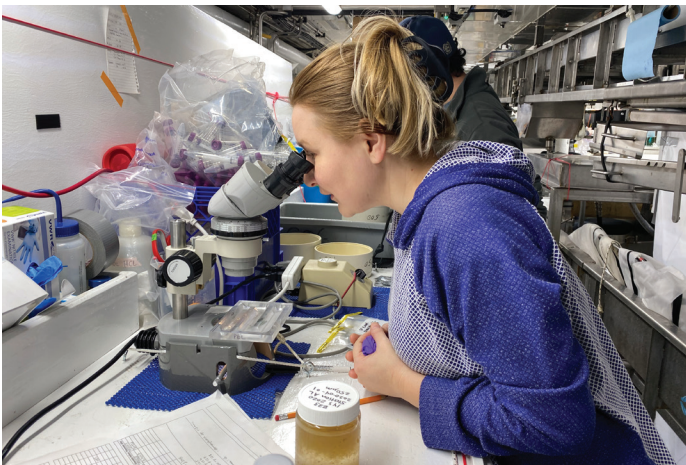
For Central Coast Nations, DNA results can help them know what proportion of their fish are caught and where, says Blaine. "Then it's important to be able to relate the information we're finding on these expeditions to what returns we're having on the Central Coast."



Frid looks forward to seeing how the results "will improve our understanding of ongoing declines and suggest management actions that promote salmon recoveries."

"In order to make better management decisions, you need a lot of data," Blaine emphasizes. "Each country does fisheries science differently but by working together scientists can compare what they are learning."

"That makes for better science and hopefully better fisheries management."



FIRST NATIONS BUSINESSES HARD HIT BY COVID-19



Border and restaurant closures, collapsing market demand, and an uncertain future have left coastal First Nations businesses hard hit by the economic fall-out of COVID-19. Many say the existing government programs to support business simply don't fit.

In Klemtu, Spirit Bear Lodge has officially closed for the June and July tourism season. "And there's an extremely high likelihood the rest of the season will follow," says general manager John Czornobaj.

"We were just gearing up to start preparing for the season and then COVID-19 happened."

While the reservations team is still working, 43 local staff have been affected. Since staff can't do their work from home, Czornobaj says, the 75 per cent federal wage subsidy for employees doesn't apply.

"This couldn't have come at a worse time for the Haida," said Candace Dennis, CEO of the Haida Development Corporation, (HaiCo).

In a shift away from fishing to cultural tourism, she says new cabins were scheduled to open at the popular Haida House resort in Tla'al. With a large number of cancellations from Europe and the US, the business is waiting to see if it can make a go of the season.

"The impact on the local economy is going to be huge," says Dennis.

While HaiCo plans to access the federal wage subsidy, Dennis says none of the other existing government programs apply. "We're going to need everything we possibly can. I think we'll be able to salvage some of the season, but it's going to be very different from what we were hoping for."

Czornobaj says canceling the Spirit Bear Lodge summer season means a potential half million dollars in lost revenue to the Kitasoo/Xai'Xais Nation – plus \$500,000 more in local staff wages. "We're going to do our best to employ as much of our staff as we can. We just don't know what that's going to look like yet."

"A lot First Nations businesses are just finding their stride and this kind of thing knocks them back," says Michael Uehara, CEO of the Coastal Shellfish Corporation. He says the federal

government needs to make good on its promise to help Indigenous companies.

"It's not about funding shareholders and executives. Or massive revenues that are going to make people rich," says Uehara. "This is about supporting businesses so they can sustain communities."

Coastal Shellfish Corporation is keeping its doors open for now, but Uehara warns, "We're facing a market situation where there's a collapse of market demand for our product."

"The timing couldn't have been worse," he says. Last year, the company opened a new shellfish processing plant in Rupert – the first to start up in Canada in 15 years. It planned to sell shucked scallop meat to an expanded North American market.

When COVID-19 hit in March, the product launch was cancelled. Restaurant sales – comprising 90 per cent of revenues – went to zero. And processing jobs for up to 70 people were lost.

"We're faced with some pretty stark financial realities."

In Bella Bella, the Heiltsuk Fisheries plant is operating with a skeleton crew after the closure of the commercial spawn on kelp fishery. Plant manager Shawn Baybutt says the collapse of demand from Japanese markets will cost as many as 40 plant jobs and up to \$9-million in lost revenue for processing plants and fishers.

The closure affects about 700 Heiltsuk Nation members who are uncertain whether they will qualify for the Canada Emergency Response Benefit and other financial aid programs.

A new venture to process prawns for China markets – scheduled for May – is also up in the air, says Baybutt. "There's a lot of uncertainty with international markets. It depends on what's going to happen in the next two months. We're just riding it out."

New support for Indigenous Businesses: <https://pm.gc.ca/en/news/news-releases/2020/04/18/prime-minister-announces-support-indigenous-businesses>

Aboriginal SME Survey report released by the Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business

LAND-BASED HEALING IN KUNSOOT



On a calm mid-February day, a boat carrying Heiltsuk members and out-of-town visitors travels quickly across Seaforth Channel to the site of the new Qícutkv (Kunsoot) Wellness Centre.

Sheets of ice scatter as the boat enters the inlet to Kunsoot and shatters its fragile surface. Qqs Projects Society executive director Jessie Housty gestures to the passing shoreline. "At one point, 18 smokehouses lined the inlet here."

This is a place of cherished memories, she says, where Heiltsuk families have gathered to hold picnics, pick berries and harvest and smoke fish.

The Kunsoot Wellness Centre was identified as a need for the community in 2018 and is now nearing its first phase of completion. The Centre promises to deliver healing and wellness programs on the land year-round and offers "a beacon of resilience in the face of trauma and crisis."

The name 'Kunsoot' comes from a very old dialect of Heiltsuk language, Housty explains, meaning "an abundance of salmon

in the fish traps." The inlet is still home to pink and chum salmon. An old stone fish trap is visible below the tideline.

At the wellness centre site, Housty's father Larry Jorgenson offers visitors a tour; among them are Dr. Hayden King, executive director of the Yellowknife Institute, and Gwich'in lawyer Kris Statnyk. Both have traveled to Bella Bella to attend a healing ceremony later that day for Heiltsuk member Max Johnson and his family.

The facility is designed to be as low-impact as possible, explains Jorgenson. He outlines plans for solar panels and creek micro-hydro, composting sewage, locally-milled lumber and organic gardens.

Newly-constructed cabins are nestled in a grove of sun-filtered hemlock, spruce and cedar. A cookhouse offers expansive views of ocean and forest. The pungent smell of fresh-sawn cedar fills the air.

"I'm excited to have a space where we can align our programs with the cycles and seasons," Housty enthuses. "To have a space we can use year-round."

Housty says a wide range of community groups were asked to help implement a plan for the centre. "We're building a space where people will hopefully see themselves and their ideas reflected all around them."

Priorities include a residential space for people awaiting addictions treatment; school trips for students; a safe house for people experiencing domestic violence; and a meeting space for Heiltsuk matriarchs.

Kunsoot will also offer programs in cedar bark weaving, medicinal plants harvesting, traditional tea-making, and berry-picking for jam-making. Local hunters have been asked to teach kids to hunt and process ducks and geese.

"It's really important to us that we're not just relocating clinical health services. It's about going out to Kunsoot and learning about who we are."

Bringing together a wide range of groups to manage the space has been an exciting challenge.

"The thing I really love is the amount of time we're able to say yes to community members and we're really able to innovate," says Housty. "People don't often get to hear that."

The wellness centre society is seeking \$1-million in funds to complete the project. The corona virus pandemic has also caused delays to construction and the launch of spring programs. While that's disappointing, Housty emphasizes, "our community's safety is our priority."



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