

T'aaq-wiihak Ca?inwa (Gooseneck Barnacle) Fishery Update: An Enterprising Delicacy



The Nuu-chah-nulth fishing rights case recognized an aboriginal right to harvest multiple species.

In 2013, the ca?inwa (gooseneck barnacle) fishery re-opened its doors following the Ahousesht et al vs. Canada court decision in 2009 to recognize the aboriginal right to harvest and sell all species of fish. Given their constitutional right to access this resource, five Nuu-chah-nulth Nations—Ahousesht, Ehattesaht/Chinehkint, Hesquiaht, Mowachaht/Muchalaht, and Tla-o-qui-aht—

established the rights-based fishery, which had originally closed in 2005 due to a lack of market demand and lack of management measures to meet sustainability goals.

Not long after re-opening, the fishery had landed its first major sale of 150 pounds and was making waves among chefs at a handful of Vancouver's top restaurants. With permission from the Ha'wiih (hereditary chiefs) to sustainably harvest from their ha-houlthee (Chiefly territories), the five First Nations, known as T'aaq-wiihak, created Ha'oom Wild Seafood products, and the flavourful crustacean became one of its signature products.

"It's an easy sell to chefs who want to provide a unique food experience to their customers and to source local, sustainable seafood," says Steve Johansen, one of the fishery's first buyers of goosenecks. His company called Organic Ocean sells the product to higher end restaurants in Vancouver, Calgary, Toronto, Ottawa and Montreal, and is thankful for the dedication and skillfulness of T'aaq-wiihak fishers.

"We're happy to be supporting the five First Nations," he says, "and are very appreciative of the effort put into harvesting the goosenecks as it's a risky business."

Marcel Martin, a T'aaq-wiihak fishery harvester agrees that the work is very dangerous.

"The winter months are the most difficult due to strong tides," he says. "We always have two people on the rock when prying off the goosenecks so we can take turns harvesting and listening for a swell; we time the waves so that we work between them." He adds that safety is always their number one priority. "Having someone in the boat is

very important as the boat can get hooked on the rock and out of reach in an instant when the tide changes."

The three-person crew, comprised of two harvesters on the rock and one on the boat, carries hand-held radios with them at all times and safety throw lines in case of a man overboard.

"This is always a possibility as the barnacles live where there are strong waves," says Martin. "And the dangerous conditions can impact harvesting because sometimes harvesters can't get out to the rocks."

It's a well-known fact that Nuu-chah-nulth First Nations have always harvested gooseneck barnacles on the west coast of Vancouver Island. And today—just as their ancestors once did—fishers are taking care of the sea resources in their territories to in-

sure a long-term, successful fishery. Part of this attention includes making regular checks of harvest locations to record and track species that are being harvested.

"We do biological assessments," says Alex Gagne, T'aaq-wiihak fishery coordinator. "To make sure we are harvesting in a range that will preserve the fishery for the future."

Studies have shown that the small gooseneck fishery has little impact on surrounding species and barnacle populations regenerate swiftly if harvested selectively. Adding to this, the aspect that only about three percent of the barnacles on any given rock are viable for market means there's a limit as to how much gets taken. Besides preserving this significant resource and business opportunity, the fishery also sees education as key to its long-term success.

Some describe the flavour of goosenecks as a cross between a lobster and a clam. The pale pink meat that is tender and sought after by chefs around the globe, must also appeal to public taste, and so giving people opportunities to learn about, try and enjoy this sea treat, is part of doing business.

"Gooseneck barnacles are always in season so there's plenty of opportunity to educate people about the wonderfulness of them year round," says Johansen.

He compares the barnacles to spot prawns when they first entered the market several years ago. "People didn't know what they were, but slowly they came round and now everybody knows what a spot prawn is. The same thing will happen to gooseneck barnacles."

It is a learning curve for the fishery to re-establish markets and ensure sufficient, skilled harvesters exist to meet orders and ensure safety. Yet, in spite of the many challenges, the fishery is growing its network of fishers and buyers and has extended its reach within BC and across North America. The only gooseneck barnacle fishery to serve the North American market, the T'aaq-wiihak fishery will continue working hard to embody the Nuu-chah-nulth Nation's cultural commitments to careful harvest, sustainable livelihoods and fresh and local foods.

"It's an easy sell to chefs who want to provide a unique food experience to their customers..."

—Steve Johansen, Organic Ocean



To eat a gooseneck barnacle, pick it up by the head (the shell) with one hand, and use a knife or your fingers to make a small rip in the covering at the top of the stalk. Allow water to drain (or drink or save the broth), then pull off the entire covering of the stalk to expose the succulent strip of meat.

Uu-a-thluk
P.O. Box 1383
Port Alberni, B.C.
V9Y 7M2

Ph: 250.724.5757
Fax: 250.724.2172
info@uuathluk.ca

www.uuathluk.ca