

Prawn Fishery Highlights Concerns

Fisheries and Oceans Canada is concerned about the growing number of prawns harvested by First Nations for food and ceremonial use. In a management plan released by the federal department late last year, the department also noted concerns over the growing number of commercial vessels taking part in the food and ceremonial prawn fishery.

“While the concern is legitimate from a management perspective, DFO unilaterally changed the rules that allowed prawns to be taken while commercial fishing,” says Uu-a-thluk biologist, Jim Lane. “This is inconsistent with numerous court rulings that uphold a nation’s aboriginal right to fish in its preferred manner—assuming conservation issues have been observed.”

A member of the fishery’s Prawn Sectoral Committee, Lane recalls how this issue first came up in 2012-13. “[The department] continues

to identify this as a serious issue in the Integrated Fisheries Management Plan, but has yet to consult with First Nations.”

The Prawn Sectoral Committee is a forum where stakeholders and the department exchange information about issues related to prawn fisheries management. Its long list of members includes representatives from First Nations, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, and the various prawn and shrimp fisheries in the province. It is not a forum for bilateral consultations with First Nations.

The food and ceremonial fishery is one of the three fisheries harvesting prawns and shrimp by trap in B.C. First Nations communal licences, treaties, and harvest documents outline where nations can harvest prawns for food and ceremonial use.

The commercial fishery is the largest

BC prawn fishery. First Nations also harvest prawns in the commercial fishery under communal licences held by individual nations. There are 55 of these commercial communal licences in the province.

A final player in the BC prawn harvest is the recreational fishery, which has grown substantially since the 1990s. This fishery is an open entry fishery (anyone can participate) with possession and gear limits. In most places, the fishery is open throughout the year, though some restrictions have applied in the Alberni Inlet since 2007.

No matter which fishery they take part in, most fishers target spot prawns, which enjoy a healthy population in the

Pacific region. This healthy population has attracted increasing interest from First Nations as other species decline and gear becomes more available.

Like other food and ceremonial fisheries, the First Nations food and ceremonial prawn fishery has first priority if conservation needs are met.

Fisheries and Oceans Canada does not limit this fishery’s catch, though some nations establish their own catch limits. Still, nations would like to see the federal department host formal consultations to sort out their concerns.

“The department has identified something they see as a problem. The proper procedure is to contact the nations to start bilateral discussions, but they are not willing to actively engage the nations in these discussions,” Lane says.

First Nations organizations in the province are encouraging nations to read the document and respond. One such organization, The Island Marine Aquatic Working Group (IMAWG), is reviewing the document and will provide notes to First Nations leaders and fisheries managers later this month.

For more information or to obtain a copy of the draft plan, contact Jim Lane (Jim.Lane@nuuchahnulth.org or 1-877-677-1131).

The department is inviting comments on the draft management plan until February 6, 2013.

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—Jim Lane, Uu-a-thluk Biologist

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Spot prawns or k^waałk^waac.