



**Howie Wright, Executive Director for Ha'oom Fisheries Society.**

Spring is a time of change, and for the Ha'oom Fisheries Society (HFS), this year's transition is marked by more than just April showers.

On April 4, Ha'oom welcomed their new executive director, Howie Wright, while starting the process of saying a slow goodbye to Alex Gagne, who has spent the last ten years working for the Five Nations.

Gagne joined the Nations (Ahousaht, Ehattesaht, Mowachaht/Muchalaht, Hesquiaht and Tla-o-qui-aht) in the summer of 2012, working alongside former Uu-a-thluk central region biologist, Katie Beach, on setting up the first 'demonstration fishery' for Chinook salmon.

In Gagne's words, that fishery was 'long overdue,' since it followed the landmark 2009 Ahousaht et al v. Canada court ruling that affirmed the Five Nations' Aboriginal right to fish and sell fish from their territories. It would be one of many long, drawn out processes the Five Nations and supporting staff would fight their way through over the years to ensure the recognition of the Nations' rights.

"Alex has assisted the Five Nations develop Ha'oom Fisheries Society while supporting frustratingly slow 'negotiations' with DFO and Canada to develop and implement meaningful and fair rights-based economic fisheries," said Don Hall, advisor to the Nations and retired Uu-a-thluk program manager.

As one might imagine, a decade of politically charged work can come with real highs and lows.

When recalling the highs, Gagne describes being on the courthouse steps with the Five Nations leadership, drummers and singers following the April 2018 'Justification Trial' ruling, along with the joy of seeing fishermen land their catch with generations of family around them.

"A more frequent one – seeing leaders exercise so much grace and patience in a system that is systematically against them (DFO)," added Gagne. "Specifically, 10 years of Mike Maquinna and his unwavering commitment and drive to better the lives of his people..."

Among the lows, Gagne cites the loss of "many great mentors and friends over the years, including the late Fred Adams, Richard Lucas, John Hayes, Lorne Little Jr. and Butch Brown," and DFO's relentlessly uncompromising interactions with the Nations.

One of the important lessons Gagne says she's gained from her time with the Nations is about the importance of culture, and how commitment to family and community provides strength for individuals.

Strength of community is an area Howie Wright is familiar with, having spent the last 15 years working as the Program Manager for the Okanagan Nation Alliance (ONA) fisheries department.

Wright, who is Gitksan, was raised in Vancouver, but travelled regularly to Hazelton, BC with his parents for food fishing on the Skeena River.

"My parents both worked for North Pacific Cannery in Prince Rupert during the 60s, with my dad as a gill netter and my mom in administration at the cannery," said Wright, explaining that he has always had an interest in fisheries.

That interest led him to pursue an MSc in Resource Management and Environmental Studies at UBC's Institute for Resources and Environmental Studies, and ultimately to his position with the ONA that saw him providing policy and program oversight, and direction for the fisheries program.

Included in Wright's prized memories over the years was being part of the ONA fisheries team that worked on sockeye salmon restoration in the Okanagan.



*The leadership of your Nations have taught me patience, perseverance and that culture and connection to land and water can never be beaten down by government policies and systemic oppression. – Alex Gagne*

"ONA communities have an opportunity for food fishing and an economic fishery was developed," he said, adding that, "ONA fisheries was able to develop capacity with their own hatchery for salmon restoration, their own virology lab that includes genetic capacity, and a strong fisheries team to support ONA leadership initiatives."

According to Elmer Frank, HFS Board of Directors Co-chair and fisherman, Gagne has taken the Five Nations a long way with the transition from the authority of the T'aaq-wiihak to the new authority of Ha'oom, and Wright is, "quite capable of taking and filling those shoes."

Although negotiations are still taking place to enable Ha'oom to become the independent fisheries service provider the Five Nations want it to be, Gagne's consultative overlap with Wright will ensure there is continuity and consistency throughout the process.

As Frank puts it, "Alex has made it clear that once she's done, she's not done ... she's going be leaving with a lot of knowledge and information that she's willing to continue to share."



**Candace Picco, Fisheries Biologist for Ha'oom (L) and Alex Gagne, former Executive Director for Ha'oom (R), stand on the BC Supreme Court steps in Vancouver (April 2018).**