

NASS SALMON FISHERY GETS TOP MARKS

(Ottawa) An in-depth study of the salmon fisheries of British Columbia's Nass River has earned top marks for Canada's federal government and for the Nisga'a government, which co-manages the fishery with Ottawa.

"This is probably as good as it gets in salmon fisheries management," says report author David Levy, one of Canada's top salmon biologists.

The Nass River Salmon Fishery Report Card, released today by the Sierra Club of Canada, gives the fishery an overall grade of "B". A key feature of the fishery is a stock assessment system that Levy judges to be one of the best of any salmon fishery in the world.

The fishery is lucrative - the value of sockeye catches alone average about \$10 million annually - and fishery benefits are equitably shared among all stakeholders, including recreational fishermen, seiners, gillnetters, and trollers. The Nisga'a people enjoy guaranteed access to harvestable surpluses according to a formula allowing for food as well as commercial fisheries through communal and individual licences.

The "B" grade would likely have been higher if it weren't for a region-wide decline of chum salmon along B.C.'s north coast. Because of conservation concerns, no directed fishery for chum salmon is permitted in the Nass River salmon fisheries.

Another concern is uncertainty about the status of small sockeye salmon runs that spawn in the Nass, which Levy recommends be subjected to DNA analysis as the fishery proceeds.

But the relatively few problems with the fishery were offset by high marks resulting from the sophisticated stock-assessment system, which involves fish wheels, a mark-recapture program and a fishway counting operation.

Coho and chinook salmon are well protected, as is a small pink salmon population that is harvested according to an effective region-wide plan.

"This is very, very encouraging," said prominent British Columbia environmentalist Vicky Husband. "It should be a very important lesson to Prime Minister Stephen Harper. If he had been making the decisions, this fishery in its present form wouldn't even insist."

Harper has recently angered First Nations in British Columbia with his vow to return to the discredited Reform Party policy of opposing so-called "racially divided" fisheries. Harper made his comments in a surprise letter to the Calgary Herald last month.

The success of the Nass salmon fishery is directly related to the fisheries component of the Nisga'a treaty, which sets out co-management responsibilities for a variety of marine and terrestrial resources over a vast area encompassing the Nass River basin, roughly adjacent to the Alaskan panhandle.

The treaty's fisheries sections were initialed in 1996, and when the Nisga'a treaty was finally ratified six years ago, it became the first full settlement of aboriginal rights and title claims since British Columbia entered Confederation in 1871.

B.C. conservationist and author Terry Glavin said Levy's report serves as a rebuke to the alarmist critics of the Nisga'a treaty's fisheries component. The loudest critics were with the Reform Party, which eventually folded into the Conservative Party. The Nisga'a fishery's critics once included B.C. Premier Gordon Campbell, who has since reversed his opposition to negotiating commercial fisheries arrangements with First Nations.

"For years, we were told that the Nisga'a treaty would be a disaster for the Nass River salmon fisheries. This clearly proves the critics were wrong," Glavin said. "The Nisga'a and their partners in the federal government have set a fine example for what could be undertaken up and down B.C.'s coast."

Earlier this year, in a report prepared for the Sierra Club of Canada's B.C. Chapter, Levy found that the endangered salmon runs that caused a shutdown of almost the entire Fraser River sockeye fishing season in 2005 represented just the "tip of the iceberg" of troubled sockeye salmon runs on the B.C. coast.

Levy's coastal sockeye report, released in February, found that at least 38 sockeye runs, coastwide, were candidates for "endangered" status by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC).

Husband said she hopes that Prime Minister Harper carefully reads the Nass River Salmon Fishery Report Card before he closes the door on other negotiated agreements for commercial fisheries with B.C.'s First Nations.

"We have concerns about the Nass fishery and we've made a few recommendations," Husband said, "but this is a real success story. We congratulate the Nisga'a and the Department of Fisheries and Oceans for what they've accomplished."

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