Lake Babine Nation

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Lake Babine First Nation revives fishery taken from them in 1906

(Burns Lake) – Yesterday's opening of a smokehouse in the community of Tachet on the shores of Babine Lake marks the revival of a salmon fishery taken from the Lake Babine Nation over a century ago.

For thousands of years, the Lake Babine people operated traditional salmon weirs on Babine Lake and the Babine River, harvesting in excess of 750,000 sockeye a year. But in 1906, the Canadian government banned their traditional fishery, devastating an entire way of life.

Now, the Lake Babine Nation has re-established its traditional fishery in cooperation with Fisheries and Oceans Canada and regional conservation organizations.

“These fisheries are very important to the Lake Babine people who suffer from high unemployment and poverty,” explained Lake Babine Nation’s fisheries manager Donna Macintyre. “Some of the participants live on less than $200 per month, so this income is a major boost to their ability to support themselves and their families.”

“Hearing fishers singing traditional Carrier songs with huge smiles on their face really says it all,” she added.

More than 60 people are now employed to selectively harvest salmon from the Fulton River using beach seines. A second fishery located on the Babine River near the community of Fort Babine is employing an additional 20 people. This fishery uses the DFO salmon counting fence, which was constructed in 1946 at the same site Lake Babine Nation’s largest traditional K’oonze (the Carrier word for weir) once stood.

“This is such a great news story for the Lake Babine Nation. Not only are they bringing significant benefits to their communities, but they are showing the world that these fisheries are sustainable and economically viable,” said Greg Knox, executive director of SkeenaWild Conservation Trust. “Their location and harvesting techniques allow these fisheries to intercept strong runs while allowing smaller, weaker populations to reach their spawning areas. They are some of the most sustainable salmon fisheries in the world.”

Yesterday, a celebration is took place in Spirit Square in the community of Tachet to officially open the community’s new smoke house, gathering site, and campground. Funds for this project came from LBN’s Forestry Department’s Economic Initiatives.
“Harvesting natural renewable resources economically and for sustenance is critical to the health of the Nation,” explained Chief Wilf Adam. “This project provides an important opportunity to express our aboriginal right to commercially sell our salmon, and bring benefits back to our communities”.

“We are hoping to start using profits from our fisheries to build more infrastructure in our communities, which have struggled for a long time” said Donna Macintyre.

The smoke house will provide a facility for everyone in the community to smoke their own fish, and will provide food for elders and community members who do not have access to fish and smoking facilities. The campground will provide revenue to the community from tourists and fishermen who frequent the area during summer.

The fisheries also have the potential to add value to the fish being caught. Often overlooked in the past, salmon caught near their spawning areas are leaner, making them suitable for unique products. The Lake Babine Nations is currently working with Vancouver-based Raincoast Trading to develop new product forms and markets, and is looking to expand future operations to include on-site processing of salmon roe products for the caviar market in Japan and Europe.

See below for contacts and backgrounder. Photos and b-roll video available by request.

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BACKGROUNDER

Lake Babine Nation

Lake Babine Nation is third largest Aboriginal Band in British Columbia. Lake Babine Administration Office is situated 142 miles West of Prince George, with a total registered membership of over 2,310 [based on 2008 population]. The Nation has 27 reserve lands and three (3) communities, which are inhabited year round, and two that are inhabited year round from time to time.

Prior to 1957, Lake Babine was two separate Bands, the Old Fort Band and the Fort
Babine Band, both situated on the Babine Lake. At the time, approximately 12 communities were inhabited year round. On June 12, 1957, Department of Indian Affairs amalgamated the two Bands to form what is now known as the Lake Babine Nation. From LBN website: [http://www.lakebabine.com/index.php](http://www.lakebabine.com/index.php)

**Skeena Watershed In-River Selective Commercial Fishing**

**Lake Babine Nation Commercial Fisheries**

**Fulton Beach Seine Fishery**

The Fulton fishery takes place at the mouth of the Fulton River on Babine Lake where enhanced sockeye salmon return in the hundred’s of thousands each year. LBN use beach seines in this fishery, which are used to coral salmon into shore where target species are harvested and by-catch is released unharmed. Conservation concerns in mixed stock fisheries in the Skeena approach waters and lower river have resulted in reduced access in these locations, meaning that the most sustainable place to access productive Babine sockeye are in front of the Pinkut and Fulton Rivers on Babine Lake.
Babine Fence (weir)

The Babine fence is located on the Babine River near the outlet of Nilkitkwa Lake, and was put in place in 1946 as a DFO counting facility. Prior to the early 1900’s Lake Babine Nation harvested hundreds of thousands of sockeye per year (over 750,000) using traditional weirs. The Fence’s primary function remains as a core stock assessment tool for DFO. Opportunities to harvest sockeye at the fence by LBN occur through an Economic Opportunity License through DFO.

The fence is an excellent harvest tool because non-target species are not handled - they simply swim through the holding tanks, while targeted sockeye are dip netted out. This results in a near zero by-catch mortality, which is unachievable with other harvest technologies. Due to its terminal location, the Babine fence fishery only harvests sockeye bound for the Babine Lake system.

Historical Context

Lake Babine Nation people managed highly effective fisheries in the Skeena Watershed prior to European contact. Archeological research and First Nations accounts suggest that LBN people had sufficient population, combined with the necessary harvesting technology and processing capacity, to potentially compromise salmon biodiversity in the watershed during the millennia prior to contact. Yet, at the time industrial mixed-stock fisheries were introduced in 1873, most Skeena sockeye stocks were abundant and supporting viable terminal fisheries - providing evidence that LBN people were effectively and sustainably managing the resource.

Historical LBN fisheries were neither small-scale nor inefficient. The Babine Weir was an example of sustainable management of fishing technology. It was described by Fishery Officer Hans Helgerson in 1906 as having, “the most formidable and imposing appearance...constructed of an immense quantity of materials, and on scientific principle...which not a single fish could get through. People were catching and processing some three quarters of a million fish (see photograph). Similar weirs and barricades were used throughout LBN territory. It is evident that LBN people managed an intensive, sustainable and resilient fishery for many centuries.
Barricade Agreement

In the early 1900’s, four or five new canneries were scheduled to open on mouth of the Skeena River. The canneries needed a secure supply of fish and they believed that the weirs on the Babine River threatened that supply. With the development of processing corporations, the government of Canada introduced regulations that restricted certain fishing and processing activities in the name of protecting the salmon from over fishing and habitat degradation. They appointed local Fishery officials and designated the power of the Canadian state to secure their supply of fish. Peter Wallace of Wallace Brothers Packing Co. wrote to his members of Parliament that the Indians had no sense of salmon conservation. This suggestion is untrue but the fisheries department felt that they had plenty of justification for eliminating the Babine barricades (weirs).

On October 15th 1904, Hans Helgesen, a fishery officer, made his visit of inspection to Babine Lake. About seven miles down the river, he found two huge barricades, a half a mile apart, in full swing for fishing where crowds of Indians could be seen on the banks. The overseer, like most non-Indian people who encountered Indian fishing sites for the first time, could barely contain his wonderment at the ingenious technology.

Helgesen was sure that the Babines were destroying all the salmon. He did not realize that they had a system. Mr. Helgesen informed Chief Atio that he was sent by the Government to destroy and remove all barricades; Officer Helgesen explained the Fishery Laws and Regulation to Chief Atio. Chief Atio told Helgesen that the Indians had an indisputable right for all the time in the past to fish and wished to know to what extent the government was willing to provide for the Babines if they complied. They were threatened with jail, so the men proceeded to take the weirs down. At a meeting held later with the Babine Indians and Helgesen, the Indians stated that they should be compensated for the loss of the weirs. Helgesen agreed to the conditions set out by the Babine Indians in return for the destruction of the weirs. He agreed they would be paid $600.00 for the work of the removal and that the orphans and widows would receive rations and nets would be distributed to all.

In the autumn of 1905, Helgesen and three fish guardians were sent to the Babine River to enforce the weir prohibition. They brought with them nets supplied by Skeena River canners. The nets were distributed in exchange for the Babine Indian’s cooperation but noted that the nets were old web. The nets supplied by Helgesen were too rotten to catch salmon for the winter storage. Consequently the following winter, the Indians nearly starved and had no bait for their traps. The Babine people attempted to build the barricade to do their gathering for the winter, the fish Guardians came to remove the weir on August 23, 1906. When the guardians started to dismantle the barricade the community defended it. The guardians reported women armed themselves with clubs that was used on Norrie and Wells. When two fish guardians went into the river the women pushed them under the water and sat on the fish warden playing with him. The fish wardens sent back a report that Babine people were uprising and asked for a militia of a hundred to be sent to the community. Warrants were issued for the men from Babine. Father Coccola talked to the Babine Indians and upon his pleading; nine Indian surrendered and were jailed on September 26, 1906.

Father Coccola started to negotiate for the chiefs to make a trip to Ottawa to negotiate with DMF and DIA senior officials in late September 1906. They took the first boat down the Skeena connecting with the C.P.R. Steamer coming from Alaska. On October 20,
1906, the Babine Chiefs arrived in Ottawa. Father Coccola, Chief Tszak Williams and Chief Big George negotiated the Barricade Treaty in Ottawa in 1905. The chiefs negotiated the treaty regarding the removal of the weirs, in exchange for agreeing to use nets and not to rebuild the Barricade. The government made a promise to supply the people with farm equipments nets and a school among other items. 1913 The Royal Commission is established, a hearing in Hazelton sees Chief William and Chief George testify where they make it clear that the resources were inadequate and wanting more lands with protection. The economy for the Babine Indian shifted from reliance on salmon to trapping, the fur trade and the wage labor. Although nets were a poor substitute for weirs, the Babine Indians remained active fishers and came to rely on other tools such as boats. From LBN website: http://www.lakebabine.com/files/history-timeline.php