

# 'Building the Great Lucrative Fishing Industry': Aboriginal Gillnet Fishers and Protests over Salmon Fishery Regulations for the Nass and Skeena Rivers, 1950s–1960s

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Résumé de l'article

Dans les années 1950 et 1960, les pêcheurs autochtones ont protesté contre les nouveaux règlements de la pêche du saumon au filet maillant qui limitaient l'accès à l'industrie de la pêche dans les rivières Nass et Skeena au Nord de la Colombie-britannique. En utilisant les dossiers des conserveries, ainsi que les lettres, les pétitions et les déclarations que les Autochtones ont faites au Département de l'industrie de la pêche, cet article examine les protestations et l'impact des règlements que l'État avait introduit dans une période de changements structuraux, économiques, technologiques et écologiques massifs dans l'industrie de la pêche. Selon les lettres des pêcheurs autochtones, l'héritage autochtone et l'identité axée sur le travail et la classe ont façonné leur opposition contre l'État. Ceux qui dirigeaient les protestations étaient actifs dans d'autres domaines de la politique relative aux Autochtones, mais qui s'identifiaient aussi comme pêcheurs au filet maillant et au petit bateau dans une industrie de la pêche de plus en plus stratifiée et concurrentielle. De plus, les pêcheurs autochtones ont eu une longue histoire d'activisme et d'organisation syndicale. Cet article suggère que la compréhension des moyens par lesquels les groupes autochtones avaient navigué entre les patri-moines coloniaux et capitalistes peut prendre un aperçu de la politique et de l'expérience des Autochtones pendant cette période.

## ARTICLE

# 'Building the Great Lucrative Fishing Industry': Aboriginal Gillnet Fishers and Protests over Salmon Fishery Regulations for the Nass and Skeena Rivers, 1950s–1960s

**Miriam Wright**

IN JANUARY, 1957, a group calling themselves the “Skeena River Indian Fishermen” wrote a letter protesting new commercial salmon regulations for the Nass and Skeena rivers in northern British Columbia.<sup>1</sup> The regulations, which shortened the fishing season and cut the number of weekly fishing days, were proposed by the Department of Fisheries through the newly created Skeena Salmon Management Committee. The Committee had invited responses to the regulations at a public meeting in Prince Rupert, and the Skeena River Indian Fishermen attended, along with other groups of fishers, both native and non-native. The “Skeena River Indian Fishermen” were led by Peter Williams from Kitwancool (Gitanyow), a community of Tsimshian-speaking people of the Upper Skeena. Williams was an industrial gillnet fisher, head of the Kitwancool Native Brotherhood (a branch of the native fishers’ union in British Columbia) and active in his community’s land claim fight.<sup>2</sup> Others included Harold Sinclair and Joseph Daniels from Kitwanga, an Upper Skeena Gitksan village. Like Williams, both were gillnetters and involved in local native leadership. They claimed these regulations unfairly hurt small-boat fishers and would

1. Library and Archives Canada (hereafter LAC,) RG 23, vol. 1430, file 745–19–2[2], Skeena River Indian Fishermen and their Families to Skeena Salmon Management Committee and the Department of Fisheries, 19 January 1957.

2. Neil J. Sterritt *et al.*, *Tribal Boundaries in the Nass Watershed* (Vancouver 1998), 59–97.

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Miriam Wright, “‘Building the Great Lucrative Fishing Industry’: Aboriginal Gillnet Fishers and Protests over Salmon Fishery Regulations for the Nass and Skeena Rivers, 1950s–1960s,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 61 (Spring 2008), 99–130.

put them further into debt, or make it impossible to continue fishing. “We, the Skeena River Indian Fishermen, with our families,” they told the Committee, “wish to appeal to the authorities concerned in an effort that the excruciating pains of the foregoing calamities may be alleviated.”<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the government had not, they insisted, “adequately consider[ed] the Indian Fishermen’s hardships while we are building the Great Lucrative Fishing Industry.”<sup>4</sup>

The Skeena River Indian Fishermen’s letter was just one example of the disagreements that occurred between northern native fishers and the state over salmon regulations in these years of rapid ecological, structural, and technological change. Aboriginal people had been central to the industrial fishery since it began in the 1870s, and it remained the single largest employer of natives in the province for much of the 20th century. In the Nass and Skeena district, Aboriginal people comprised the majority of commercial fishers, one of the few areas where this was still the case. For these Aboriginal fishers, both capital and the state controlled their access to the fishery – capital by providing vessels and credit, and the state, through the *Fisheries Act*, which gave it authority to regulate ocean fisheries. The federal Department of Fisheries had been regulating British Columbia’s salmon harvest since the late 19th century by drawing fishing boundaries, setting open and close dates, and restricting uses of particular gear types. After World War II, however, in response to declining salmon populations and a massively expanded harvesting capacity, the state tightened these regulations across the province, further limiting where and when people could fish. For the Aboriginal fishers of this region, most of whom used gillnetters (vessels typically under 40 feet in length, using nets hung vertically in the water, operated by one or two people), these changes came at a time when larger craft such as seiners (between 60 and 90 feet, using purse-like nets, with a crew of six or more) and an international offshore fishery were taking an increasing share of the catch. Over the next decade, the Skeena River Indian Fishermen and other groups of fishers, both native and non-native, continued to attend the Skeena Salmon Management Committee meetings, challenging the regulations and fighting to maintain access to the resource.

This paper will focus on those protests – the letters, petitions, and statements native fishers made to the Skeena Salmon Management Committee and the Department of Fisheries. More than merely a register of complaint, these letters offer an opportunity to explore several interconnected and important issues in the history of British Columbia first peoples, labour, and the fishery. First, the protests let us look more closely at state control over the fishery, and the specific ways that regulations affected fishing people. While

3. LAC, RG 23, vol. 1430, file 745-19-2[2], Skeena River Indian Fishermen and their Families to Skeena Salmon Management Committee and the Department of Fisheries, 19 January 1957.

4. LAC, RG 23, vol. 1430, file 745-19-2[2], Skeena River Indian Fishermen and their Families to Skeena Salmon Management Committee and the Department of Fisheries, 19 January 1957.



Fishing boats on the Skeena River, 1954

IMAGE I-22258 COURTESY OF ROYAL BC MUSEUM, BC ARCHIVES, PHOTOGRAPHER: BC GOVERNMENT

Dianne Newell's *Tangled Webs of History* has provided a valuable overview of state policies and industrial transformations from the late 19th century to the 1980s, we know little about localized regulations, and the interactions between fishers and officials.<sup>5</sup> Second, the protests will help us explore the larger question of Aboriginal identity, work, class and politics raised by others, including John Lutz and Andy Parnaby.<sup>6</sup> The native gillnetters were protesting during a period of heightened Aboriginal rights activity in the province, and many of the leaders were also involved in other areas of native politics. When the native fishers wrote their letters to the Skeena Salmon Management Committee, they often spoke about their heritage and their historic connections to the resource. At the same time, however, they also revealed aspects of a class politics, identifying as gillnetters, small-boat fishers operating in a

5. Dianne Newell, *Tangled Webs of History: Indians and the Law in Canada's Pacific Coast Fisheries* (Toronto 1993).

6. John Lutz, "After the Fur Trade: The Aboriginal Labouring Class of British Columbia, 1849–1890," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, (1992), 69–93; Andrew Parnaby, "The Best Men That Ever Worked the Lumber': Aboriginal Longshoremen on Burrard Inlet, B.C., 1863–1939," *Canadian Historical Review*, 87, 1 (2006), 53–78.

stratified industry where competition for access to the resource among different vessel classes was intensifying. They often argued that the regulations favoured other vessel classes, such as seiners, trollers, and the international off-shore fishery. Their particular place in the industrial structure, as well as their relationships to the canneries, were shaping their experiences and affecting their responses. In fact, the Aboriginal fishers' complaints closely resembled those of the local non-native gillnetters, who also accused state officials of not doing enough to protect the resource, and forcing the smaller vessels to pay the price for conservation. I would argue the Aboriginal protesters' fused identities affected the way they presented themselves, their needs and problems, and the way they criticized the state. This paper will first explore the question of Aboriginal identity, class and political action, and then follow with an examination of the effects of structural, technological, and ecological change in the fishery on Aboriginal people in the 1950s and 1960s. After developing this background, the paper will discuss federal fisheries regulation in these years and the interactions between officials and natives as the gillnetters fought to maintain their place in the fishery.

### **Aboriginal Identity, Class, and Activism**

As Andy Parnaby has pointed out, native labour has not received as much attention in British Columbia as the colonial context of native-newcomer relations, or Aboriginal and treaty rights movements.<sup>7</sup> Although a few studies have made valuable contributions to our understanding of the labour history of Aboriginal people, Parnaby's own work on the Squamish longshoremen in early 20th-century Vancouver challenges us to think more directly about the links between class, labour activism, and Aboriginal identity.<sup>8</sup> He argued that the daily experiences of class on the waterfront and the realities of their lives as Aboriginal people in both colonial and capitalist environments affected the activism of native dockworkers. Indeed, many of the Aboriginal leaders on the docks were also heavily involved in the struggle for land and resource rights. "Significantly," Parnaby argued,

the politics of work influenced, and in turn were shaped by, the emerging struggle for Aboriginal rights. Both played an important role in the political socialization of Joe Capilano, Andrew Paull, and Simon Baker, among others, and addressed the issues of powerlessness, identity, and independence.<sup>9</sup>

7. Parnaby, "The Best Men That Ever Worked the Lumber," 53.

8. Rolf Knight, *Indians at Work: An Informal History of Native Labour in British Columbia, 1858-1930* (Vancouver 1978); Lutz, "After the Fur Trade," and Parnaby, "The Best Men That Ever Worked the Lumber."

9. Parnaby, "The Best Men That Ever Worked the Lumber," 72. Andrew Paull also worked for the Native Brotherhood for a few years. Another dock worker, Ed Nahanee, spent many years working as the Native Brotherhood's Business Agent.

Although taking place in a different time period, different industry, and with different First Nations, the protest experiences of the Nass and Skeena native gillnetters offer some parallels to the dockworkers. In their own way, the Aboriginal fishers' letters and appeals to the Department of Fisheries to change the regulations also addressed the issues of powerlessness, identity, and independence.

Class was manifested in the daily experiences of Aboriginal fishers, through the type of boats they used, their relationships to the fishing companies, and in the labour organizations they formed and belonged to. Although not strictly waged workers like the longshoremen, fishers negotiated collectively with the canneries over fish prices. Native fishers were, however, dependent on the canneries for access to vessels, either by renting or buying boats from the companies. Since natives, on the whole, had fewer resources and had trouble getting bank loans because of *Indian Act* regulations prohibiting Status Indians from using reserve land as collateral, they remained more dependent on the canneries than whites. Most native fishers also relied on company credit to get outfitted for the beginning of the fishing season. In return, the fishers were obligated to deliver the fish they caught to that cannery. While some developed close working relationships with company personnel, the position of the gillnetter was always precarious. A few poor fishing seasons and rising debt loads could mean the cannery managers could refuse the fisher further credit, or deny a boat rental. Fear of going into debt and getting cut off credit was an underlying concern for native fishers and was fuelling the Nass and Skeena fishers' protests in the 1950s and 1960s.

The lived experience of class also shaped the native fishers' involvement in labour organizations and action. As Drucker, Gladstone, and others have argued, Aboriginal people have had a long history of labour militancy in the industrial fishery, particularly earlier in the century.<sup>10</sup> Before formal unions emerged, native fishers banded together, and frequently took strike action in conjunction with white fishers. By the 1930s, however, Kwakwaka'wakw fishers from Johnstone Strait had formed their own labour organization, the Pacific Coast Native Fishermen's Association (PCNFA), in response to white fishers (and some native fishers from outside the region) breaking a 1936 strike at Rivers Inlet. In the early 1940s, the PCNFA joined with the Native Brotherhood of British Columbia, an Aboriginal rights and issues advocacy group formed in 1931 by Haida and Tsimshian industrial fishers. Meanwhile, the emerging union of white fishers, the United Fishermen's Union (later the United Fishermen

10. Philip Drucker, *The Native Brotherhoods* (Washington, D.C. 1958); Percy Gladstone, "Native Indians and the Fishing Industry of British Columbia," *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, 19 (February 1953), 20–34; Knight, *Indians at Work*, 179–206; Alicja Muszynski, *Cheap Wage Labour: Race and Gender in the Fisheries of British Columbia* (Montreal & Kingston 1996); Keith Ralston, "The 1900 Strike of Fraser River Sockeye Salmon Fishermen," unpublished M.A. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1965.

and Allied Workers' Union – UFAWU), approached the Native Brotherhood to see if they were interested in a merger. Fearing their interests would be lost in the larger organization, the Native Brotherhood declined, but agreed to joint negotiations with the canneries. In 1945, the Native Brotherhood became the recognized bargaining unit for native fishers. While several observers have noted the Native Brotherhood's leaders were generally less militant than their counterparts in the UFAWU, the organization's members continued to cooperate with the larger union and supported the periodic strike activity staged over failed price negotiations.<sup>11</sup> The Native Brotherhood also had numerous district and local branches, and it was through these local branches that most of the Nass and Skeena fishers protested the Department of Fisheries' regulations.

In making their protests over the regulations, the Nass and Skeena native fishers' most clear expression of class identification came through their position as gillnetters. Fish harvesting was highly stratified, with different vessel classes of varied size, value, and productive capacity all competing for fish. Rivalries among vessel classes are common in coastal fisheries, and they existed in British Columbia in these years. As gillnetters (gillnetter boats being the smallest in the fleet), the Nass and Skeena native fishers felt disadvantaged and told the Department of Fisheries officials. When they identified the threat to their position in the fishery, the native gillnetters mostly pointed at fishers of other vessel classes – the offshore, seiners, trollers, and those with larger, more powerful gillnetters who came from outside the northern district. Although many of these other fishers were non-native, they were not exclusively so.<sup>12</sup> Certainly, ethnic tensions existed in a fishery that had long been divided along racial lines. Historically, both Aboriginal and white groups had harboured some resentment against Japanese fishers, partly over earlier strike-breaking incidents and partly because canners tended to favour Japanese fishers.<sup>13</sup> There were some anxieties over the return of Japanese fishers after the war, but this subsided after a few years. Those making protests over the Nass and Skeena regulations never publicly made accusations against other ethnic groups.<sup>14</sup> Their recognition of the challenges they faced as gillnetters, however, suggests

11. Drucker, *The Native Brotherhoods*, 131. Some Aboriginal fishers joined the UFAWU instead of the Native Brotherhood, including some in Prince Rupert and a branch of Nisga'a fishers at Kincolith.

12. In fact, there were native owned and operated seiners in the area.

13. Drucker, *The Native Brotherhoods*, 128; Newell, *Tangled Webs*, 83–4. Japanese fishers, on average, fished longer than white or native fishers, which contributed to the favoritism of the canners.

14. Rolf Knight, in *Nativism and Americanism* (<http://www.rolfknight.ca/Native8AmerAug06.pdf>), 203–6, quoted former UFAWU organizer Homer Stevens as saying the Native Brotherhood leadership was nativist, and against non-native fishers. I did not see any evidence to support this argument in the protests over the Skeena regulations.

they saw themselves as marginalized and vulnerable in the larger industrial structure.

Like the dockworkers in the early 20th century, the fisheries protest leaders were operating in an environment where both their work-centred experiences and their Aboriginal identity were shaping their political action. Besides trying to make sure the Nass and Skeena regulations did not force them out of the industrial fishery, these leaders were also pursuing Aboriginal rights and treaties that they believed would provide stability and independence. Peter Williams of Kitwancool had been politically active since the 1930s, following the example of his father, who had taken part in land protests earlier in the century. Harold Sinclair, who often submitted joint petitions with Williams, was active in a number of areas, serving as a Kitwanga band councillor, and writing to the Native Brotherhood's monthly newspaper, the *Native Voice*, about Aboriginal issues.<sup>15</sup> In the 1950s, both the Kitwanga and Kitwancool bands were also seeking rights to control and sell timber on their ancestral lands. Sinclair, who also worked as a trapper, attempted to secure a forestry reserve<sup>16</sup> and Williams spoke before the 1956 British Columbia Royal Commission on Forestry.<sup>17</sup> Another Upper Skeena group was led by Walter Harris, then a young Gitksan hereditary chief from Kispiox who later gained renown as an artist, fostering carving traditions of the Gitksan people. Representing Nass fishers was Frank Calder, who also came from a politically active family, being the adopted son of one of the founders of the Nisga'a Land Committee that petitioned London in the early 20th century. Calder, who became the first Aboriginal person elected to the British Columbia legislature in 1949, was also instrumental in incorporating the Nisga'a Tribal Council and launching their case on Aboriginal title, which resulted in the 1973 decision from the Supreme Court of Canada.<sup>18</sup> Less well known is the fact that he was also fighting for his community's right to access to the industrial fishery, submitting letters to the Skeena Salmon Management Committee and the Department of Fisheries on behalf of the Nisga'a Tribal Council. Another Nisga'a leader, James Gosnell participated in the discussions over the regulations. Gosnell became president of the Nisga'a Tribal Council in the 1970s, and would take his people through years of negotiations for a land claim settlement until his death in the late 1980s. Gosnell, however, was also a successful gillnetter, and his daughter

15. Harold Sinclair, Chairman, Kitwanga Native Brotherhood, "Letter to the Editor," *Native Voice*, 3, 3 (March 1949); Harold Sinclair, "Northern B.C. Indian History," *Native Voice*, 14, 12 (December 1960).

16. Richard Rajala, *Up-Coast: Forests and Industry on British Columbia's North Coast, 1870-2005* (Victoria, B.C. 2006), 154-5.

17. Sterritt *et al.*, *Tribal Boundaries*, 90-1.

18. Paul Tennant, *Aboriginal People and Politics: The Indian Land Question in British Columbia, 1849-1989* (Vancouver 1990), 122-4; 219-21. Also see Daniel Raunet, *Without Surrender, Without Constraint: A History of the Nisga'a Land Claims* (Vancouver 1996).



recalled he loved fishing and took pride in his skills as a provider.<sup>19</sup> In fact, according to one source, “It was in the wheelhouse of his father’s gillnetter that he became inspired to settle the land question.”<sup>20</sup> Whether this story is accurate or not, the fact that Gosnell, Calder, Williams, and others were involved in both work-related and Aboriginal activism suggests that we need to understand the connections between the two. Clearly, these people were navigating their way through both colonial and capitalist legacies, searching for settlement, stability, and independence.

### Aboriginal People in a Changing Fishery

Major structural and technological changes in the British Columbia salmon industry after World War II contributed to the growing anxieties about access to the fishery. Having to adjust to the reduced demand for North American salmon after the war, the canning companies began centralizing their operations, made possible with new refrigerated holding and transportation methods. Since they no longer had to process fish where it was caught, the British Columbia companies consolidated their operations in the Lower Mainland and closed many of their northern plants. Both Aboriginal fishers and the native women who had historically provided the majority of the cannery workforce were affected.<sup>21</sup> Loss of jobs for native women meant families had to depend more on incomes from husbands and fathers who fished. Fishing, however, grew more expensive as new harvesting technologies such as more powerful engines, mechanical drum net-hauling devices (introduced in 1942) and nylon nets (mid-1950s) were introduced. After the war, cannery owners began reducing the size of their rental fleets and tried to encourage fishers to buy vessels by offering them financing.<sup>22</sup>

Those who remained in the fishery had difficulty catching as much fish as they had in the past. Significant declines occurred in the two most important species for northern gillnetters – sockeye and pinks. Skeena sockeye landings had reached their peak in 1910 and despite the introduction of gas-powered boats in the 1920s, they had continued to fall.<sup>23</sup> With few binding international agreements on salmon stocks, fish bound for Canadian rivers became vulnerable to a growing high seas salmon fishery and increased efforts by Alaskans

19. Alex Rose, *Spirit Dance at Meziadin: Chief Joseph Gosnell and the Nisga’a Treaty* (Madeira Park, B.C. 2000), 85. James was Joseph’s brother.

20. Rose, *Spirit Dance*, 85.

21. For background on cannery workers, see Muszynski, *Cheap Wage Labour*.

22. Drucker, *The Native Brotherhoods*, 124–5.

23. D.J. Milne, “The Skeena River Salmon Fishery, with Special Reference to Sockeye Salmon,” *Journal of the Fisheries Research Board of Canada*, 12, 3 (1955), 451–485.



On the canning line at Inverness Cannery, Skeena River, 1947

IMAGE I-28895 COURTESY OF ROYAL BC MUSEUM, BC ARCHIVES, PHOTOGRAPHER: BC GOVERNMENT

fishing off the Panhandle.<sup>24</sup> As well, a 1951 rock slide on the Skeena system further compromised the sockeye by blocking access to their main spawning grounds at Babine Lake.<sup>25</sup> Fisheries officials only learned of the slide late in the season, and did not send crews to clear it until the following spring. Fisheries scientists estimated the slide killed 75 per cent of the 1951 spawners. Although the slide did not affect pinks to the same degree (it occurred above the main pink spawning area), catches for that species had been declining since 1930. Despite acquiring more efficient technologies such as nylon

24. Richard A. Cooley, *Politics and Conservation: The Decline of the Alaska Salmon* (Harper & Row, 1963). According to Cooley, the Alaskan domestic fishery was in even worse shape than British Columbia's. For an overview of international agreements in the north Pacific in these years, see Patricia Marchak, "'Because Fish Swim,' and Other Causes of International Conflict," in Patricia Marchak et al., eds., *Uncommon Property: The Fishing and Fish-Processing Industries in British Columbia* (Toronto 1987) 153–70. For background on the Canadian government's (largely unsuccessful) negotiations for an extended fishing limit, see Miriam Wright, *A Fishery for Modern Times: The State and the Industrialization of the Newfoundland Fishery, 1934–1968* (Toronto 2001).

25. D.R. Foskett, "The Effect of the Babine Slide on the 1951 Sockeye Run," *Fisheries Research Board Progress Report No. 90* (March 1952).



North Pacific Cannery, Skeena River, 1944. A view of the gillnetters, as well as cabins for seasonal fishers and cannery workers.

IMAGE I-20509 COURTESY OF ROYAL BC MUSEUM, BC ARCHIVES, PHOTOGRAPHER: FRANK PETERS BOUCHER

nets, between 1951 and 1965, Nass and Skeena gillnet fishers saw their sockeye landings fall (Nass – 50 per cent, Skeena – 45 per cent<sup>26</sup>). Average earnings increased only moderately from the early 1950s to the mid-1960s (Table 1), while costs for fuel and supplies were rising. Considering prices for salmon increased during this time, fishers' earnings in the 1960s suggest lower fish landings.<sup>27</sup> Strikes occurred in several years, usually over prices, also contributing to decreased catches.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, with declining landings, getting higher prices for fish became critical.

These changes contributed to a steady decline in numbers of Aboriginal people in the British Columbia fishery. Natives had been the original labour force in the industrial fishery when it began in the 1870s, with primarily men fishing and women on the canning lines. Within two decades, white and Japanese fishers had also entered the fishery, displacing some natives, particularly on the Fraser River.<sup>29</sup> By the early 1950s, Aboriginal people still

26. B.A. Campbell and R.F.A. Roberts, "A Review of Recent Trends in the British Columbia Salmon Fishery, 1951–1966," Department of Fisheries (Vancouver 1967), 39–40.

27. Campbell and Roberts, "A Review of Recent Trends," 15. Between 1951 and 1966, sockeye prices rose 58 per cent and pink prices rose 43 per cent.

28. Strikes (2–3 weeks) occurred in 1952, 1954, 1957, 1959 and 1963.

29. Newell, *Tangled Webs*, 85.

**Table 1**  
**North Pacific Cannery – Average earnings of gillnet fishers, 1947–1965**

Year	Average earnings
1947	\$780.21
1948	\$2,046.86
1949	\$1,598.10
1950	\$1,772.68
1951	\$2,178.71
1952	\$3,097.69
1953	\$2,253.22
1954	\$2,116.86
1955	\$2,100.37
1956	\$2,673.62
1957	\$2,826.43
1958	\$3,963.53
1959	\$2,212.53
1960	\$1,994.02
1961	\$3,915.17
1962	\$3,350.78
1963	\$1,755.44
1964	\$4,428.73
1965	\$2,753.23

Source: University of British Columbia, Special Collections, A.B.C. Packing Company Records, North Pacific Cannery Fishermen's Earnings.

comprised one third of industrial fishers in the province.<sup>30</sup> A decade later, however, they had dropped to 19 per cent. Numbers fell even further after 1968, when the federal government introduced a licence limitation program known as the Davis Plan (named after then Minister of Fisheries Jack Davis) aimed at removing hundreds of small boats from the industry in the name of

30. M.F. Friedlaender, "Economic Status of Native Indians in BC Fisheries, 1964–1973," Department of Fisheries, Technical Report Series PAC/T-75-25 (Vancouver 1975), 6.

efficiency.<sup>31</sup> Favouring larger and higher-producing operations, the plan disproportionately affected native fishers, whose boats tended to be smaller than the provincial average.<sup>32</sup> By the early 1970s, Aboriginal people comprised just twelve per cent of British Columbia's industrial fishers.

Despite these challenges, in the mid-1950s, at least 600 native fishers remained in the Nass and Skeena area fishery.<sup>33</sup> Although Japanese fishers had been on the Skeena since the 1890s, native fishers and cannery workers were always in the majority. Northern canners, lacking access to a large white labour market, hired native fishers to secure the labour of their wives and daughters on the canning lines.<sup>34</sup> In the 1950s and 1960s, Aboriginal fishers worked for the five or six remaining canneries located in the communities at the mouth of the Skeena, such as Prince Rupert and Port Edward (the last Nass cannery having closed at the end of World War II). Historically, the native fishers and cannery workers came from the northern coastal region as well as the Skeena and Nass river valleys. This remained the case in the post-World War II years, with people coming from the Tsimshian communities along the coast such as Port Simpson and Hartley Bay, as well as the Nisga'a settlements in the Nass Valley, including Kincolith (Gingolx), Aiyansh, and Greenville, and the largely Gitksan villages of the Upper Skeena, such as Hazelton, Kitwanga (Gitwanga), Skeena Crossing (Gitsegukla), and Kitwancool (Gitanyow). While these families from upriver settlements would move to the coastal region for the fishing season, some Aboriginal people, primarily from Coast Tsimshian, Haida, and Nisga'a communities had moved permanently to Port Edward and nearby Port Essington.<sup>35</sup> Fishers of Japanese descent, who comprised the next largest group of fishers, had also lived in the region before the war.<sup>36</sup> When they returned in

31. Newell, *Tangled Webs*, 139–43.

32. LAC, RG 23, Acc. 83–84/120, vol. 132, file 729–4–3[9], “The Role of the Native in the Commercial Fisheries of British Columbia – 1966,” by Blake A. Campbell and R.F.A. Roberts, Department of Fisheries, 1967, 5. Although no figures are available for the 1950s, in 1966, the value of native-owned or operated gillnetters was 26.8 per cent less than the provincial average.

33. According to Harry B. Hawthorn, C.S. Belshaw and S.M. Jamieson, *The Indians of British Columbia: A Study of Contemporary Social Adjustment* (1958; Toronto 1960), 114, 629 native people from the Skeena Agency worked as fishers. A Canadian report for the International North Pacific Fisheries Commission (International North Pacific Fisheries Commission, “The Exploitation, Scientific Investigation and Management of Salmon Stocks on the Pacific Coast of Canada in Relation to the Abstention Provisions of The North Pacific Fisheries Convention,” Bulletin Number 9 (Vancouver 1962), 1–112) indicated that from 1950–5, the yearly average number of licences for the entire Skeena area was 781.

34. Newell, *Tangled Webs*, 85–6.

35. Newell, *Tangled Webs*, 110–1.

36. City of Vancouver Archives, Add mss 1, location 565–C–4, A.B.C. Packing Company Cannery Returns, file 2. At the North Pacific Cannery in Port Edward, between 1930 and 1941, Japanese fishers ranged from 22 per cent to 39 per cent of the total working for this cannery (average 31 per cent).

1950, their numbers were still strong, but most lived in Vancouver and travelled north for the fishing season.<sup>37</sup> Smallest in number, white fishers lived in the Skeena area communities such as Prince Rupert, as well as Vancouver.

Records from the region's oldest salmon operation, the Anglo-British Columbia Packing Company's North Pacific Cannery, reveal the Aboriginal fishers in particular were facing difficult times. Of the three ethnic groups tracked by the cannery (the company categorized their fishers by ethnicity – "Whites," "Indians," and "Japanese"), native fishers experienced the biggest drop in numbers in the 1950s (Table 2). Although the numbers of whites also declined, they mostly owned their own vessels, giving them options such as finding other employment or selling and leaving the fishery entirely.<sup>38</sup> According to Hawthorne *et al.* in their 1958 study of Aboriginal people in British Columbia, many white fishers got into the fishery during the war when economic conditions were good, but left when it was no longer as profitable.<sup>39</sup> "In other words," they claimed, "many Indians in the north have continued gillnet fishing under conditions which have driven a large number of Whites out of the industry entirely."<sup>40</sup> Native fishers, however, had fewer choices as only about half owned their own vessels. Moreover, Aboriginal fishers faced more barriers finding other jobs, and off-season employment in the northern region, including trapping and sawmill work, was disappearing.<sup>41</sup> Although Japanese fishers were more dependent on cannery rentals than any other group, their numbers remained fairly stable.

In 1955, both the UFAWU and the Native Brotherhood confronted the Skeena canneries about renting fewer boats and cutting people off credit. That year, North Pacific and other Skeena canneries cut the size of their fleets, and union leaders feared the reduction was permanent (see Table 2 for North Pacific figures). In 1954, a British Columbia Packers executive, R.E. Walker, told the

37. For an account of the experiences of a Skeena-area Japanese fisher, see Rolf Knight and Maya Koizumi, *A Man of Our Times: The Life-History of a Japanese-Canadian Fisherman* (Vancouver 1976). The fisher, Ryuichi Yoshida, had been active in the labour movement. He and his wife returned to the Skeena after the war, and lived there year-round for a number of years before moving to New Denver in the southern interior of the province.

38. City of Vancouver Archives, Add mss 1, location 565-C-4, A.B.C. Packing Company, Cannery Returns, file 2. Percentage of fishers who rented: "Japanese" – 60–80 per cent; "Indians" – 40–60 per cent. Almost all "Whites" owned their own vessels.

39. Hawthorne *et al.*, *The Indians of British Columbia*, 117. My great uncle, Otto Wright, fit that pattern. Originally from Ontario, he had spent time working on a Lake Erie fishing boat. During the war he and his family moved to British Columbia and he got a job as a net boss (someone who supervises the repairing of the company's nets) at a Knight Inlet cannery. He later bought a gillnetter and fished out of Namu on the central coast, while his wife Mabel and son Don worked in the cannery. Sometime in the 1950s, they left the fishery and bought a small farm.

40. Hawthorne *et al.*, *The Indians of British Columbia*, 117.

41. Rajala, *Up-Coast*, 157.

**Table 2**  
**Numbers of gillnet fishers making deliveries to North Pacific Cannery, by ethnic designation**

Year	Whites	Indians	Japanese	Total
1947	44	116	0	160
1948	61	125	0	186
1949	71	111	0	182
1950	52	104	22	178
1951	48	112	26	186
1952	47	121	38	206
1953	47	123	40	210
1954	43	115	33	191
1955	40	79	46	165
1956	46	73	31	150
1957	46	60	32	138
1958	22	85	35	142
1959	27	81	34	142
1960	28	78	36	142
1961	22	76	41	139
1962	19	83	39	141
1963	10	85	39	134
1964	12	106	34	152
1965	12	106	34	152
1966	11	79	41	131
1967	15	90	35	140

Source: City of Vancouver Archives, Add MSS 1, location 565-C-4, A.B.C. Packing Company, Cannery Returns, file 2.

chair of the Fisheries Research Board (the research arm of the Department of Fisheries) they were reducing their Skeena operations because of concerns about the impact of the rock slide.<sup>42</sup> Scientists had warned the loss of spawners in 1951 would affect the 1955 and 1956 returns (Skeena sockeye had four

42. LAC, RG 23, vol. 1430, file 745-19-2[1], R. E. Walker to J. L. Kask, Fisheries Research Board, 3 December 1954.

and five-year life cycles). He suggested, however, that other reasons besides the rock slide were affecting their decision: "Whatever happens we intend to curtail our fishing fleet, many of whom are sub-marginal."<sup>43</sup> Walker never explained what he meant by "sub-marginal," but the fisheries unions wanted to know. In the spring of 1955, an article in the Native Brotherhood's newspaper, *Native Voice*, revealed that both the UFAWU and the Native Brotherhood had accused the companies of targeting the Nass and Skeena gillnet fishers.<sup>44</sup> The unions claimed the companies were denying the fishers credit and accusing them of being "marginal." During a meeting with the Fisheries Association of British Columbia (organization of fishing companies) that spring, the UFAWU and the Native Brotherhood made the following request:

1. That the companies provide a full list to the UFAWU and Native Brotherhood of all the fishermen in the northern areas who have been refused a boat for the coming season. This list to show length of service with the company, production recorded during the past four years, and the amount of debt owing by the individual.
2. That a definition of the word "marginal" as it applies to fishermen be given.
3. That there be a general re-instatement of all fishermen – the only exception being extreme cases of neglect on the part of individuals.
4. That in such cases there should either be a cancellation of all outstanding debts on the provision of a job in cannery or some other phase of the operation.
5. That a new policy be applied in Northern BC that would give equal opportunity to Native fishermen along with the other fishermen in the type of boats, quality of gear and quality of housing.<sup>45</sup>

While the companies did not respond to these demands, the unions' accusations suggest the northern gillnetters were feeling vulnerable. Clearly, these were difficult years for the Aboriginal gillnetters and this helps explain the urgency of the protests.

### **The Skeena Salmon Management Committee and State Regulation of the Fishery**

The Department of Fisheries formed the Skeena Salmon Management Committee, not only to regulate but also to legitimize its intervention and mitigate tensions in the northern fishery. Finding legitimacy was critical for the post-war liberal capitalist state, and the Department needed to secure the cannery

43. LAC, RG 23, vol. 1430, file 745-19-2[1], R. E. Walker to J. L. Kask, Fisheries Research Board, 3 December 1954.

44. "Salmon Price Negotiations Continue as Season Nears," *Native Voice*, 9, 6 (June 1955).

45. "Salmon Price Negotiations Continue as Season Nears," *Native Voice*, 9, 6 (June 1955).



owners' and fishers' cooperation in following the regulations. Douglas Harris has argued that historically, state intervention in the British Columbia fishery favoured the salmon canning industry.<sup>46</sup> Judicial interpretations of the *Master-Servant Act* in the 1870s transformed Aboriginal fishers under the law from independent fishers to employees, requiring them to remain under contract to fish for a single company. Once the federal government began regulating the British Columbia salmon fisheries, it operated on the liberal principle of "open access," legally entitling private enterprise access to salmon. The Department of Marine and Fisheries (as it was called) established a licensing system, banned some Aboriginal fishing methods, and created the "Indian Food Fishery," all strategies to protect the resource for industry. In the mid-20th century, cannery owners retained a strong presence in the regulatory process. In fact, the Skeena Salmon Management Committee itself was created in response to complaints from cannery owners about the Department's decision to close the fishery at the height of the 1953 sockeye season.<sup>47</sup> They claimed the Fisheries Research Board had not done enough scientific research in the northern region to warrant the closure. While senior Fisheries officials were defensive, the Assistant Deputy Minister at the time, George Clark, who had worked in the British Columbia fishing business before becoming a civil servant, warned other senior officials that they needed to address the criticism.<sup>48</sup> Clark quickly moved to assuage the industry's concerns, and personally met with cannery owners, promising to create a management committee for northern salmon.<sup>49</sup>

Although the Committee was originally created to legitimize the increased intervention in the fishery in the eyes of the cannery owners, the Department also needed to secure cooperation from the fishers. While the Committee itself retained final control over the regulations, the Department formed an Advisory Board, and arranged for annual public meetings, allowing fishers to participate. The Committee consisted of just two members: the Director of the Fisheries Research Board's Pacific Biological Station at Nanaimo and the Chief Supervisor of Fisheries for the Pacific Area. Admittedly, the Advisory Board was dominated by cannery owners and managers, who held six of the nine positions, with the remaining three going to gillnet fishers (one from UFAWU, one from Prince Rupert Fishermen's Cooperative and one from Native Brotherhood). It was through the public meetings the Committee held in Prince Rupert, however, that fishers were able to establish a presence. Reports

46. Douglas C. Harris, *Fish, Law and Colonialism: The Legal Capture of Salmon in British Columbia* (Toronto 2001), 14–78.

47. LAC, RG 23, vol. 1430, file 745–19–2[1], 'Northern Cannery Managers' to Fisheries Association of British Columbia, 2 November 1953.

48. LAC, RG 23, vol. 1430, file 745–19–2[1], A.J. Whitmore to Deputy Minister, 29 December, 1953. Clark wrote a brief note on the bottom of Whitmore's letter.

49. LAC, RG 23, vol. 1430, file 745–19–2[1], "Brief summary of a meeting in the office of the Chief Supervisor of Fisheries, February 5, 1954."

indicated the Nass and Skeena area native fishers were usually well represented, and non-native groups included the UFAWU and the Prince Rupert Fishermen's Co-operative. Although Japanese Canadian fishers had not been as involved in the protests, Tomekichi Mio from Port Edward attended and made presentations at least twice.<sup>50</sup> One of the largest gatherings occurred in 1958, when an estimated 200 fishers attended, the majority of whom were Aboriginal.<sup>51</sup> Over the years, these groups were able to get some concessions from the Committee over the regulations, suggesting the Department officials were concerned about not alienating these particularly vocal and active participants. Indeed, by 1965, the Department re-organized the Advisory Committee, giving the majority of seats to fishers' groups, and leaving just two for the cannery owners.<sup>52</sup>

The regulations would generate considerable controversy over the years – perhaps more than Department officials anticipated. In trying to justify and defend them, Department officials and Committee members tried to highlight the role of fisheries science in setting the particular regulations. Fisheries scientists from the Pacific Biological Station at Nanaimo projected the size of the returns of each salmon species, and then set escapement targets at 50 percent of the expected run. From there, they made recommendations on how long the fishery could remain open to ensure half the fish reached the spawning grounds. Canadian fisheries science and the Fisheries Research Board were highly regarded internationally, but scientific work on Pacific species was not as developed as on the Atlantic Coast. Until the mid-1930s, the budget given to the Pacific Biological Station was a fraction of that of the much larger Atlantic Biological Station in New Brunswick.<sup>53</sup> After declining landings in the 1940s, the Pacific Biological Station put more effort into studying Skeena sockeye.<sup>54</sup> With the creation of the Skeena Salmon Management Committee, however,

50. He attended Skeena Salmon Management Committee meetings in 1958 and 1960. Unlike most of the other gillnetters of Japanese descent, he lived in the Skeena area, which may have given him a greater interest in the local fishery.

51. LAC, RG 23, vol. 1430, file 745-19-2[2], "List of Persons Presenting Briefs or Submissions to the Skeena Salmon Management Committee at Prince Rupert January 30, 1958." The native groups and individuals included: Joseph Daniels, Jeffrey C. Benson, Nass River District Vice President, Native Brotherhood, Tom Gosner and Paul Price of Port Simpson Native Brotherhood branch, Lewis Clifton, Ed Clifton and Paul Mason of Hartley Bay and Kitkatla Native Brotherhood Branches, Peter Williams of Skeena River Native Fishermen, Kitwancool, Walter Harris, District Vice President for the Indian Villages of Hazelton, Kispiox, Moricetown, and Telkwa.

52. Department of Fisheries of Canada, *Skeena River Salmon Management Committee Annual Report, 1965* (Vancouver 1966), 1.

53. Jennifer Hubbard, *A Science on the Scales: The Rise of Canadian Atlantic Fisheries Biology, 1898-1939* (Toronto 2006), 213-5.

54. LAC, RG 23, vol. 1430, file 745-19-2[1], G.S. Reade, District Supervisor of Fisheries to A.J. Whitmore, 6 January 1954.

the Station directed more resources to studying both northern sockeye and pinks. A special director was appointed to oversee this research and make recommendations to Committee members. The Committee also arranged for Nanaimo staff to attend the annual meetings in Prince Rupert and present research findings to canners and fishers.

Initially, the closures were less severe, but as the years passed and the Skeena sockeye continued to show signs of distress, the Committee increasingly limited fishing times. The dates and times varied throughout the entire fishing season, to provide different levels of protection for sockeye, which mainly ran in late June and July, and pinks, which mostly returned in August. The Committee began in 1955 with a shortened sockeye season (early July instead of late June), and a four-day fishing week instead of the usual five.<sup>55</sup> In 1956, they kept the four-day fishing weeks, but did not open regular gillnet fishing until late July.<sup>56</sup> In 1957, the Committee opened the season earlier than the previous year but reduced weekly fishing to three days.<sup>57</sup> Three-day weeks continued for sockeye in 1958, but weakness in the pink run led to one-and-a-half-day weeks in August.<sup>58</sup> In 1959, the sockeye returns were the lowest since 1951, and thereafter, two or two and a half fishing days per week in July was the norm.<sup>59</sup> The following year, the pink landings were the lowest on record and the Committee increased the closures during August.<sup>60</sup> Although sockeye had recovered somewhat by 1963 and 1964, the next year was extremely poor for salmon fishers across the province, and on the Skeena, pink landings were the lowest they had been in the history of the industrial fishery.<sup>61</sup> A 1962 report of the International North Pacific Fisheries Commission (an organization comprised of Canada, United States and Japan created to monitor straddling stocks such as salmon) concluded that Skeena salmon was being fished at its

55. Fisheries Research Board of Canada, *Skeena Salmon Management Committee Annual Report, 1955* (Nanaimo 1956), 1–2.

56. Fisheries Research Board of Canada, *Skeena Salmon Management Committee Annual Report, 1956* (Nanaimo 1957), 1–2.

57. Fisheries Research Board of Canada, *Skeena Salmon Management Committee Annual Report, 1957* (Nanaimo 1958), 2.

58. Fisheries Research Board of Canada, *Skeena Salmon Management Committee Annual Report, 1958* (Nanaimo 1959), 2–3.

59. Fisheries Research Board of Canada, *Skeena Salmon Management Committee Annual Report, 1959* (Nanaimo 1960), 1–2.

60. Fisheries Research Board of Canada, *Skeena Salmon Management Committee Annual Report, 1960* (Nanaimo 1961), 2–3, 7.

61. Department of Fisheries of Canada, *Skeena River Salmon Management Committee Annual Report, 1965* (Vancouver 1966), 1–6.

limit, and any attempt to relax the regulations would lead to the destruction of the stocks.<sup>62</sup>

### Protesting the Salmon Regulations

For the Aboriginal people and other small-boat fishers of the Nass and Skeena, these regulations had severe implications for their ability to stay in the fishery. Fewer days to fish meant less income, and the danger of sliding into debt or not being able to keep up boat payments. Every year, fishers came to the Skeena Salmon Management Committee meetings, describing the hardships caused by the regulations and asking for changes. While the gillnetters generally agreed with the idea of conservation, they differed sharply from the Committee members on how to achieve it. Indeed, they offered alternative ways of protecting the fish, mainly by restricting the larger vessels operating in the northern region, and stopping the international offshore fishery. For the most part, the Aboriginal fishers, who were always in the majority at these meetings, made arguments similar to their non-native counterparts – that the regulations were too restrictive for the smaller boats, which faced significant disadvantages in the new post-war fishing environment. What differentiated some of the native gillnetters' comments from the non-natives', however, were claims to the resource based on their Aboriginal heritage.

Of the native groups protesting the regulations, the Upper Skeena organizations, particularly those from Kitwanga and Kitwancool, made the most direct arguments about their Aboriginal identity. The Skeena River Indian Fishermen, led by Peter Williams and Harold Sinclair, began their 1957 letter by claiming they wanted to participate in the “processes of Lawmaking as well as creating a good regulation for our traditional Fishing Industry.”<sup>63</sup> By 1960, they had expanded their claim, arguing native people had a historic relationship not only with natural resources of the province, but also the post-European contact commercial economy. They began: “We, the Natives of this great country, the investors of the most lucrative “Goodwill” in the four basic industries since the colonial days of this province, the holders of the most honourable ‘Prerogative rights’ of our heritage and natural resources.”<sup>64</sup> Not only did they have a special relationship to the resources, but they had also helped build the colonial economy by working in the fur trade, logging, agri-

62. International North Pacific Fisheries Commission, “The Exploitation, Scientific Investigation and Management of Salmon Stocks,” 48.

63. LAC, RG 23, vol. 1430, file 745-19-2[2], Skeena River Indian Fishermen and their Families to Skeena Salmon Management Committee and the Department of Fisheries, 19 January 1957.

64. LAC, RG 23, vol. 1431, file 745-19-2[4], Peter Williams, The Kitwancool and Skeena Indian Fishermen of the Native Brotherhood branch to the Department of Fisheries and the Skeena River Salmon Management Committee, 26 January 1960. The letter was also signed by Harold Sinclair, Moses William Jones of Kitsegukla (Skeena Crossing) and Jeffrey H. Johnson of Hazelton.

culture, and the fishery. They claimed, however, that they had gradually been pushed out of all of these enterprises except for the fishery, and that they were losing their hold on this as well. Being forced out of the fishery, they insisted, was not only taking away their last means of livelihood, but it was “against the principle of *THE CROWN*” [original emphasis].<sup>65</sup> Again, they reminded the Committee that their labour had created wealth in the Skeena region for the canneries as well as local municipalities. They remarked that “the Indian fishermen are the best commercial supporters of the City of Prince Rupert and all the other Municipalities as well as the transportation industries.”<sup>66</sup> In the following year, they repeated the same arguments, emphasizing that Aboriginal people had been “building up the fishing industry from its minutest beginnings long before any other race ever stepped into it.”<sup>67</sup> Clearly, their identity as Aboriginal people was fused with their sense of their relationship to the land and resources, and to their historic participation in the post-European-contact economy.

While Frank Calder’s approach differed from that of the Upper Skeena groups, he also conveyed the idea that fishing, whether it was the “Food Fishery” for domestic use or the industrial fishery, was central to their cultural and economic survival. While less detailed in the descriptions of the hardships caused by the regulations than the Williams and Sinclair letters, Calder’s petitions nevertheless show a sophisticated understanding of the governance of Canadian fisheries under the law, and an awareness of the international debates on high seas fishing and territorial waters. A letter he wrote for the Nass District Native Brotherhood branch in 1959 did not make any particular claim based on Aboriginal identity, but a set of resolutions passed by the Nisga’a Tribal Council he sent to the Minister of Fisheries in 1964 show a concern for both customary Aboriginal fishing rights (protection for oolichan, a small fish valued for its fat content, as well as clams) and the industrial fishery (concerns about the Skeena Salmon Management Committee regulations and the offshore fishery).<sup>68</sup> As an organization created to pursue land claims, it is significant that it also fought to secure access to the industrial fishery. As Paul Tennant notes, however, all of the men (except for Calder) listed on the

65. LAC, RG 23, vol. 1431, file 745-19-2[4], Peter Williams, The Kitwancool and Skeena Indian Fishermen of the Native Brotherhood branch to the Department of Fisheries and the Skeena River Salmon Management Committee, 26 January 1960.

66. LAC, RG 23, vol. 1431, file 745-19-2[4], Peter Williams, The Kitwancool and Skeena Indian Fishermen of the Native Brotherhood branch to the Department of Fisheries and the Skeena River Salmon Management Committee, 26 January 1960.

67. LAC, RG 23, vol. 1431, file 745-19-2[4], Peter Williams, The Kitwancool and Skeena Indian Fishermen of the Native Brotherhood branch to the Department of Fisheries and the Skeena River Salmon Management Committee, 26 January 1960.

68. LAC, RG 23, Acc. 83-84/120, vol. 132, file 729-4-3[9], Frank Calder to H.J. Robichaud, 10 November 1964.

Nisga'a Tribal Council incorporation papers identified their occupations as "fishermen."<sup>69</sup> In fact, one of the resolutions asked the Department of Fisheries to include a representative from the Nass River area to the Skeena Salmon Management Committee, a request it complied with in 1965 by creating a regular space for a member of the Nisga'a Tribal Council.

While several of the Aboriginal groups referred to their historic attachments to the fishery, for the most part, the protests focused on their concerns as small-boat fishers. Their smaller size limited where they could fish because many were "inside" fishers, confined to the more protected waters of the river itself and Inverness Passage (between Smith Island and the mainland). Only those with the larger, more powerful craft could fish in the rougher "outside" fishing of Hecate Strait.<sup>70</sup> In challenging the Committee, the native gillnetters argued this relative lack of mobility made it harder for them to get around the regulations by fishing in another area.<sup>71</sup> Peter Williams often accused the Committee of unfairly penalizing the smaller vessels when, as he argued, compared to other vessel and gear types, gillnetters damaged the resource the least. In his 1960 letter, Williams claimed, "it is not the orthodox gillnets fishing that endangers the fish populations," and that it is the "outside fishing and the offshore fishing that break up and consume schools of fish."<sup>72</sup> Others also tried to convince the Committee that they could find other ways to protect the resource without affecting the viability of the gillnetters.

Some of the most heated debates occurred over the Skeena Salmon Management Committee's proposal to move the fishing boundary seaward. Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal fishers argued moving the boundary would hurt the smaller boats the most. The existing boundary, in place since the late 1940s, was approximately 26 kilometres upriver from Port Edward, near the village of Port Essington. During the meetings for the 1955 regulations, Skeena Salmon Management Committee members suggested they could meet escapement targets by moving the boundary instead of reducing the weekly fishing days.<sup>73</sup> Most of the cannery owners wanted the boundary moved so

69. Tennant, *Aboriginal People and Politics*, 123.

70. A lot of the older gillnetters were in the 25' range whereas the ones built after World War II tended to be in the 35' range. As well, by the 1960s, some 'combination' gillnetters were being built, which were equipped with both gillnetting and seining equipment.

71. They also complained that losing fishing time made it impossible to collect Unemployment Insurance benefits. The Department had introduced this program for fishers for the first time in 1957, but the Skeena Salmon Management Committee's restrictions on season length meant it would have been very difficult to qualify, unless the fisher had a larger vessel able to travel to other regions.

72. LAC, RG 23, vol. 1431, file 745-19-2[4], Peter Williams, The Kitwancool and Skeena Indian Fishermen of the Native Brotherhood branch to the Department of Fisheries and the Skeena River Salmon Management Committee, 26 January 1960.

73. LAC, RG 23, vol. 1430, file 745-19-2[1], "Progress," by A.W.H. Needler and A.J. Whitmore, April 1955.

they could keep their plants operating longer during the week. For the fishers, both native and non-native, moving the boundary seaward created new problems. If the Committee had moved the boundary, the majority of the native gillnetters would not have been able to fish. As well, fishers used to setting their nets upriver lacked familiarity with fishing grounds at the mouth, giving them a disadvantage relative to those who did. Over the next few years, both fishers and cannery owners continued to debate the boundary issue. Williams and Sinclair mentioned it in their 1957 letter, as did Silver Oddson, a non-native member of the Advisory Board who also represented fishers from the Prince Rupert area.<sup>74</sup> During the 1958 meeting, Oddson remarked that moving the boundary would only concentrate fishing in a smaller area at the mouth, defeating the purpose of conservation.<sup>75</sup> As well, in 1960 Williams and Sinclair suggested that they were unhappy with the pressures the cannery owners were putting on the Committee, saying: “and regarding the fishery boundaries, it is a matter between the Department of Fisheries and the Fishermen only, and not the canneries.”<sup>76</sup> A year later, they made the same comment on the boundary and fishing times, adding “the canners should always support the fishermen’s position in these two connections.”<sup>77</sup>

The fishers’ opposition, however, had some effect on the Committee and contributed to the decision not to move the boundary. The Committee moved it briefly in 1955, and proposed to move it again in 1958, but backed down after the protests. After the 1957 discussion, Chief Supervisor of Fisheries, Pacific Area, and Committee member A.J. Whitmore reflected on the larger implications of moving the line.<sup>78</sup> Of the two Committee members (the other being A.W. H. Needler, Director of the Pacific Biological Station<sup>79</sup>), he was more familiar with the Skeena fishery and was more aware of the economic position of the native gillnetters. He had worked in the area for many years and was well known to the Native Brotherhood, who honoured him when he retired

74. LAC, RG 23, vol. 1430, file 745-19-2[2], Silver Oddson to Skeena Salmon Management Committee, 19 January 1957.

75. LAC, RG 23, vol. 1430, file 745-19-2[2], “Skeena Management Meeting at Rupert,” by Jack McPherson, C.B.C. Fishermen’s Broadcast, 6 February 1958.

76. LAC, RG 23, vol. 1431, file 745-19-2[4], Peter Williams, The Kitwancool and Skeena Indian Fishermen of the Native Brotherhood branch to the Department of Fisheries and the Skeena River Salmon Management Committee, 26 January 1960.

77. LAC, RG 23, vol. 1431, file 745-19-2[5], Peter Williams, President Kitwancool Skeena River Indian Fishermen and Native Brotherhood Branch to Department of Fisheries and Skeena Salmon Management Committee, no date but filed with 1961 letters (also signed by Harold Sinclair).

78. LAC, RG 23, vol. 1430, file 745-19-2[2], “Re: Protest – Skeena Salmon Regulations – 1957,” by A.J. Whitmore, 8 March 1957.

79. Needler had recently been Director of the Atlantic Biological Station in New Brunswick.

in 1960.<sup>80</sup> Whitmore claimed moving the boundary would have been controversial and would have been “resisted strenuously by many Skeena gill-netters, both Whites and Indians.”<sup>81</sup> Moreover, he suggested, there would be no conservation benefit, as removing the smaller boats and adding an extra day each week for fishing would only mean the larger boats would catch everything. Whitmore acknowledged that economics were getting entangled in conservation, but claimed this was probably inevitable as the fishing fleets grew larger and more efficient. He surmised that if trends continued, “it will only be a matter of time before the less able boats will disappear.”<sup>82</sup> In the meantime, he said, the Skeena was not ready for a new seaward boundary, as it would remove too many people from the fishery. Although the cannery owners continued to push for a seaward boundary, after 1958, the Committee never proposed to move it again.

Fishers also complained the Committee’s opening and closing dates for the fishing seasons on the Nass and Skeena hurt the smaller, “inside” gillnetters. The Committee set the dates for both the Nass (Area 3) and the Skeena (Area 4), but within each area, some of the dates were staggered. For example, some of the areas outside the river mouth opened several days earlier than on the river itself, giving the “outside” fishers a head start and potentially a greater share of the catch. Williams and Sinclair made this point in their 1960 letter (and again in 1961), saying: “To protect the Skeena bound sockeye and pink salmon, the sub-Areas 3X and 3Y [outside the Nass River] and wherever the Skeena fish might pass through towards the Skeena River, like Beaver Passage and Ogden Channel must be governed by the same Skeena River weekly closed times.”<sup>83</sup> In this case, the Committee did accommodate these demands, and adjusted the dates to create more uniformity within the fishing area.<sup>84</sup>

Not only did Aboriginal gillnetters accuse the Committee of giving “outside” fishers greater access, they also claimed existing regulations and policies favoured those with larger vessels who came from elsewhere in the province. The Department’s liberal “open access” licencing policies allowed salmon-licence holders to fish wherever they liked, so long as they remained within designated fishing areas. Williams mentioned this during the 1958 meetings, asking if the Department could limit the number of non-locals

80. “Brotherhood Pays Tribute to Director,” *Native Voice*, 14, 4 (April 1960).

81. LAC, RG 23, vol. 1430, file 745-19-2[2], “Re: Protest – Skeena Salmon Regulations – 1957,” by A.J. Whitmore, 8 March 1957.

82. LAC, RG 23, vol. 1430, file 745-19-2[2], “Re: Protest – Skeena Salmon Regulations – 1957,” by A.J. Whitmore, 8 March 1957.

83. LAC, RG 23, vol. 1431, file 745-19-2[4], Peter Williams, The Kitwancool and Skeena Indian Fishermen of the Native Brotherhood branch to the Department of Fisheries and the Skeena River Salmon Management Committee, 26 January 1960.

84. LAC, RG 23, vol. 1431, file 745-19-2[4], A.J. Whitmore to Peter Williams, 13 April 1960.



fishing on the Skeena.<sup>85</sup> Williams and Sinclair commented on this again in 1960, concluding their letter with this statement: “gentlemen I like to add that three quarters of our fishermen cannot go to other areas to fish, while many from the other areas come to Skeena and fish.”<sup>86</sup> They wanted the Committee to know open access policies were unfair to those who could not travel to other regions. In their 1961 letter, they repeated this comment, but added they considered neighbouring Nass gillnetters as locals: “We also pray that equitable measures should be taken by the department of fisheries to prevent the usual overcrowding on the Skeena River by other fishermen from remote areas with the exception of the Nass River Fishermen.”<sup>87</sup> Joe Daniels also complained about the open access policies during a special meeting the Committee had with the Kitwanga and Kitwancool bands in Kitwanga in the spring of 1961 (the meeting having been prompted by some members of the community criticizing the Committee’s research projects on the Kitwanga River).<sup>88</sup> Daniels was a member of the Advisory Board, having been appointed at the suggestion of Whitmore, who claimed he had heard of Daniels’ reputation as “one of the highline Indian fishermen on the Skeena.”<sup>89</sup> According to a Department official who took notes at the Kitwanga meeting, “Mr. Joe Daniels objected to ‘transient’ and ‘holiday’ fishermen and said some restriction was needed. He stated that Indian boats were not good enough to travel to fish in distant areas or outside fishing grounds.”<sup>90</sup>

Concerns about these transient fishers led the gillnetters to oppose the Committee’s 1961 proposal to open the Nass and Skeena sockeye season

85. LAC, RG 23, vol. 1430, file 745-19-2[2], “Skeena Management Meeting at Rupert,” by Jack McPherson, C.B.C. Fishermen’s Broadcast, 6 February 1958.

86. LAC, RG 23, vol. 1431, file 745-19-2[4], Peter Williams, The Kitwancool and Skeena Indian Fishermen of the Native Brotherhood branch to the Department of Fisheries and the Skeena River Salmon Management Committee, 26 January 1960.

87. LAC, RG 23, vol. 1431, file 745-19-2[5], Peter Williams, President Kitwancool Skeena River Indian Fishermen and Native Brotherhood Branch to Department of Fisheries and Skeena Salmon Management Committee, no date but filed with 1961 letters (also signed by Harold Sinclair).

88. LAC, RG 23, vol. 1431, file 745-19-2[5], “Meeting of the Skeena Salmon Management Committee with Kitwanga and Kitwancool Indians at Kitwanga, British Columbia, May 30, 1961.” Notes were taken by J. McDonald, Department of Fisheries. Members of these communities spoke about declines in the “Food Fishery” and blamed Committee research projects on the Kitwanga River for interfering with the salmon. Industrial fishers at the meeting also commented on offshore fishing and federal licence limitation proposals.

89. LAC, RG 23, vol. 1430, file 745-19-2[2], A.J. Whitmore to Ed Nahanee, Native Brotherhood, 22 February 1957.

90. LAC, RG 23, vol. 1431, file 745-19-2[5], “Meeting of the Skeena Salmon Management Committee with Kitwanga and Kitwancool Indians at Kitwanga, British Columbia, May 30, 1961.”

two weeks earlier than in neighbouring districts.<sup>91</sup> The Committee members claimed the early-run sockeye had recovered enough to warrant an earlier date and proposed to open the sockeye season in mid-June instead of the usual early July, a measure supported by the cannery owners, who wanted a longer season. The fishers, however, said opening the Nass and Skeena before other areas would only attract more people from outside the region. By 1963, however, the Committee members had changed their minds, agreeing to delay opening the Nass and Skeena until neighbouring districts had also opened. The Committee's *Annual Report* acknowledged they had changed their minds because of "representations made regarding the economic needs of the Skeena fishermen and of the industry generally."<sup>92</sup> In a letter to the Deputy Minister, Committee member W.C. Hourston (a former Fisheries Research Board scientist, he had replaced Whitmore in 1960) explained they had changed their minds primarily because of the economic problems of the native fishers.<sup>93</sup> Although the Committee members agreed to the later date to appease the Aboriginal gillnetters, they never suggested changing the open access regulations. Doing so would likely have led to protests from some fishers and cannery owners who benefited from a mobile workforce.

Although fishers' protests had been successful in some areas, they were less effective at getting the Committee to extend the regulations to the troller fleets. Trollers fished in the "outside" waters along the coast, catching primarily spring and coho salmon. Although the bulk of the Nass and Skeena gillnetters' catches were sockeye and pinks, they did catch and sell some spring and coho. The Committee, however, considered the troller catch too small to warrant regulation, and in this district, the opening and closing dates as well as the weekly closed times did not apply to them. This angered both native and non-native gillnetters, who resented what they saw as the state's preferential treatment of one group of fishers. At the Committee's Prince Rupert meeting in January, 1957, Silver Oddson remarked on this disparity.<sup>94</sup> "This is a most regrettable state of affairs," he said, "when through restrictions and regulations we have created a privileged class of fishermen."<sup>95</sup> He said he hoped the Committee would recognize that one section of the fleet was bearing the "burden of conservation." Similarly, Williams and Sinclair regularly claimed that coho and spring should be protected, and the trollers should be subject

91. LAC, RG 23, vol., 1431, file 745-19-2[5], "Summary of a public meeting of the Skeena Salmon Management Committee with its Advisory Board, Prince Rupert, January 25, 1961."

92. Fisheries Research Board of Canada, *Skeena Salmon Management Committee Annual Report 1963* (Nanaimo 1964), 2.

93. LAC, RG 23, vol. 1431, file 745-19-2[6], W.C. Hourston to Deputy Minister, 25 February 1963.

94. LAC, RG 23, vol. 1430, file 745-19-2[2], Silver Oddson to the Skeena Salmon Management Committee, 19 January 1957.

95. LAC, RG 23, vol. 1430, file 745-19-2[2], Silver Oddson to the Skeena Salmon Management Committee, 19 January 1957.

to the regulations. At the 1958 meeting, Williams claimed their coho catches had been declining, suggesting the trollers were to blame.<sup>96</sup> By the early 1960s, trollers were beginning to catch more sockeye and pinks, putting them in direct competition with the gillnetters. In his 1964 petition to the Minister of Fisheries, Frank Calder asked that “those engaged in the salmon industry, who use the troll gear, be equally restricted to the same conservation measures of weekly fishing time closures as imposed upon the Gillnet and Seine salmon fishermen.”<sup>97</sup> In a letter to Robichaud about Calder’s complaints, Hourston remarked that regulations for trollers had been raised for a number of years, “principally by Indians from the Skeena and Nass.”<sup>98</sup> He claimed, however, that troller catches in the area were too small to warrant restrictions.

An even greater source of resentment for both native and non-native gill-netters was the federal government’s failure to stop British Columbia-bound salmon from being caught by international fleets. With only a three mile territorial and fishing limit, and no agreements with the United States over northern salmon stocks, British Columbia-bound fish were becoming increasingly vulnerable. In a convention signed in 1952, Japan agreed to limit its high seas salmon fishery to east of 170 degrees longitude, but tagging studies suggested these vessels were catching some North American fish.<sup>99</sup> Even more alarming for the northern British Columbia fishers were studies from 1957 and 1958 indicating that Alaskans fishing off Noyes Island, adjacent to the Panhandle, were catching significant amounts of Skeena-bound salmon.<sup>100</sup> Fishers attending the Skeena Salmon Management Committee meetings regularly claimed having to follow such severe restrictions while offshore fishing continued was unfair. Almost everyone making presentations at the 1958 meeting, for example, mentioned high seas fishing, and Jeffrey C. Benson, representing the Nass Native Brotherhood branch, demanded that the government sign a new agreement with Japan, and negotiate with other countries to declare a mid-Pacific sanctuary for salmon.<sup>101</sup> The next year, Hubert Doolan, who was then representing the Nass Native Brotherhood branch, brought a letter written by

96. LAC, RG 23, vol. 1430, file 745-19-2[2], “Skeena Management Meeting at Rupert,” by Jack McPherson, C.B.C. Fishermen’s Broadcast, 6 February 1958.

97. LAC, RG 23, Acc. 83-84/120, vol. 132, file 729-4-3[9], Frank Calder to H.J. Robichaud, 10 November 1964.

98. LAC, RG 23, Acc. 83-84/120, vol. 132, file 729-4-3[9], W.R. Hourston to Deputy Minister, 1 March, 1965.

99. Marchak, “Because Fish Swim,” 157-8.

100. Fisheries Research Board of Canada, *Skeena Salmon Management Committee Annual Report, 1959* (Nanaimo 1960), 5.

101. LAC, RG 23, vol. 1430, file 745-19-2[2], “Skeena Management Meeting at Rupert,” by Jack McPherson, C.B.C. Fishermen’s Broadcast, 6 February 1958.

Calder to the Committee complaining that the Alaskans could fish when the Nass and Skeena Fishery was closed.<sup>102</sup>

As the Committee tightened the regulations, the fishers grew increasingly frustrated by the lack of movement on international fishing. In fact, the Nass and Skeena gillnetters argued that the regulations, far from helping local stocks recover, were only benefiting the international fishery. Williams and Sinclair argued in their 1961 letter that:

a strict measure be taken to protect the Pacific Waters which are the home of all salmon and where they are fully mature before they are naturally prepared to ascend to their spawning grounds; without this protection, Sirs, no government on earth can expect to see that a sufficient supply of fish available for Spawning purposes. We cannot afford to sacrifice ourselves in our own country and suffer hardships under measures while the foreign fishermen enjoy the harvesting of the results of our country's conservation measures.<sup>103</sup>

They claimed the government was obligated to protect the salmon, yet they were failing, and forcing the gillnetters to accept regulations that were severely affecting their ability to continue fishing. Sinclair made this point again in a separate letter, claiming, "we have proven, where the high seas fishermen on all outside Areas are reaping the harvest, and the cream of the country, before the salmon runs enter the Skeena and here we suffer the hardships in the past now five consecutive years."<sup>104</sup> Tomekichi Mio also commented on the Alaskan fishery, saying: "The salmon must come to the Nass and Skeena Rivers from Alaska. I understand that the Alaska fishermen start fishing earlier than we do and their days of fishing [are] longer than ours. So by closing Area 3X and 3Y, we are sacrificing for Alaska fishermen."<sup>105</sup> As well, Frank Calder's 1964 letter to Robichaud included two resolutions on the offshore fishery.<sup>106</sup> Although the international fishery was one of the most contested issues, northern gillnetters would have to wait many years for changes. Senior Fisheries officials were involved in international discussions, but they accomplished little until the 1970s, when Canada declared a 200-mile fishing limit and signed new salmon fishing agreements with the United States.

102. "Nass Fishermen Want More Time for Salmon," *Native Voice*, 13, 3 (March 1959).

103. LAC, RG 23, vol. 1431, file 745-19-2[5], Peter Williams to Department of Fisheries and Skeena Salmon Management Committee, no date but filed with 1961 letters.

104. LAC, RG 23, vol. 1431, file 745-19-2[5], "Kitwanga Resolution" by Harold Sinclair, Kitwanga Band Councillor.

105. LAC, RG 23, vol. 1431, file 745-19-2[5], "Brief to the Skeena Salmon Management Committee" by T. Mio (also signed by M. Hayashi, Y.J. Tanaka, H. Omori, I. Yamamoto, T. Nakanishi).

106. LAC, RG 23, Acc. 83-84/120, vol. 132, file 729-4-3[9], Frank Calder to H.J. Robichaud, 10 November 1964. They asked for an end to mid-Pacific fishing, and for Canada to declare a twelve-mile fishing limit, with the line drawn from headland to headland. For background on the twelve-mile limit, see Wright, *A Fishery for Modern Times*, 128-38. The Canadian government had been trying to declare a new limit drawn from headland to headland, but encountered opposition from the United States for defence reasons.

By the early 1960s, the gillnetters who came to the Committee meetings spoke more forcefully about the economic impact of the regulations, and their growing indebtedness to the companies. Many revealed these frustrations at the 1961 Prince Rupert meeting, telling the Committee the poor fishery the previous year had increased their debts, and they would have difficulty recovering with the proposed two-and-a-half-day fishing weeks.<sup>107</sup> James Gosnell argued that fishing for two and a half days was not economical and that they would rather have a shorter season if it meant having longer fishing weeks.<sup>108</sup> Walter Harris of Kispiox told the committee the regulations affected “the livelihood of our fishermen very seriously” and asked for increased fishing times, as well as more research to investigate the causes of the declines.<sup>109</sup> Williams and Sinclair’s letter highlighted the huge debts they had incurred, saying they could not tolerate the economic strain much longer:

And furthermore, Sirs, due to the restrictive measures referred to above, the Indian Fishermen still owe the Fishing companies thousands upon thousands of dollars in 1959 and 1960. Therefore, Sirs, unless the Fishery Department allow the Indians to fish and produce adequate amount of fish this year, 1961, there will be a three storey building of indebtedness this year, and the situation, which is already calamitous, will reach the end of the Indian endurance. This is the kind of situation that causes trouble or even wars on the face of the earth.<sup>110</sup>

Harold Sinclair, who claimed fishers’ debts ranged between \$2000 and \$11,000, had written a letter during the 1960 fishing season asking the Department for financial aid for fishers in debt, but was told there was no precedent for such a program.<sup>111</sup> Williams and Sinclair also noted that they still had to pay the canneries the full rental fees, no matter how many days they fished. Clearly, anxiety and anger about the poor fishery, rising costs and debts, and the continued failure of the regulations to bring improvements, were increasing.

By 1965, Peter Williams was clearly growing impatient with the Skeena Salmon Management Committee. That year, fishers throughout British Columbia were experiencing a very poor fishery and some were asking the

107. LAC, RG 23, vol. 1431, file 745-19-2[5], “Summary of a public meeting of the Skeena Salmon Management Committee with its Advisory Board, Prince Rupert, January 25, 1961.”

108. LAC, RG 23, vol. 1431, file 745-19-2[5], “Summary of a public meeting of the Skeena Salmon Management Committee with its Advisory Board, Prince Rupert, January 25, 1961.”

109. LAC, RG 23, vol. 1431, file 745-19-2[5], Petition from the Northern Interior Branch of the Native Brotherhood of British Columbia, submitted by Walter Harris, Northern Interior District Vice-President, 25 January 1961.

110. LAC, RG 23, vol. 1431, file 745-19-2[5], Peter Williams, President Kitwancool Skeena River Indian Fishermen and Native Brotherhood Branch to Department of Fisheries and Skeena Salmon Management Committee, no date but filed with 1961 letters (also signed by Harold Sinclair).

111. LAC, RG 23, vol. 1431, file 745-19-2[4], Harold Sinclair to Chief Supervisor of Fisheries, 5 July 1960.

government to provide relief.<sup>112</sup> The Committee initially limited July fishing to one and a half days each week, but later reduced it to one. They allowed two-day weeks in August, but later closed the fishery for an extra fourteen days when the pink run was smaller than expected. Williams sent a resolution to the Minister of Fisheries, asking the government to compensate them for income losses caused by the restrictions and the poor fishing season.<sup>113</sup> Remarking on their experiences with the regulations over the years, he claimed “we are in a general frustration although we have repeatedly inform[ed] the Fisheries Department of this great frustrative situation.”<sup>114</sup> He continued, describing the difficulties their ancestors had when they first took part in the industrial fishery, and the difficulties they, their descendants, were facing: “we dedicated ourselves to humility, like our forefathers did when they started building this fishing industry suffering unbearable hardships... but in 1965 A.D. we are suffering exceedingly when our right to fish was taken away.”<sup>115</sup> Williams continued to attend meetings and submit briefs to the Committee until at least 1969.<sup>116</sup> Neil Sterritt *et al.* claim that Williams “spent nearly his entire life in a dignified and single-minded quest for a just settlement of the Gitanyow land claim.”<sup>117</sup> The effort he put into petitioning the Committee suggests that working for his community’s right to take part in the industrial fishery was also something he took seriously.

The executive of the Native Brotherhood also pressed for more support for natives in the industrial fishery. Members of this organization spoke about the impact of changes in the fishery on natives at the federal government’s special Joint Committee of the Senate and House of Commons on Indian Affairs in 1959–1961.<sup>118</sup> The representatives, including President Guy Williams and

112. “Special Jobless Aid for B.C. Fishermen,” *Native Voice*, 19, 12 (December 1965). The federal government eventually decided to offer small compensation packages to British Columbia fishers.

113. LAC, RG 23, Acc. 83–84/120, vol. 132, file 729–4–3[9], “Resolution presented to the Native Brotherhood of British Columbia convention held in Prince Rupert, B.C., November 26–27, 1965,” by Kitwancool Native Brotherhood Branch, Peter Williams, President.

114. LAC, RG 23, Acc. 83–84/120, box 132, file 729–4–3[9], “Resolution presented to the Native Brotherhood of British Columbia convention held in Prince Rupert, B.C., November 26–27, 1965,” by Kitwancool Native Brotherhood Branch, Peter Williams, President.

115. LAC, RG 23, Acc. 83–84/120, box 132, file 729–4–3[9], “Resolution presented to the Native Brotherhood of British Columbia convention held in Prince Rupert, B.C., November 26–27, 1965” by Kitwancool Native Brotherhood Branch, Peter Williams, President.

116. LAC, RG 23, Acc. 83–84/120, vol. 132, file 729–4–3[11], W.R. Hourston to Jack Davis, 19 August 1969.

117. LAC, RG 23, Acc. 83–84/120, vol. 132, file 729–4–3[11], W.R. Hourston to Jack Davis, 19 August 1969.

118. The Native Brotherhood had also presented at a similar Joint Committee on the Indian Act in 1947.

Peter Kelly told the Committee native fishers desperately needed access to loans.<sup>119</sup> Kelly claimed Indian Affairs' Revolving Fund, which gave a few loans to native fishers, was inadequate, and the 25 per cent down payment too much for people who earned less than \$3000 a year.<sup>120</sup> In a 1960 *Native Voice* article, Williams repeated these demands that Indian Affairs intervene to help Aboriginal people hurt by high fishing costs and the Department of Fisheries' weekly closures.<sup>121</sup> Noting the changes in the fishery, he claimed:

Many Native fishermen are now beached because of the high cost of boats, running into the thousands of dollars in one season. Conservation measures restricting fishing to 3 or 4 days a week have made it difficult for fishermen to operate. The different mesh requirements for local areas make it virtually impossible for a fisherman to have gear for the entire coast fishing operation. Yet Native highline fishermen take second place to none in the yearly catch. The Department of Indian Affairs must act at the highest level to protect interests of Indian fishermen.<sup>122</sup>

The Native Brotherhood was also pushing for settlements on territorial waters and international fishing.<sup>123</sup> None of these efforts, however, had much impact, as the Davis Plan, followed by closures of most of the Skeena canneries in the late 1960s, put an end to the careers of many northern gillnetters. For those who remained in the fishery, increasingly abbreviated fishing times became a permanent feature of their working lives.

While the Davis Plan undoubtedly contributed to many native fishers losing access to the fishery, this paper suggests that we need to look more carefully at gillnetters' encounters with earlier state regulations. The Department of Fisheries regulations, along with structural and technological changes in the industry, were clearly affecting Aboriginal fishers. They were reminded of this weekly, as they sat in their boats, waiting for word they could start fishing. With their smaller vessels and high degree of dependence on the canneries, losing so many fishing days threatened to push them further to the economic margins. For the native fishers who had fewer options in getting loans, this intersection of state regulations and the capital intensive trends in the fishery had ominous implications. In response, Aboriginal people organized, wrote letters and attended Skeena Salmon Management Committee

119. Guy Williams, a seine fisher from the Haisla community of Kitimat, was appointed to the Canadian senate in the early 1970s. Peter Kelly, a Haida from Skidegate, was a clergyman and had been active in the land claims movement since the early 20th century.

120. Canada, Joint Committee of the Senate and the House of Commons on Indian Affairs. *Minutes of Proceedings and Evidence*, Friday, July 3, 1959 (Ottawa 1959), 173. In 1958–9, the Revolving Fund provided \$64,072.70 in loans to native fishers (average \$2288 per loan). At the time, fully-equipped gillnetters cost between \$5,000 and \$10,000.

121. Guy Williams, "This Was the BC Fishing Industry," *Native Voice*, Special Edition (1960).

122. Guy Williams, "This Was the BC Fishing Industry," *Native Voice*, Special Edition (1960).

123. "Centennial, Salmon Problems Take Williams to Ottawa," *Native Voice*, 20, 4 (April 1966); "Williams in Seattle Over Salmon Issue," *Native Voice*, 20, 6 (June 1966).

meetings, fighting to stay in an industry they had been part of for generations. Many questions remain, however, about the ways that Aboriginal fishers and their families reacted to the changes, including shifting to other species or resources and finding outside employment. While many struggled, some were able to invest in new vessels and equipment to give them the greater flexibility that being in the new fishery required. Further examinations of the relationships between Aboriginal fishing families, the companies, federal officials, and the various (and sometimes contradictory) federal policies will provide a more precise understanding of the factors affecting native people's abilities to continue making a living by fishing.

We also gain some insights into native and labour history, as the letters and statements the native fishers made at the Committee meetings suggest the importance of understanding the connections between Aboriginal struggles with both colonialism and capitalism. Many of the leaders were protesting as Aboriginal people, led by those deeply committed to asserting their rights as indigenous peoples, such as Frank Calder, Peter Williams, Harold Sinclair, and others. At the same time, however, these protestors had a long history of engagement in labour organizations and activism in the fishery, and their complaints were shaped by their experiences in the industrial structure. Specifically, they identified as gillnetters, small-boat fishers in an age when those with the ability to invest in larger vessels and equipment had a distinct advantage.<sup>124</sup> Whether it was the timing of the opening and closing dates in relation to neighbouring areas, or the "open access" policies that allowed larger vessels from other regions to fish on the Skeena, the native gillnetters' complaints suggest they felt state officials were failing to recognize the ways the regulations hurt the smaller craft. Moreover, they grew increasingly resentful about having to follow the regulations when the international fishery as well as local trollers remained unregulated. In these ways, their accusations were similar to those of the local non-native gillnetters. Taken together, these protests had a limited success, as the Skeena Salmon Management Committee, needing to secure fishers' co-operation for the regulations, made some concessions regarding opening dates and the heated boundary issue. Fishers had less success, however, in getting state support for dealing with the structural and technological changes in the fishery that were giving significant advantages to those with larger, more mobile boats, both domestically and internationally, a situation exacerbated by the 1968 Davis Plan.

124. Peter H. Pearce, *Commission on Pacific Fisheries Policy, Proceedings, Volume 23, Campbell River, June 12 1981*, 7977–80 (Ottawa 1981). Decades later, Joe Gosnell (brother of James), who would lead negotiations for the Nisga'a land claim in the 1990s, spoke about the problems of gillnetters: "I've been gillnetting for over forty years, and I see the gillnetter, he's dying a slow death, there's no question about it. Not only Indians, but the gillnet fleet as a whole ... That's why we say to the Department of Fisheries, if it's going to be your policy that there shall be no more gillnetters, by God, you'd better make it clear now. And then we'll all become seiners, you know."



Finally, these complaints and protests also give us insights into the growing frustration and anger that northern Aboriginal fishers were experiencing with the state at a time when they were finding their political voices. Peter Williams reminded us the native fishers of the Skeena had built “the Great Lucrative Fishing Industry.” Indeed, they had, and it may be useful to think about how being part of the industrial fishery and the problems they experienced were also motivating native people to push for larger rights in this period. The fishery was the main occupation for native men and women in this northern district, and losing access to it had serious implications for the future economic and social survival of their communities. The fact that year after year, native fishers wrote letters and showed up at the Skeena Salmon Management Committee meetings trying to convince them to make the regulations less harsh suggests the enormity of this issue in the lives of native people. The more we learn about these localized but common work-centred conflicts of Aboriginal peoples of the Pacific coast in the post-World War II years, the better understanding we will have of how they were negotiating their way through both the capitalist and colonial legacies. It will also provide insights into what motivated them to organize and act.

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