heiltsuk tribal council

HISTORIC JOINT MANAGEMENT AGREEMENT MARRED BY CONFLICT

Heiltsuk, commercial fishermen work together to overcome challenges with DFO

For Immediate Release
March 27, 2016

Following decades of tension, Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) appeared to be turning over a new leaf when they signed the final component of the *2016 Heiltsuk-DFO Herring Joint Management Plan* with the Heiltsuk Nation earlier this week.

"In drafting this plan, the DFO staff has proven they can work successfully with us as we strive to protect our lands, waters, and resources," said Chief Councillor Marilyn Slett. "The transparency and collaboration this has brought to the coast is unprecedented, but it has not come easily."

The plan sees DFO acquiescing to a number of Heiltsuk priorities – including prohibiting a night fishery, no setting on schools smaller than 1,000 tons, and more – but every step of the way proved to be a struggle. At the centre of the debate was whether or not the herring stocks had returned in sufficient quantities to handle a harvest this year.

"The management plan we signed, the goodwill between our groups, and what we thought was a shared conservation agenda led us to believe that closing the fishery was always a possibility if there were concerns about the number of fish that actually showed up," said Heiltsuk Integrated Resource Management Department Director Kelly Brown. "This week when we raised those concerns, industry proved to be more willing to consider closing the fishery than DFO."

Friday, after meetings with DFO reached an impasse, the Heiltsuk Nation worked with the commercial fishermen late into the night to reach a compromise. When the commercial fleet agreed to verify sufficient quantities of fish were in the area before dropping their nets, and the Kitasoo/Xai'Xais Nation gave their blessing, the Heiltsuk informed DFO that they would approve an opening of a partial seine fishery. On Saturday, commercial fishermen were permitted to catch up to 107 tons of herring from East Higgins, half of their total allotment. After soundings showed sufficient biomass in the area, Heiltsuk and Kitasoo/Xai'Xais authorized the fishery to remain open for the remainder of the 215 ton quota.

Joshua Duncan, skipper of the *Western King*, was present at the meeting on Friday. As a commercial fisherman who has grown tired of DFO opening fisheries where there are no

fish to catch, and as a member of the Wei Wai Kum Nation whose herring fishery has been virtually extinguished, he understands what is at stake and welcomes the joint-management between DFO and the Heiltsuk.

"This is the beginning of change in an industry overall," he said after emerging from negotiations on Friday. "The Heiltsuk people have listened to their hereditary chiefs' direction to protect and improve their habitat and stocks that fostered their livelihood and way of life. I look forward to continuing to work as a native fisherman and commercial fisherman on relationships with the Heiltsuk First Nation and other First Nations in B.C. for long term sustainability."

"This has not been an easy process, but we are committed to making sure DFO fulfills its mandate to achieve joint management and to exercise the precautionary principle," said Brown. "We've learned a lot from this last year of negotiations. It's been trying at times, but we are still confident these joint management agreements can and should be expanded to fisheries up and down the coast."

With the commercial seine fishery complete, all eyes are on the herring roe spawn on kelp (SOK) and traditional priority fisheries and whether or not they will be able to attain their quotas.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Marilyn Slett
Chief Councillor, Heiltsuk Tribal Council
250-957-7721
mslett@heiltsuknation.ca