

# **Visions In Shared Management Workshop Presentation**

## **Gitxsan Fisheries Skeena River Experience**

**By Vince Jackson Past, Present, Future**

This document is intended to help our neighbors understand some of the thinking that went into developing a fishery program that reflects our traditional values and principles, utilizes our ancient fishing methodology of past fisheries, explores and develops present modern technologies and works toward a sustainable future in fisheries management and shared stewardship on the Skeena River.

### **The Past**

For Thousands of years the Gitxsan have lived on the banks of the X'san, or Skeena River, utilizing what the great nature had provided. Our existence was based on all of the renewable resources our creator had provided for our use. In return it was our duty to protect these resources and not abuse them. Many legends are recounted of people within the nation who abused nature and as a result were punished by the creator so that the next generation would not make the same mistakes. These legends we call Adawak which means frozen in time.

Our people are known as the salmon people because we depended primarily on salmon as our mainstay. As a result many different fishing techniques were employed by our people such as the t'in/ weirs, benna/ dip net, moohl/ trap, hlamgan/ trap, anyusxwl fence, anyum/ spear. These are the main techniques used by our people but each site would require the specific modifications to suit the area in which the methodology was implored.

These tools were very effective in harvesting salmon and generally used on the tributaries that flowed into the X'san, Skeena River. Put into the paths of migrating salmon each village would harvest enough fish for food, trade and ceremonial needs and let the rest return to spawn. There was no shortage of salmon and the Gitxsan villages worked collectively as a community so that all the needs of the people were met.

From our elder we learn deeply rooted values of respect for all of nature and principles of how to govern ourselves so that we the generation of today might set an example of how we are to survive in the future.

### **The Present**

Our fishery has always been based on selectivity using traps, weirs and dip nets but an amendment to the fisheries act called the Barricade Agreement 1906 would change our way of life for ever. This agreement forced our people to organize a political front to deal with the fundamental aboriginal rights issues that face our people on the land and water.

Many confrontations with Government and industry took place as a result of the infringement on our aboriginal right to the resources within our territories. We can recount many blockades on the land and the fish wars that would force the Government to the table to start negotiating a treaty that would benefit all parties involved.

Alliances on the Skeena drainage between the Tsim'sean, Gitanyow, Gitxsan, Wet'suwet'en and the Lake Babine Nation were formed to identify common issues and develop a strategy to address them on a united front This alliance would be called the Skeena Fisheries Commission (SFC). This umbrella organization represents the aboriginal interests and rights to the resource in the Skeena

Watershed and is based on respect, the application of traditional law and on the strict conservation of the resource base.

From the work of the SFC Individual first nations entered into a series of agreements with the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) called the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy (AFS), regarding management and enforcement. Most notably are the Interim measures, Contribution and the Conservation and Protection Agreements which provides for co-operative interaction between federal and aboriginal interests in relation to resource management, enforcement and financial accountability for the whole Skeena Drainage.

This capacity has taken time to build. Fisheries Technician programs were first delivered within the communities starting in 1983. Some of those graduates of these earlier programs occupy senior management responsibilities within our nations. In fact the vast majority of resource management jobs within the SFC First Nations, both technical and administrative, are held by people from our own communities.

Resource management capacity is only one positive aspect of the AFS. Other aspects include the general popularity of the terminal sale fishery. The terminal fishery literally employs hundreds of people in a local setting. It generates acutely needed cash for local village economies and adds greatly to peoples sense of themselves and control over their lives. More then 500 direct jobs are created in the Gitxsan Nation alone by the operation of the inland fishery.

The development of workable relationships is a good example of managed change. Both DFO and the SFC first Nations recognized the inevitability of change and went about meeting the challenge pro actively. The Gitxsan Watershed Authorities administers a number of programs and is constantly developing the capacity to effectively employ more of our people through training and is successfully acquiring funds from the various agencies who would normally tender fisheries related work out to consultants.

## **The Future**

We know that the Excess to Salmon Spawning Requirement Fishery is a collective right and is intended to create and economic opportunity for our people. We know that the licence for the ESSR is issued to the GWA on behalf of the Gitxsan people so we have to protect this collective right by developing guidelines and policies that represent our interests as a nation not as an individual.

We also know that by developing these policies they make us accountable to each other and therefore by signing the participation agreement we acknowledge our accountability and protect our collective interests as a nation.

This year the GWA worked with the fishermen to develop twenty nine fishing policies that our people could work with, they were adopted and most of them were followed.

Our gear development program is constantly exploring new and innovative ways to increase our capacity to selectively catch fish. We know that we can harvest as many fish as are allocated to the Gitxsan so our focus has shifted from catch ability to market ability.

The roll of management of the inland fishery is one of exploring and educating our fishers as to the various avenues we can explore when we talk about value added opportunities. Facilitating workshops to help our people to understand product flow and food safety requirements to help in assisting us to make informed decisions and alleviate some of the stress on senior management.

The focus of the GWA is to develop a democratic structure that ensures the participation of all Gitxsan houses and their members. A working committee will be in place to guide the inland fisheries through capacity building, marketing, accounting and policy implementation. This

committee will represent the people and assist management in developing a sound business and inland fisheries management plan for 2001 and the future.

We know from past experiences that plans and policies constantly change to suit the needs of the people that work within that structure. Co-operation and solidarity regarding the conservation of the resource base is what we must accomplish. Managing the change needed to get to this is the reality that we find ourselves facing.

Managing change will take different forms in different regions. The GWA encourages all regions to strive toward developing dynamic processes that address circumstances of their own area. The example in the Skeena is an example of one approach. It can offer ideas as to what approaches have worked in such environments, as the Skeena process learned from those which came before it.

Nothing is ever satisfactory to all observers, but trying and achieving relative success is positive. It is a positive use of people's energy and is beneficial to the resource base.