

Declining fish stocks

ABORIGINAL CRISIS

'More than the loss of a resource'

In few places has there been as dramatic a collapse of eulachon as in B.C.'s Bella Coola Valley, where it has been culturally devastating



MARK HUME

mhume@globeandmail.com

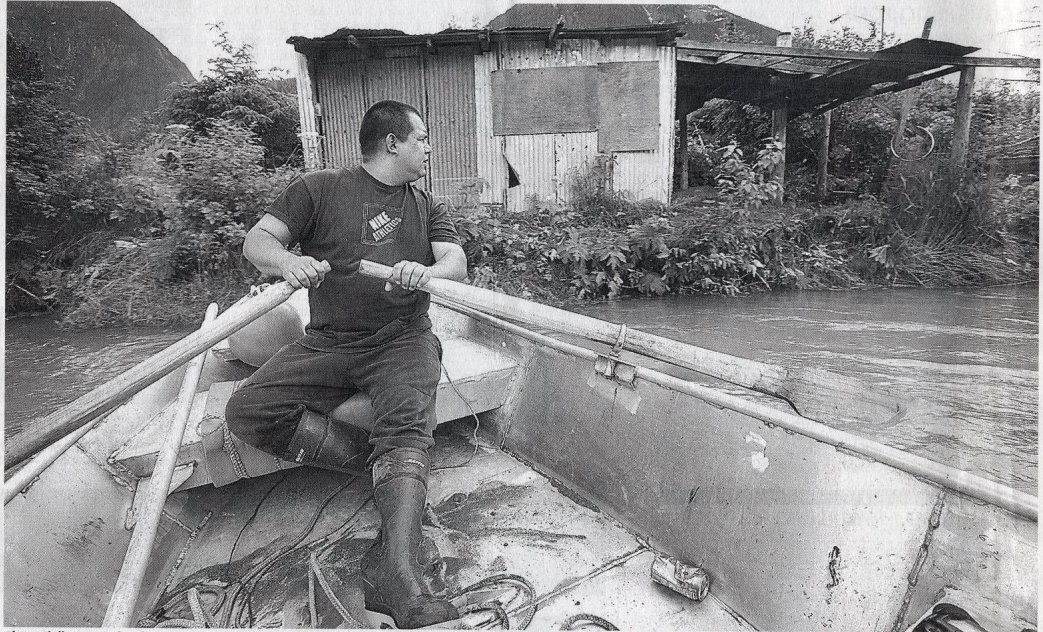
BELLA COOLA, B.C.

When the Nuxalk band gathers on the banks of the Bella Coola River, it is usually to celebrate the blessings of nature. But this spring, instead of singing to welcome back the salmon or casting eagle feathers on the water in thanks, tribes from the central coast of British Columbia gathered to hold a Feast of Shame and discuss a growing crisis.

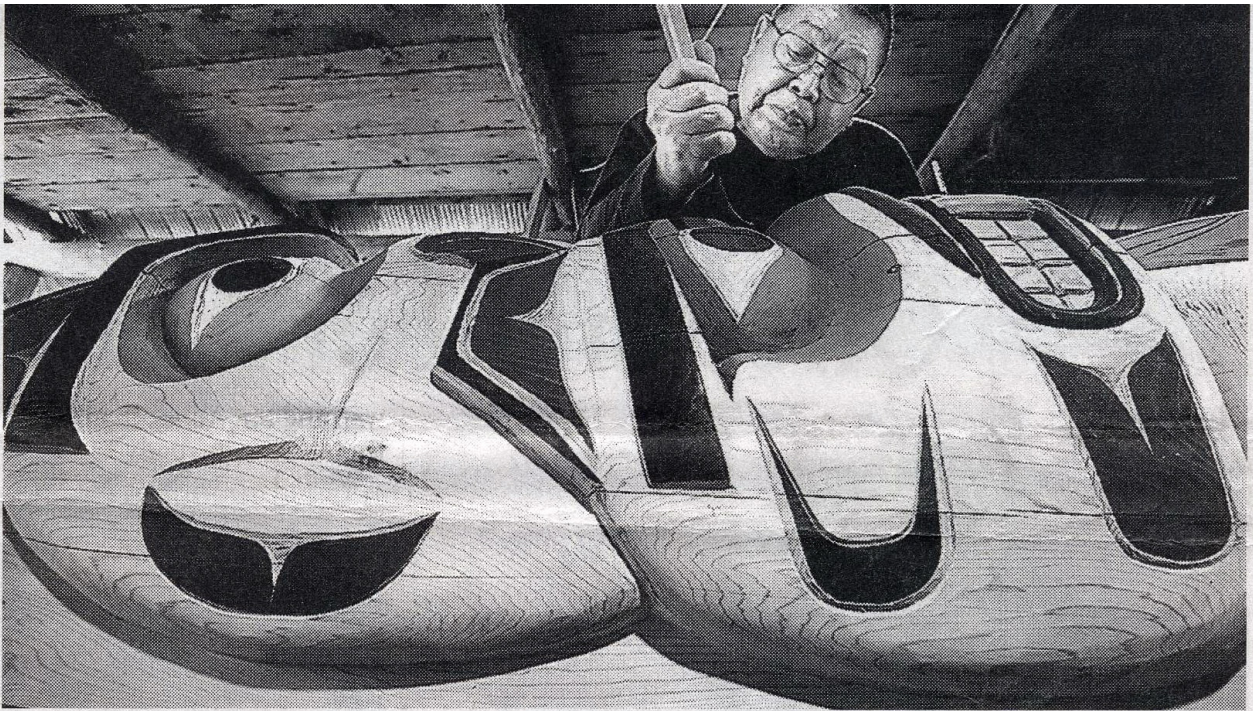
At the gathering, elders from 10 B.C. bands, including the Nuxalk (pronounced new-hawk), Kitasoo, Oweekeno and Haisla, spoke with anger and sadness about the loss of a small, herring-like fish, known as eulachon, that until recently returned in such numbers they turned the river black.

In 1995, when the last big run came in, there were millions of eulachon, so many they spilled out onto the gravel bars in writhing waves. Since then, the river has been nearly empty of fish.

"Every year we wait. Every year the seals, the sea gulls, the ducks, the swans, the geese, they sit along the river waiting."



Glenn Clellaman makes his way down the Bella Coola River in northern B.C. with an old eulachon sink house in the background last week. JOHN LEHMANN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL



Silyas Gallert works on a totem pole in his studio on the Nuxalk reserve in Bella Coola last week. About 700 Nuxalk live in Bella Coola, where they still rely on fishing and hunting. JOHN LEHMANN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

A EULACHON PRIMER



THE FISH

The eulachon is a small species of smelt that spawns in the lower reaches of coastal rivers from northern California to Alaska. Immediately after spawning, eulachon return to the sea.

When the eggs hatch, the tiny eulachon larvae are immediately washed downstream. It is believed they rear in the estuary before migrating to the open Pacific. They return to spawn after three years.

THE RUNS

In British Columbia, eulachon have spawned in 33 different rivers, but have regular runs in only 13. They favour rivers that drain glaciers or snowpacks and that have spring freshets.

Nearly all eulachon runs have declined over the past 20 years, especially from the mid-1990s. In B.C., stocks have crashed in the Fraser, Bella Coola, Stikine, Skeena, Kitimat, Kitlope and other rivers. Only the Nass River, on the north coast, maintains near-normal runs.

The Fraser River had the largest run in B.C., which supported a commercial fishery from the

1870s until 1997, when it was closed over conservation concerns. The Fraser run has been in decline since 1994.

The Columbia River, in Oregon, had the world's largest eulachon run, but it declined in 1993.

THE OIL

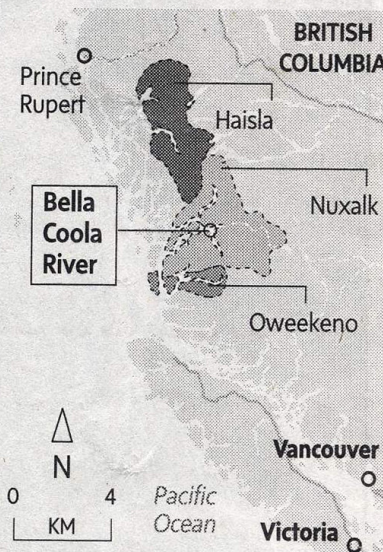
Eulachon are nearly 20 per cent oil by weight, so rich in content that a dried fish can be lit, earning them the common name "candle fish." A three-step process is used to extract the oil from eulachon.

In the first stage, the fish are stored in "stink boxes," where they are left to decompose for one to two weeks. After that, they are transferred to small cooking pots where they are slowly heated. After simmering several hours, the contents are stirred to further break down the flesh of the fish.

When a layer of thick grease forms on the surface, it is skimmed off and processed in a third step, in which it is boiled, repeatedly skimmed and then passed through a fine filter. Traditionally, natives filtered the oil through cedar baskets and stored it in wooden boxes.

» Text: Mark Hume; photo: John Lehmann/The Globe and Mail

NUXALK NOTES



CARRIE COCKBURN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

The Nuxalk, who live in the coastal town of Bella Coola, B.C., are drawn from a collection of several smaller coastal villages that were amalgamated in the 1920s.

When Alexander Mackenzie, the first European to cross North America overland, arrived in 1793, he found a rich, powerful Nuxalk (pronounced new-hawk) community near the mouth of the Bella Coola River. It was the biggest native settlement he'd encountered and he named it Great Village.

Today, about 700 Nuxalk live in Bella Coola, where they still rely heavily on fishing and hunting. The Nuxalk are not engaged in the treaty process in British Columbia, arguing instead that they remain a sovereign nation with their own traditional religion, language, land base and laws.

They speak a Coast Salish dialect known as Bella Coola and follow cultural traditions that have been passed down through generations.

Among the feasts they still practise are the potlatch, an event in which clans demonstrate their wealth by holding feasts at which they give away most of their possessions.

» Mark Hume