

Herring-egg harvest angers B.C. natives

Feb 28, 2004 Globe and Mail Newspaper

Mark Hume

Vancouver - Each spring, the herring come flooding into sheltered bays along the West Coast to deposit globs of glistening, golden eggs worth about \$35-million a year on the Asian market.

But this year on British Columbia's central coast, the fleet of commercial herring boats gathering for the harvest may be blockaded by hundreds of angry natives who feel a natural resource is being stripped from their region while communities languish in poverty.

"Who knows, maybe this province and country will soon see scenes on national TV of what took place with our brothers from Burnt Church on the East Coast. These stocks mean that much to us. Our way of life is at stake here," said Reg Moody of the Heiltsuk Nation in Bella Bella.

Mr. Moody said people are sick and tired of watching commercial boats from outside haul away a fortune in herring eggs each year without benefiting the community, where the unemployment rate is often 90 per cent and up to 70 per cent of the working-age population is on social assistance.

"The poverty is bad here. It's real. A lot of people who are on social assistance have trouble even getting gas to go fishing [for food]. You get three or four guys pooling up so they can get enough gas to go some place where they can catch a halibut. I see that on a regular basis," said Mr. Moody, who is helping to co-ordinate a protest against the herring boats. "It's hard to just sit here and watch your resources hauled away while there are so many unemployed and so many living below the poverty line."

About 30 commercial herring boats from around the West Coast are expected to gather in the Bella Coola region over the next few weeks to await openings by the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans. The central coast fishery is one of five areas where herring are harvested in B.C. The areas open at different times in the spring, depending on when the herring eggs ripen. In the past, up to 100 boats have participated in the fishery.

The herring boats have commercial licences, which are expensive, and beyond the means of Heiltsuk fishermen.

When the open signal comes, the boats rush in to net thousands of tonnes of the herring, in what is known as a roe fishery. The object is not the fish themselves, but their sacs of rich eggs, or roe, considered a delicacy in Japan.

Also waiting for the herring are fishermen who have what is called a spawn-on-kelp (or SOK) fishery, in which fronds of seaweed are strung in spawning areas. In a spawn-on-kelp operation, the herring are allowed to lay their sticky eggs on the seaweed and then swim away. The kelp is hauled out and the eggs are processed for market.

The spawn-on-kelp fishery is mostly made up of native fishermen, who hold 36 of 46 licences coast-wide. The Heiltsuk, who have nine licences to harvest spawn on kelp, can trace the practice to before European contact on the West Coast, when egg-covered hemlock branches were collected and traded among tribes. A

1996 Supreme Court of Canada case confirmed the Heiltsuk's traditional right to sell spawn on kelp.

But Mr. Moody said the roe-herring fishery, in which the spawning fish must be killed to extract the eggs, is taking too big a share of the catch, depriving the Heiltsuk of opportunities to conduct their harvest. "Our commercial right to harvest SOK within our traditional territory is one of the few economic development options we have." Although we make up 55 per cent of the central coast population, our herring allocation represents approximately 9 per cent of the harvested resource value. The remaining 90 per cent of the allocated herring resources (worth an estimated \$155-million since 1996) cct with these brackets - it's the source speaking, not the reporter are exported, without benefit to the Heiltsuk," Mr. Moody said.

He said the Heiltsuk have been calling on Fisheries and Oceans Canada to double their spawn-on-kelp quota to 1,043 tonnes from 525 tonnes. That would mean taking an equivalent amount away from the roe-herring boats, which this year on the central coast can catch about 2,000 tonnes.

Mr. Moody said that after years of fruitless negotiations, the Heiltsuk and a neighbouring band - with the backing of 15 other tribes coast-wide - have decided to try blocking the commercial fishery.

"To protect the future of the central coast region, the Heiltsuk and Kitsoo Xaixas Nations have been instructed by their people not to allow a seine or gillnet sac-roe fishery in their traditional territories for the 2004 season," Mr. Moody said in a statement. The bands have declared that all herring fishing grounds traditionally used by natives on the central coast are closed to the commercial fleet. While that would leave some areas open, key areas, like Spiller Channel, would be "closed." "We have no recourse. The two [First] Nations will take all necessary steps available to them to resolve these issues," Mr. Moody said. He would not say exactly what type of action is being planned, but said 200 to 300 native protesters would probably be involved.

Gord McEachen, Fisheries and Oceans chief of conservation management for the central coast, said the government hopes a confrontation can be avoided.

If there is a protest, he said the government will see that commercial boats can fish.

He didn't want to speculate on what native protesters might do, or how the department might respond. "They plan to do something on the grounds ... [but] I'm not sure how you blockade when you're in the open ocean," he said. "We've met with the Heiltsuk repeatedly. We're still in discussion with them ... we'll see if it can be averted or not."

Ed Safarik, president of Ocean Fisheries Ltd., said the confrontation boils down to a tough question of sharing a limited resource. He said he doesn't doubt the Heiltsuk have pressing economic needs, but so do others. "All the users of that resource need the money. It's a tough business right now," he said.

Mr. Safarik said Fisheries and Oceans is doing the best it can under difficult circumstances.

The situation appears to be coming to a head. A statement being prepared for release by the Heiltsuk and Kitsoo says about 200 kilometres of coastline will be declared "no-fish zones for the commercial herring sac-roe fishery for 2004."