

## The west coast — land of the salmon people

For longer than history records, fish and fishing have been important in the lives of people residing on the northwest coast of North America. For the native peoples who lived in the region now called British Columbia, the salmon in particular was not only the most important single item of food but the centrepiece of a culture — so much so that they called themselves “the salmon people”.

Early in the nineteenth century, European settlement reached the Pacific coast of Canada and a commercial fishery began. The first fish exports from B.C. (salted salmon) were made in 1830 and the first salmon cannery began operations in 1870.

Comprising commercial, native and recreational fisheries, the Pacific fishery of Canada is as different from the Atlantic as its geographic base. The commercial fishery produces only about 10 per cent of the total volume of fish harvested in Canada, but it accounts for 30 per cent of the total value.

Today, as in the past, salmon is supreme. There are five Pacific species: chum, chinook, coho, pink and sockeye. Pacific salmon are the main source of animal protein for many native communities throughout the province. They are also the mainstay of the commercial fishery and the centrepiece of a rich recreational fishing industry. In 1983, landings of salmon were 71 000 tonnes valued at \$104 million. About 75 per cent of the total was exported.

The wild salmon stocks (i.e. those not raised in hatcheries) of B.C. begin and end their lives in thousands of streams and rivers, some reaching nearly 1 600 kilometres inland. In between, they spend much of their lives at sea. In this century they have come under pressure in both phases. Overfishing, on the high seas and also in Canadian and US waters, cut deeply into the stocks. Meanwhile, industrial development undercut salmon habitats in B.C., destroying many spawning beds and blocking many pathways to the sea.

At the United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea, Canada responded to the problem of overfishing in the ocean by leading a drive for a special “salmon article” banning high-seas fishing of salmon, which was incorporated into the final convention. In 1985, after 15 years of negotiation, Canada and the United States signed the International Pacific Salmon Treaty which addresses the problem of salmon interceptions by both nations. Under its terms, Canada and the US agree to share the burden of rebuilding and conserving overfished stocks.