

The Washington State Experience

Unlike the Native people of British Columbia most Washington Natives have treaty-protected rights to resources. Nevertheless, parallel historical developments in Washington State led to the near total exclusion of Native people from participation in the fishing industry. As the Washington State fishery became increasingly capital intensive and as labour of other ethnicities came to replace Native labour the Native people attempted to assert treaty rights to fish. The policy of the federal government at the time, however, discouraged activities deemed "traditional" and instead pressured Native people to pursue farming as a means to bring about assimilation into the dominant society. Nevertheless the Native people held to the contention that treaties gave them assured rights to fish but the State of Washington consistently refused to recognize Native fishing rights. In the early 1900s the Coast Salish of Washington State came to be restricted to fishing on their reservations and even this activity was suppressed by the state and federal governments. By 1935 the total salmon harvest by Native fishers accounted for less than 3 percent of the total in Washington State. For a short period of time during World War II and for a few years after the Native people enjoyed a short reincorporation into the fishing industry. Then in the 1950s the increasing technological changes and increasing participation by non-Natives led to the exclusion of Native fishers from the industry. This has been attributed to general discrimination and an inability of Native people to access capital, for example, Native property is held in trust by the federal government and cannot be used as collateral and lending institutions will generally not make loans to Native people (Boxberger 1989). In the 1960s Native people began to question the manner in which the fishery had