

This displacement was caused by the consolidation of the canning industry and the adoption of more capital intensive fishing technology. From 1950 to 1980 the number of Native-owned vessels fell by two-thirds. The number of Native people employed as crew and cannery workers also dropped. This decline in participation in the fishing industry was a severe economic blow to the Native communities. By 1980 Native fishers accounted for just 15 percent of the salmon fleet and most of the Native vessels were leased from the canneries. The Native people perceived the attrition of their participation in the fishery as the most serious threat to their economic well-being. Several organizations developed in the attempt to reverse this trend, such as the Indian Fisherman's Assistance Program and the Indian Fisherman's Development Board. Since most British Columbia Natives never formally negotiated treaties with the Canadian government it has long been the contention of Native bands and political organizations that aboriginal rights to resources remain. The Constitution Act of 1982 has marked an important turning point for Native people in British Columbia. Although British Columbia Natives have a long history of political activism designed to clarify aboriginal rights to land and resources (Fisher 1977; Tennant 1990) their efforts have generally been thwarted by the province until recently. Native fishing rights were tested in the 1980s by several court cases, the most important of which was the Sparrow case. Ronald Sparrow, a member of the Musqueam band near the mouth of the Fraser River, was arrested in 1984 for using a net longer than allowed by the Fisheries Act. As early as 1868 the Fisheries Act has regulated the Native food fishery in British Columbia and this case was one of the first to question whether the Native fishery was an existing aboriginal right or whether the aboriginal right to fish was extinguished by the Fisheries