First Nations Fisheries Council of British Columbia

More Than Food

The Vital Role that Wild Salmon Play in First Nations Wellbeing

2025

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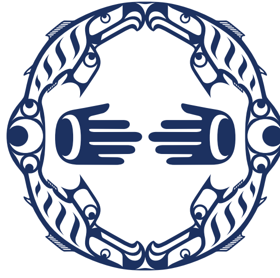

ABOUT THE FIRST NATIONS FISHERIES COUNCIL OF BC

Through the *BC First Nations Fisheries Action Plan*, First Nations in British Columbia (BC) have directed the First Nations Fisheries Council of BC (FNFC) to support them in protecting, reconciling, and advancing their Aboriginal Title, Rights and Treaty Rights as they relate to fisheries and the health and protection of aquatic resources. FNFC's priorities are to develop effective governance mechanisms, form collaborative relationships among First Nations organizations, and work together to build a cohesive voice on fisheries and other aquatic resource matters.

FNFC is not a rights- and title-holding organization. FNFC's role is to provide information and resources, and support First Nations' positions where their collective interests align.

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A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR:

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I am truly grateful for the opportunity to glimpse into your world and rich history. This project has not only introduced me to a remarkable community but has also revealed a beautiful way of life that stretches back to time immemorial. Your vulnerability and generosity have deeply enriched this work and my own understanding. Much like the Salmon, I marvel at your resiliency and ability to continue swimming. – *Analiese*

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INTRODUCTION

More than 70% of salmon populations are now below their long-term average across the 41 combinations of regions and species assessed, signaling a profound ecological crisis (PSF, 2025). Salmon have long been more than just a food source for First Nations (FN) communities across what is now known as British Columbia (BC). They are fundamental to FN identity, culture, governance, and intergenerational knowledge systems (Reid et al., 2022). For thousands of years, wild Pacific salmon have shaped the physical, spiritual, and ecological landscapes of FN territories, serving as a cornerstone of lifeways that emphasize interconnectedness with the land and waters (PSF, 2025; NCCIH, 2022).

Salmon carry more than nutrients from the ocean to inland ecosystems, they bring stories, family ties, ceremonies, and responsibilities that define FN cultural life. As cultural keystones, salmon represent abundance, renewal, and reciprocity with nature (PSF, 2025). Their seasonal rhythms align with traditional harvesting practices and ceremonies, fostering intergenerational knowledge transfer and community cohesion (FNFC, 2021).

These practices are embedded in a holistic worldview that links food, land, and health. The role in the community that salmon encompasses goes beyond simply being a fish. However, these relationships are now increasingly strained by ecological degradation, inequitable resource management, and the legacy of colonization (Atlas et al., 2021).

Health and the well-being of FN peoples cannot be meaningfully understood outside the context of colonization, land displacement, and intergenerational trauma, which continue to shape access to health, experiences of illness, and health outcomes (Greenwood et al., 2018; TRC, 2015). FN communities face disproportionately high burdens of chronic diseases: the **prevalence of diabetes is 17.2% among FN adults compared to the general Canadian population's 5%**, and rates of cardiovascular conditions also remain significantly elevated (Allan & Smylie, 2015). These disparities are compounded by systemic racism, underfunded infrastructure, food insecurity, and jurisdictional neglect regarding health equity (Loppie-Reading & Wien, 2009).

Food insecurity is a particularly pressing issue, with **54% of FN individuals living on-reserve reporting inadequate access to sufficient and nutritious food** (FNIGC, 2012). This has direct implications for nutrient intake and long-term health, as inadequate diets contribute to the overwhelming prevalence of chronic illness and further entrench health inequities (Li et al., 2016; Willows, 2005). Loss of access to traditional food systems, including salmon, exacerbates these issues by undermining food sovereignty and disconnecting communities from the land which has supported FN health for generations.

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Mental health is another area of concern, particularly for FN youth, where suicide rates are up to seven times the national average (Pollock et al., 2018). Yet, despite these challenges, FN communities continue to demonstrate resilience through land-based healing, cultural revitalization, and self-determined approaches to wellness that integrate Traditional Knowledge with contemporary health practices (Reading, 2015; Kirmayer et al., 2007). These culturally grounded frameworks center wellness not as the absence of illness, but as a dynamic balance of physical, emotional, spiritual, and communal well-being. Efforts to revitalize traditional salmon fisheries are therefore not only about environmental conservation but are also critical acts of cultural resurgence and health equity. As recent research highlights, FN peoples are actively resisting colonial barriers and working to restore the sacred relationships between salmon, land, and community well-being (Atlas et al., 2021; Batal et al., 2021). Supporting these efforts is essential for ensuring food security, cultural continuity, and the overall health of FN populations.

This research seeks to examine the connection between declining wild Pacific salmon populations and the health of First Nation communities, an area that has been notably underexplored. By investigating this relationship, the study aims to underscore the critical importance of developing effective and culturally relevant health strategies, governmental policies, and interventions. This work not only highlights a foundational causal pathway affecting First Nation health but also reinforces the importance of adopting a holistic approach that is rooted in Indigenous worldviews. Given the integral role of salmon in the mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being of First Nation peoples, this research is both timely and necessary.

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METHODS

Study Design

Conducted by the First Nations Fisheries Council of British Columbia (FNFC), this qualitative study investigated the impacts of wild Pacific Salmon on First Nations health, specifically examining how Pacific salmon affect the mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual health of FN community members. Employing a Two-Eyed Seeing approach (refer to Appendix 1), the team conducted individual qualitative interviews to better understand First Nations' experiences and perspectives on the decline of wild Pacific salmon and its impacts on the population's health. Two-Eyed Seeing, a theoretical framework introduced by Mi'kmaq Elder Albert Marshall in the context of health research, recognizes and respects the strengths of both Indigenous and Western ways of knowing, supporting a more holistic understanding of the deep connections between ecological health and the well-being of Indigenous communities (IISH, 2025).

Individuals from British Columbia First Nations communities were invited to participate. Qualitative data was collected by conducting interviews that took place both in-person and virtually. In total, twelve interviews were held for one-two hours and interviewees were members of ten different First Nations, allowing for a variety of data to be analyzed. This included the following First Nations communities: Wei Wai Kum (North Vancouver Island), T'Sou-ke (South Coast Vancouver Island), Cheam (Fraser Valley), Leq'á:mel (Fraser Valley), Simpcw (Mid-Fraser), Lower Nicola (Mid-Fraser), Kispiox (Upper Skeena), Westbank (Transboundary Columbia), Sumas (Fraser Valley), and Tsartlip (South Coast Vancouver Island. These interviews highlighted themes including health, intergenerational knowledge, physical health effects connected to a lack of wild Pacific salmon, relationship to the land, and perceived barriers. Interviews followed an eight-question questionnaire that was created by FNFC researchers that helped ensure the lived experiences of FN individuals was amplified on a large scale. The interviews allowed for a robust community-informed "snapshot" of the holistic relationship between salmon and First Nations well-being. The qualitative data allowed for participants to have control over the use of their interview content and identity in the report. Free, prior, and informed consent was given from each participant for the recording and transcription that was obtained verbally by interviewers. All participants were anonymized prior to data analysis unless specifically stating they would like to be identified in the report. Each individual received an honorarium of $150.00 for their participation in conducting the interview and received information about different resources available if needed.

Previous research highlights the views FN communities hold regarding the significant colonial or outside factors that attribute to the decline of salmon (Atlas et al., 2021). However, there is very little that highlights the impact of the decline of salmon on the health of FN communities. To address these gaps, this study focused exclusively on FN members to better capture the realities of their access to health and the depth of impact the salmon crisis has. The sample was limited to FN in British Columbia to ensure that participants experienced similar governmental conditions. Given the study's scope and logistical constraints, a convenience sampling method was employed, and individuals were invited to participate through email outreach methods from FNFC and word-of-mouth recruitment.

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Data Management & Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted by author A.G. and was first dissected by manually developing an initial codebook, starting with the identification of broad themes that were later refined through the inclusion of additional quotations. Discrepancies amongst authors regarding coding or thematic categories were resolved through discussion and consensus, with further consultation used when necessary to reach agreement. The analysis was guided by the Social Ecological Model (SEM, refer to Appendix 2), this research frames the impact of declining wild Pacific salmon populations on First Nation health across multiple levels. At the individual level, it affects nutrition, mental health, and cultural identity. Interpersonally, it disrupts family and community practices rooted in salmon harvesting and sharing. At the community level, it undermines traditional economies and local food systems. Organizational and policy levels involve gaps in governmental responses, regulatory frameworks, and resource management that fail to reflect Indigenous knowledge systems. Applying SEM when conducting the study's analysis emphasizes the need for multilevel, culturally grounded interventions and policies that recognize the interdependence of ecological and community health. Lastly, this model was applied throughout the analysis to support the identification of major themes and subthemes.

INTERVIEW GUIDE

QUESTIONS	*PROBES*
Q1. What does "Health" mean to you? What does it mean to your people?	• *One health model* • *Any barriers to accessing traditional food* • *Has environmental change affected access to traditional foods*
Q2. Do you have access to food that would support this idea of Health? **a.** What are some of your observations on changes in food preferences in your community? **b.** Where does your community get their fish?	• *Sharing amongst First Nations* • *Food sovereignty* • *Decline of Salmon* • *Governmental Aid*

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INTERVIEW GUIDE

QUESTIONS	*PROBES*
Q3. Has your community seen a decline in wild Pacific Salmon? **a.** If yes, but not fully answered: What does that decline look like? What does it feel like? **b.** If yes: Can you describe a time when wild Pacific Salmon was abundant?	• *What did the abundance look like compared across generations?*
Q4. Do you believe there are physical health effects that are connected to a lack of wild Pacific salmon? **a.** If yes: Can you expand on why you believe that?	• *Type 2 Diabetes* • *Cardiovascular Symptoms or Disease* • *Sedentary lifestyle*
Q5. Can you explain a bit about your relationship with the water and fishing? If yes: Can you expand on why you believe that? **a.** If not fully answered: How often are you out on the water? How often do you fish? **b.** Do you feel that the activity of fishing is connected to wellbeing? **c.** Have you noticed any changes in the physical condition of salmon you are catching now compared to years past? **d.** Do you feel that the condition of salmon you catch is connected to your state of well-being, or that of your community? **e.** Do you believe that the health of the salmon is symbolic of your community's health? (Including mental and physical well-being)	Probe for: • *Spiritual health connections* • *Parasites affecting the quality/health of salmon*

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INTERVIEW GUIDE

QUESTIONS	*PROBES*
Q6. **What challenges do you encounter when sharing traditional salmon knowledge between generations?**	• *Food sharing between community members and families*
Q7. **Do you think the government has affected salmon and First Nation health? If so, how?**	• *Community (community), band (government), band council (government), school (community, individual), people (individual)*
Q8. **Is there anything we haven't asked you about your relationship with salmon that you would like to tell us?**	

KEY MEASURES (CODE BOOK)

THEMES	*POTENTIAL CODES*
Mental	• Community cohesion • Sense of place • Stress and anxiety
Emotional	• Interconnectedness and resilience • Ecological Grief (loss of land)
Spiritual	• Loss of tradition • Cultural identity • Disruption of intergenerational knowledge transmission
Physical	• Reduced participation in physical activity (disruption of traditional practices) • Limited access to nutritious/whole foods (decline in salmon quality or availability)

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What is Health?

Participants consistently described health as an inherently holistic concept, deeply embedded in their relationship with the land, water, and cultural practices. For many, health and salmon are inseparable: “when you talk about fish… it’s health, you can’t go without the two of them together” (Int. 1, North VI & Mainland Islets). Salmon, and other traditional foods, are seen not only as vital for physical health but also for spiritual, emotional, and cultural well-being. The loss of access to these traditional foods represents more than a dietary shift; it signals a disruption of a way of life that once centered on “living by the fat of the land, [and] what’s in the water” (Int. 1, North VI & Mainland Islets).

Participants emphasized that being healthy includes the ability to practice traditional ways, that being: fishing, gathering, traveling across territory, and connecting with ancestral places. One participant described health as “being able to do the things that I love… being healthy enough to go out onto the land, to gather, to hunt, to fish” (Int. 6, Mid-Fraser). The ability to travel across their territory to harvest where ancestors once did (Int. 6, Mid-Fraser) underlined the importance of land-based wellness. Another explained, “I would define health as feeling safe and being incredibly resilient… and that would include all the parameters, physical, spiritual, emotional, resiliency” (Int. 8, Mid-Fraser), reinforcing the idea that health is multidimensional and deeply rooted in safety and strength.

Health was also viewed through the lens of concentric circles and sensate embodiment, beginning with individuals and radiating outward to community, land, and spiritual connection. “Healthy individuals… have both those kinds of traditional activities… being physically active [and] having access to traditional foods” (Int. 3, Fraser Valley). However, participants also acknowledged the repercussions of colonial disruption to diets and ecosystems, as one individual shared an encounter with his non-Indigenous primary care physician: “He said it’s taken about 150 years of [western] diet to bring you down to our health outcomes” (Int. 3, Fraser Valley), pointing to how colonialism has led to a disproportionate rise in diabetes, hypertension, and other chronic illnesses that now burden Indigenous communities.

For some, health encompasses foundational aspects of well-being: housing, clean water, food security, and care for family and elders, “Health… is making sure that an individual has a home… running water… food on their table” (Int. 5, Mid-Fraser). Others described health as a state of balance, where physical, cultural, and spiritual practices coexist: “being able to practice our cultural ways… in a good, healthy way” (Int. 4, Fraser Valley). One participant captured this interconnected worldview, describing health as “your holistic well-being, obviously, your spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical well-being… not only for yourself, but the health of everything around you and how [you] can maintain your own individual health by taking care of everything around you” (Int. 7, Upper Skeena).

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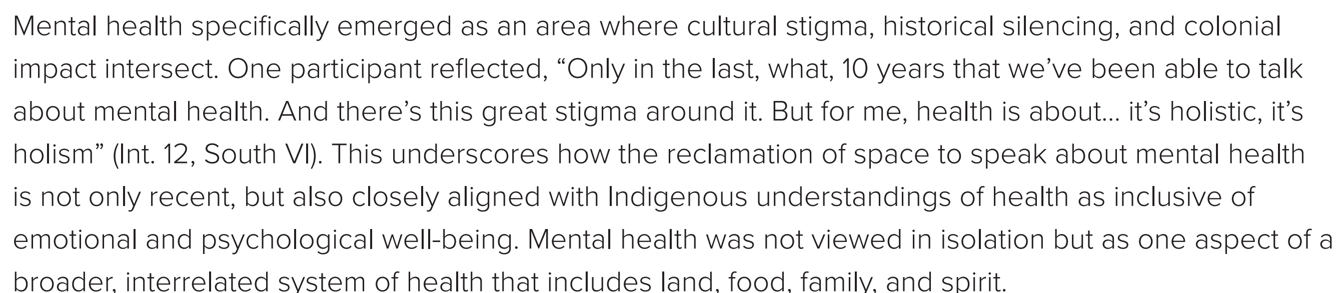

Mental health specifically emerged as an area where cultural stigma, historical silencing, and colonial impact intersect. One participant reflected, “Only in the last, what, 10 years that we’ve been able to talk about mental health. And there’s this great stigma around it. But for me, health is about… it’s holistic, it’s holism” (Int. 12, South VI). This underscores how the reclamation of space to speak about mental health is not only recent, but also closely aligned with Indigenous understandings of health as inclusive of emotional and psychological well-being. Mental health was not viewed in isolation but as one aspect of a broader, interrelated system of health that includes land, food, family, and spirit.

Collectively, these perspectives reveal that for many First Nations in BC, health is not reducible to biomedical terms. It is an integrated experience tied to traditional food systems, especially wild Pacific salmon, and the ability to live in accordance with Indigenous values, knowledge, and connection to place.

Access to Health

Participants shared mixed perspectives on their current access to health, describing a complex interplay of geographic limitations, systemic barriers, and reliance on traditional practices. Some reported partial access to basic health supports, such as over-the-counter medications. As one participant noted, “Just recently… we are even administering pharmaceutical products. The low-level stuff, like Tylenols and cold and flu medicines” (Int. 4, Fraser Valley). However, this level of access was widely regarded as inadequate and unevenly distributed. “We have access, I would say, a little, yes,” one interviewee reflected, “but is it really enough?” (Int. 4, Fraser Valley). Others were more direct: “It’s really poor… it’s very, very poor. We’re so reliant upon the commercialized, industrialized food systems… and not just from access and everything, but even like the knowledge, a lot of knowledge has been lost” (Int. 8, Transboundary Columbia).

Access to traditional foods emerged as a key determinant of health. Several participants emphasized the continued reliance on hunting, fishing, and gathering, particularly in the face of high unemployment and systemic neglect. “I just happen to be lucky that I have two parents who believed in raising us on the land” (Int. 6, Mid-Fraser), one participant reflected. Another explained, “There’s a huge reliance still on the traditional ways of gathering and hunting… especially with the high unemployment rate” (Int. 7, Upper Skeena). These practices are not only necessary for survival but serve to bridge gaps in access: “We’ve been steady at 90% unemployment or more since that time [Delgamuukw case, refer to Appendix 3] … so, you know, being able to bridge the needs gap with traditional gathering practices has been continued on just based on that” (Int. 7, Upper Skeena).

Interviewees also drew strong links between economic exclusion and food insecurity. “When you’re fully integrated into the fishery and into the economy, and participating in it, and you can generate and create wealth, health comes from that” (Int. 12, South VI). Yet, this integration is increasingly difficult. “We are called the saltwater people, but yet we can’t access our foreshore” (Int. 12, South VI), one participant

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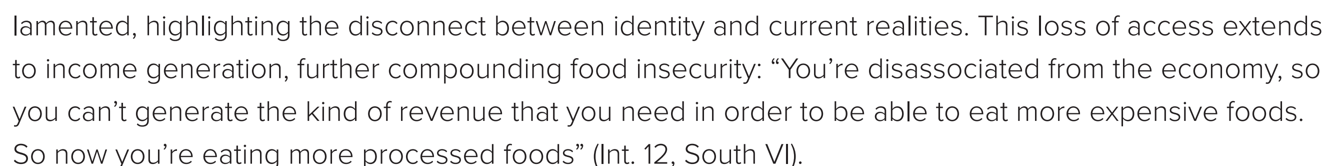

lamented, highlighting the disconnect between identity and current realities. This loss of access extends to income generation, further compounding food insecurity: “You’re disassociated from the economy, so you can’t generate the kind of revenue that you need in order to be able to eat more expensive foods. So now you’re eating more processed foods” (Int. 12, South VI).

The reliance on cheap, ultra-processed foods was described as a last resort, not a choice: “It may as well be eating cardboard, right? But it’s something and it sustains you sort of, but cognitively, physically, emotionally, spiritually?... You’re putting food [in] that is not really food... it has no nutritional value. You’re not getting the output that you need to be thinking clearly... All of those things are the things that get sacrificed. It is just so depressing that this is where we’re at” (Int. 12, South VI). This participant further underscored the gravity of disconnection from traditional food sources: “We used to have access to all these places to hunt healthy food” (Int. 12, South VI).

The long-term decline of salmon in traditional streams was repeatedly cited as both a practical and cultural crisis. “It’s been probably 15 years since our community has been able to go out and traditionally harvest salmon” (Int. 5, Mid-Fraser), one participant shared. Government regulations and economic barriers have further restricted access: “We’ve been taken out of the water by the government” (Int. 1, North VI & Mainland Islets); and “Health is making... the capabilities to make a living for your family. Those things are gone” (Int. 1, North VI & Mainland Islets). Even when salmon is acquired, the act of fishing, central to health and identity, is lost: “There’s a communal effort now... going out and purchasing it and then distributing it... But then when you do that, you’re, of course, removing the act of fishing and then you’re becoming armchair fishermen, they say” (Int. 7, Upper Skeena).

The shift from self-harvested to purchased foods has had far-reaching impacts. “Our food sovereignty (refer to Appendix 4) or our ability to have food is so dependent upon the commercialized industrial system that it’s fragile” (Int. 8, Mid-Fraser). For some, this fragility affects not just diet, but safety and emotional well-being: “One of the key parameters of feeling safe is having food to eat... Do I have a meal to eat? That makes me feel safe... when that abundant food resource gets diminished... there’s this underlying gut-wrench reaction of like, we’re under threat, there’s a problem” (Int. 8, Transboundary Columbia).

Together, these reflections reveal a broader erosion of meaningful access to health, one that includes not only clinical care but the cultural, environmental, and economic foundations of well-being. “In times of low abundance and fish, you’re leaning harder on other resources... there’s still quite a substantial amount of folks relying on traditional ways” (Int. 7, Upper Skeena), and yet that reliance is increasingly precarious in a system where traditional knowledge, food, and access are under threat.

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The Decline of Wild Pacific Salmon

The decline of wild Pacific salmon has been deeply felt across communities, with participants speaking to a wide range of impacts: economic, spiritual, mental, and intergenerational. For many, the loss is not just environmental, but personal and communal. “When you don’t have access for six years running, I haven’t untied my boat from the dock for six years. Six years,” one participant shared. “And we’re still paying bills. You got to pay your insurance, you got to pay your mortgage, your storage for your gear. And you’re losing $30,000 a year with no money coming in” (Int. 1, North VI & Mainland Islets). Furthermore, this prolonged economic hardship has created devastating cascading effects on the mental well-being of FN. “It got really bad for a while… guys were threatening to commit suicide. You know, we were proud people, and now we’re standing in welfare lands” (Int. 1, North VI & Mainland Islets).

The emotional and spiritual consequences of the salmon’s decline were similarly profound. Participants described how the reduced presence of salmon has severed cultural and spiritual relationships once maintained through fishing. One participant noted how this loss reshapes a sense of collective richness: “Your idea of community richness narrows… our spiritual relationship with fish and other communities [has diminished]” (Int. 3, Fraser Valley).

“Our spiritual health, when we interact with fish less, both mentally… preparing to go fish, preparing to butcher fish, eating fish… that also meant it had to come along with this kind of spiritual relationship… so the loss around fishing activity, not just for the individual, not just for the family, but also for the community” (Int. 3, Fraser Valley).

Participants highlighted how these changes are intensified by the external management of resources. “I think when you have other parties managing the resource and, and then it goes into a decline… it’s just one more thing that adds to some already fractured family structures and communal kind of stresses… the nations face” (Int. 11, Fraser Valley). The erosion of hereditary fishing systems and traditional harvesting knowledge only compounds the problem. “Our nation is a hereditary governed fishery… everyone has a fishing hole… but some of the fishing holes aren’t productive anymore. And so they’ve had to lean on other areas… and when their fishing areas haven’t been productive for subsequent years, then the interest level and the skill levels to fish that hole are either decreased or disappear altogether” (Int. 7, Upper Skeena). The erosion of this knowledge impacts not only food security but cultural continuity. “Nobody can understand how many fish there used to be… especially the kids growing up now because they don’t see it” (Int. 2, South/West Coast VI).

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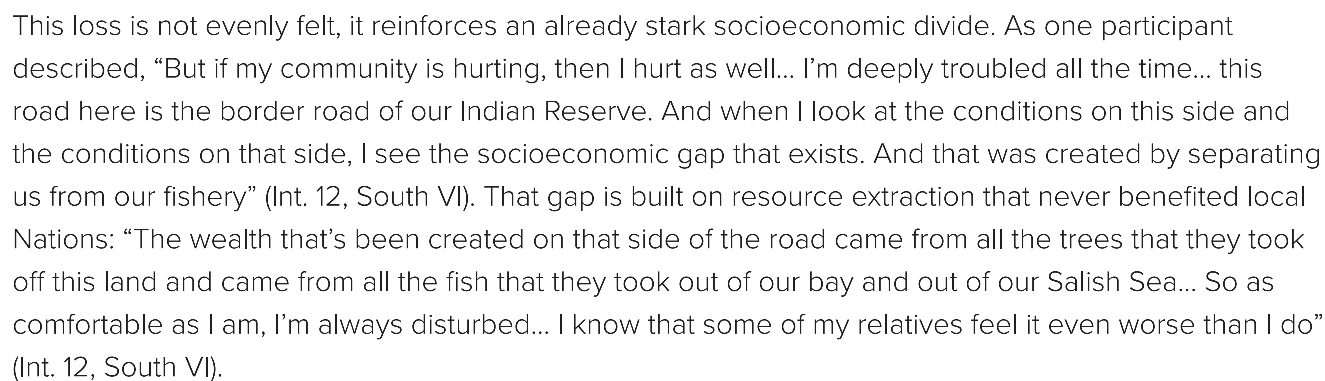

This loss is not evenly felt, it reinforces an already stark socioeconomic divide. As one participant described, “But if my community is hurting, then I hurt as well… I’m deeply troubled all the time… this road here is the border road of our Indian Reserve. And when I look at the conditions on this side and the conditions on that side, I see the socioeconomic gap that exists. And that was created by separating us from our fishery” (Int. 12, South VI). That gap is built on resource extraction that never benefited local Nations: “The wealth that’s been created on that side of the road came from all the trees that they took off this land and came from all the fish that they took out of our bay and out of our Salish Sea… So as comfortable as I am, I’m always disturbed… I know that some of my relatives feel it even worse than I do” (Int. 12, South VI).

This separation from traditional food systems has also come with enduring social stigmas. “It’s really gross to say this, but it is a construct, an intentional construct. Lazy Indian is an intentional construct and it’s perpetuated even today… there was no lazy people pre-contact… every month had its work… survival was gonna be real tough… we’re historically and culturally really hardworking people” (Int. 12, South VI). These imposed stereotypes continue to affect community dignity and mental health, especially under criminalization and judgment of traditional practices: “If you’re being told that you can’t do these things or told that you’re bad for doing these things or told you can’t sell your fish… Well, that’s what we did. Took enough, took what we needed, and we traded the rest of it. That’s what we do… And those people who may trade their food fish for money, they’re doing it because they need to… there’s a judgment that happens there that’s so unfair” (Int. 12, South VI).

Declining salmon stocks have made fishing openings increasingly rare and less fruitful. “Fishing openings have been narrower and narrower… when you do get an opening… your nets aren’t getting as full. I remember being a kid and literally catching hundreds in an evening… now people will catch 20 [for the whole season]” (Int. 8, Mid-Fraser). Even when alternative food systems exist, they are often commercialized and fragile.

As one participant noted, “If salmon is an important food resource and it’s no longer there, then we’re under threat… we’re under stress. And stress is a long-term killer… some people’s normal operating level has always been under so much stress that they don’t even know that they’re under stress” (Int. 8, Mid-Fraser).

What emerges is a picture of loss far beyond ecology. The absence of salmon reverberates through families and communities, disrupting not only livelihoods and food systems but also mental health, intergenerational knowledge, and a deeply rooted spiritual connection to the land and water.

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Abundance of Salmon

The recollections of salmon abundance reflect not only a time of ecological richness, but also a foundation for holistic health, physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual, rooted in the interdependence between people, salmon, and the land. Physically, abundant salmon meant reliable access to traditional food systems that nourished communities across seasons.

As one interviewee shared, "we don't have access to that one food group that we always had access to" (Int. 6, Mid-Fraser), connecting the decline in salmon to worsening health outcomes. With abundance, Salmon was never just sustenance, it was identity, medicine, and connection.

Emotionally and mentally, abundance created meaning and stability. Participants described how salmon supported livelihoods, intergenerational teaching, and a sense of pride and purpose. From organizing large-scale community fish deliveries (Int. 1, North VI & Mainland Islets) to learning from Elders how to manage abundance responsibly (Int. 7, Upper Skeena), salmon was central to emotional resilience and cultural continuity. One participant recalled times when pink salmon were so numerous in the Kispiox River that Elders instructed people to reduce their numbers to protect the ecosystem (Int. 7, Upper Skeena). This practice, guided by traditional knowledge and systems like ESSR (Excess Salmon Spawning Requirements), reflects how Indigenous communities actively engaged in stewardship, even during times of overwhelming abundance. This proactive care fostered a sense of empowerment, balance, and responsibility, ensuring the long-term health of both people and salmon.

Spiritually, salmon were, and continue to be, sacred beings that made reciprocal relationships possible. Abundance enabled ceremonies, gifting practices, and spiritual agreements between humans and more-than-human relatives. As one interviewee explained, it wasn't just about full fridges or dry racks, but the cultural wealth shared in winter ceremonies and across communities (Int. 3, Fraser Valley). Salmon abundance supported not just survival, but spiritual and cultural thriving.

Today, the loss of that abundance is felt deeply across generations. One speaker reflected on how their generation has "lost touch with the water" (Int. 6, Mid-Fraser), signaling not just a physical disconnection, but a spiritual and cultural rupture. Where rivers once teemed with salmon to the point of overcapacity, they are now quiet, and with that silence comes loss: of health, identity, and belonging (Int. 5, Mid-Fraser). The contrast between the past of needing to thin out overabundant runs and the current need to protect dwindling stocks underscores the ecological and emotional grief experienced today.

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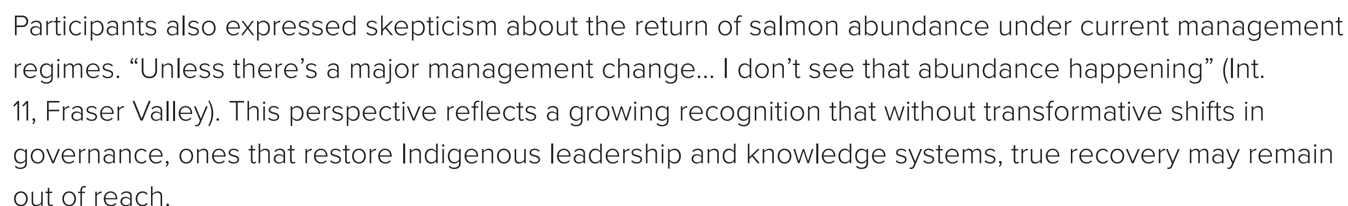

Participants also expressed skepticism about the return of salmon abundance under current management regimes. “Unless there’s a major management change… I don’t see that abundance happening” (Int. 11, Fraser Valley). This perspective reflects a growing recognition that without transformative shifts in governance, ones that restore Indigenous leadership and knowledge systems, true recovery may remain out of reach.

Salmon abundance once supported a deeply rooted system of Indigenous health, where well-being was defined by the health of relationships: to food, to the land, to each other, and to the spirit. The erosion of this abundance is not merely an environmental issue but a disruption of these relationships, and a call to renew reciprocal practices for future generations.

Barriers with Recreational Fishermen

Participants reported significant tension and conflict with the recreational fishing sector. Many described violence, sabotage, and racism, including boat ramming and even an incident where a chief was shot in the face with a high-powered pellet gun (Int. 10, Fraser Valley). Others spoke of feeling unsafe and unwelcome on the water.

There was also frustration over inequitable access and preferential treatment. Participants noted that recreational fishers were often given access to fisheries before Indigenous food fishers: “They’ll let the rec fishers out before us” (Int. 10, Fraser Valley), despite legal recognition of First Nations’ priority rights under Supreme Court rulings. These conflicts were compounded by a lack of clear governmental communication about rights, enabling recreational groups to challenge Indigenous access without consequence (Int. 11, Fraser Valley).

The public narrative and media portrayal of Indigenous fishers was also raised as a concern. Interviewees felt that the recreational fishing lobby had greater influence and better public relations, resulting in skewed perceptions: “They’ve done a much better job with public relations than the First Nations communities have” (Int. 11, Fraser Valley).

Participants emphasized that First Nations’ involvement in the commercial fishery was not a matter of free choice, but rather a direct outcome of colonial confinement and economic marginalization. As traditional food systems and harvesting rights were systematically restricted, communities were increasingly pushed into commercial fisheries as one of the few remaining avenues to stay connected to the water and sustain their livelihoods. One interviewee explained that, over time, “a lot of our people were huge players in that setting,” (Int. 7, Upper Skeena) highlighting how deeply involved Indigenous fishers became in the industry once it was introduced on the coast. However, this participation was shaped by structural coercion rather than opportunity. As the same participant noted, this involvement eventually “led them to a situation where they felt like they had entitlement to be able to fish down on the coast,” reflecting how settler

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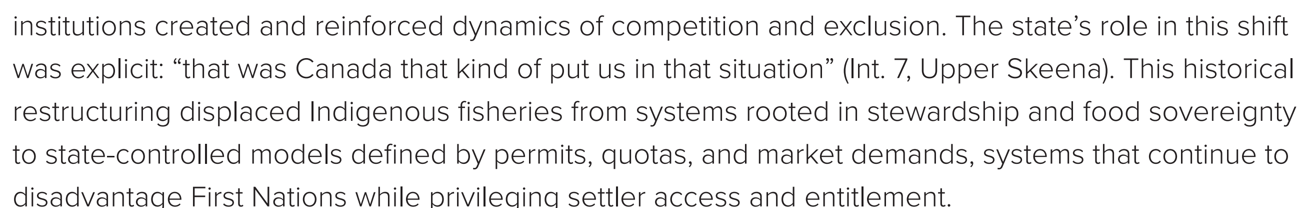

institutions created and reinforced dynamics of competition and exclusion. The state's role in this shift was explicit: "that was Canada that kind of put us in that situation" (Int. 7, Upper Skeena). This historical restructuring displaced Indigenous fisheries from systems rooted in stewardship and food sovereignty to state-controlled models defined by permits, quotas, and market demands, systems that continue to disadvantage First Nations while privileging settler access and entitlement.

Colonialism

Participants described their current realities as a direct result of colonial structures designed to displace and dispossess Indigenous peoples from their traditional economies. There was a strong sense that First Nations were deliberately excluded from the commercial and economic benefits of the fishery in favor of settler expansion.

Multiple interviewees spoke of a pre-contact economy based on internal trade networks, holistic practices, and food sovereignty. These systems were destabilized by colonial policies: "Our families were wealthy... but we've been entirely separated from those harvesting and being a part of the economic development" (Int. 12, South VI). Historical accounts reflected that reserve lines were intentionally drawn around key fishing spots under the promise that access would remain, only to later be denied: "When they figured out that they could can it and sell it back home to Europe... it was then about denying us the right to fish" (Int. 7, South VI). (refer to Appendix 5, Canning Salmon).

Participants framed DFO's failure to regulate or co-manage fisheries properly as a continuation of colonial control. For example, despite signing co-management agreements, many feel they still lack decision-making power or ownership. As one person noted the success of another Nation, "the Okanagan is a good example...because they didn't have to work with DFO that much" (Int. 3, Fraser Valley), implying that autonomy leads to better outcomes.

Finally, there was a powerful call for a shift in policy approach, from domination to relationship. "Policies need to be made from a standpoint of, 'we don't need to have dominion over, we need to have [a] relationship with'" (Int. 8, Mid-Fraser). Participants advocated for long-term thinking rooted in Indigenous worldviews, such as considering impacts over seven generations instead of short-term political gains (Int. 3, Fraser Valley). This ongoing legacy of colonial dispossession has directly fueled generational poverty, entrenched food insecurity, and deepened health disparities within Indigenous communities.

Barriers with Government

Participants described long-standing and deeply entrenched issues with government agencies, especially the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO). A recurring theme was mistrust rooted in historical and ongoing exclusion from fisheries decision-making and management processes.

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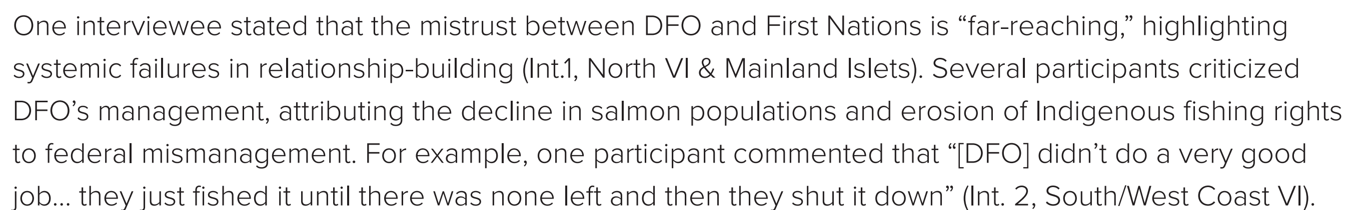

One interviewee stated that the mistrust between DFO and First Nations is “far-reaching,” highlighting systemic failures in relationship-building (Int.1, North VI & Mainland Islets). Several participants criticized DFO’s management, attributing the decline in salmon populations and erosion of Indigenous fishing rights to federal mismanagement. For example, one participant commented that “[DFO] didn’t do a very good job… they just fished it until there was none left and then they shut it down” (Int. 2, South/West Coast VI).

There was widespread concern that government policies have deliberately excluded First Nations from sustainable economic opportunities. As one participant put it: “There’s no need for us to be poor. That’s a policy choice” (Int. 12, South VI). Others noted that even modern frameworks like UNDRIP (*United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples,* refer to Appendix 6) have yet to result in real shifts in power or access.

Despite supposed co-management agreements, interviewees felt that DFO continues to retain control: “They may think in their mind that they’re co-managing… but they haven’t let loose on their side” (Int. 5, Mid-Fraser). As another participant stated bluntly, “We’ve been phased out. DFO [has] done a good job” (Int. 1, North VI & Mainland Islets), underscoring a widespread belief that exclusion is not accidental, but the product of intentional, long-standing government strategies designed to disempower Indigenous fisheries.

Participants expressed deep concern about the militarized enforcement tactics used by DFO, which they viewed as both excessive and symbolic of a broader system of oppression. One interviewee described a disturbing encounter where a clearly identified Douglas Treaty fisherman was subjected to an aggressive boat inspection: “He’s got a video camera on him… one of those guys is walking around in there with an AR-15” (Int. 12, South VI). They questioned the logic and safety of such displays of force: “Do you really think that you need to have an automatic weapon involved in this?” (Int. 12, South VI).

Rather than supporting stewardship or respecting Treaty Rights, the presence of armed officers on the water reinforced a perception of criminalization: “That’s how DFO treats us… we’re constantly fighting against this fully armed department that can’t even organize its own self, but they’re passing judgment on what we’re doing all the time. It’s pretty challenging” (Int. 12, South VI). This was not seen as an isolated event, but rather part of a broader pattern in which enforcement becomes a tool of intimidation and surveillance.

For some, these experiences extended beyond physical enforcement into a deeper emotional and psychological impact, likened to a form of confinement. One participant described it as “oppression like 24 and 7… it feels like solitary confinement,” emphasizing the emotional toll of being constantly monitored and restricted from accessing traditional resources (Int. 12, South VI). The underlying issue, they argued, is not enforcement itself but the state’s continued failure to recognize and uphold Indigenous rights: “All because we don’t want to answer the question that the Cowichan decision is starting to answer” (Int. 12, South VI).

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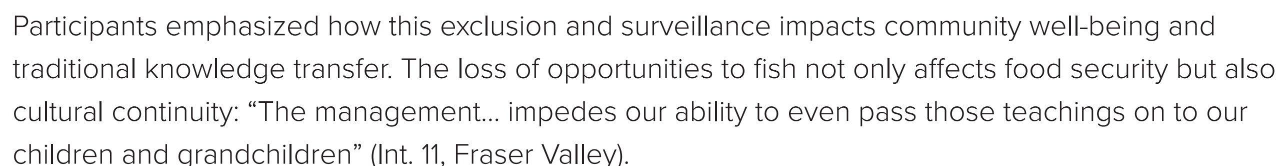

Participants emphasized how this exclusion and surveillance impacts community well-being and traditional knowledge transfer. The loss of opportunities to fish not only affects food security but also cultural continuity: “The management… impedes our ability to even pass those teachings on to our children and grandchildren” (Int. 11, Fraser Valley).

The Art of Sharing

Participants emphasized that salmon are not just a food source but a foundation for kinship, generosity, and cultural law. The “art of sharing” salmon was frequently cited as a traditional practice that connected families, clans, and Nations, particularly during times of abundance. One interviewee recalled being taught “to look after our elders and our family first,” describing the joy in helping others once everyone “got their food and their fill” (Int. 10, Fraser Valley). Another added, “If the elders can’t have access to staple foods, then we ensure that they always have a supply… when you come home, you’re always sharing food” (Int. 2, South/West Coast VI).

However, the decline in salmon populations has made these values increasingly difficult to practice. “We had to share 200 fish amongst our whole community,” one participant explained, “I don’t know whether they [other Nations] realize that” (Int. 5, Mid-Fraser). Several interviewees noted that traditional trade systems have also eroded: “We have lost the art of trade. Because that’s what we would have done if we had an abundance of one thing, but a shortage of something else” (Int. 5, Mid-Fraser). Participants highlighted how scarcity has shifted behaviors, making generosity harder to sustain: “It’s really easy to be a good person when you’re fed… but what kind of person are you when you’re cold, you’re hungry, you’re miserable?” (Int. 8, Mid-Fraser). One interviewee captured the emotional weight of this shift by stating, “And I would say, unfortunately, as First Nations, like so many of us have been cold, hungry for so long that it’s hard for us to be our best selves. And so that’s the heart of all this” (Int. 8, Mid-Fraser). These reflections speak not only to material deprivation but to the erosion of cultural identity, collective strength, and the relational ethics that once defined interactions around salmon harvesting. Ultimately, sharing was not seen simply as an action, but as an Indigenous law, tested most in times of adversity. “You’re not being generous in a time of abundance. Generous comes when there’s scarcity,” (Int. 8, Mid-Fraser) one participant reflected.

Overfishing and Government Influence in First Nations Relationships

Participants consistently identified the intersecting effects of overfishing and government policy as central factors contributing to divisions among FNs. Many emphasized the contemporary fishing practices, often driven by economic necessity or scarcity, frequently conflict with and disregard traditional values. One participant warned that it’s essential to practice restraint in fishing; suggesting that if Nations deplete all resources without leaving anything behind, they’ll continue to face the same challenges in the future. (Int.

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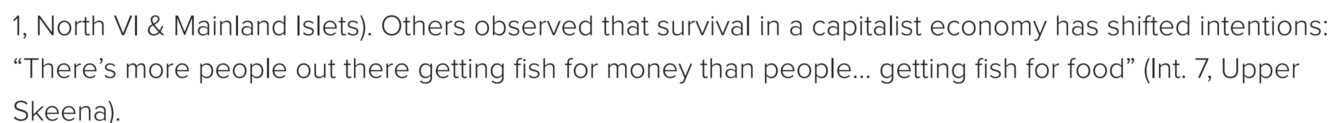

1, North VI & Mainland Islets). Others observed that survival in a capitalist economy has shifted intentions: “There’s more people out there getting fish for money than people… getting fish for food” (Int. 7, Upper Skeena).

These pressures were seen as intensified by government regulations, enforcement, and allocation policies that create inequity and competition among Nations. “Why allocate somebody four fish a person here, and… twenty over there? There’s no difference. We’re the same. We’re Native. We have rights,” (Int. 1, North VI & Mainland Islets) expressed one frustrated participant. Others pointed to how these disparities spark internal divisions: “It definitely creates challenges… the catch between nations is not equitable… and I think DFO purposely does that to create that conflict… it definitely creates tensions even within families, within the community” (Int. 11, Fraser Valley).

The psychological toll of these policies also emerged. One participant shared that salmon scarcity, combined with forced reliance on rations like flour and lard, has instilled a long-standing fear of not having enough: “We need to get this while the getting is good. Before something else happens… before the government does something else to deny us” (Int. 6, Mid-Fraser). This “scarcity mindset,” deeply rooted in colonial experiences, was described as intergenerational: “We’ve been in it for generations… it’s a really hard mindset to beat” (Int. 6, Mid-Fraser).

Many spoke of how the erosion of unity has made it harder to challenge harmful systems. “DFO… created a monster. People use those rights against each other. There’s no question in my mind we shouldn’t be doing that. We were put in place to share. And by design, our people did” (Int. 1, North VI & Mainland Islets). As one participant concluded, “It was designed for us to fight… the barriers, which is [the] government. It’s a barrier” (Int. 1, North VI & Mainland Islets).

Current Diet (local) / Physical Health Status

Traditional fishing practices demand intense physical effort, awareness, and knowledge of the land. As one interviewee described, “You need to know the season, the river levels, what other animals need… you’ve got to move around a lot. We’re canoe people, so you’re canoeing everywhere all the time” (Int. 3, Fraser Valley). Before even placing nets, fishers engage in physically and mentally demanding preparation. “If it’s a bag net between two canoes, you’ve got to have incredible core strength just to stay balanced. Add a couple of 50-pound spring salmon to the net, and it’s even more demanding. People must have been incredibly strong” (Int. 3, Fraser Valley).

The link between physical health and traditional diet is evident. One participant pointed to rising health issues: “You look at the diabetes problem… we’re eating crap from the store, not living off the fat of the land anymore” (Int. 1, North VI & Mainland Islets). This change is most visible in younger generations: “Kids all go to McDonald’s… it’s tough to get them away from a machine” (Int. 1, North VI & Mainland Islets). In

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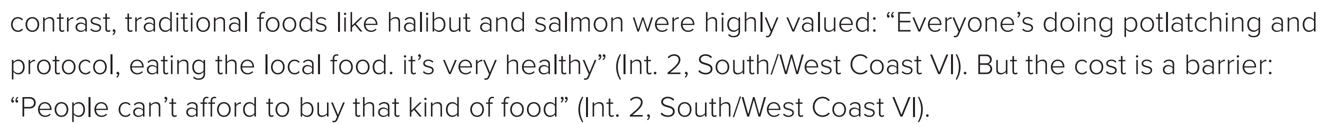

contrast, traditional foods like halibut and salmon were highly valued: “Everyone’s doing potlatching and protocol, eating the local food. it’s very healthy” (Int. 2, South/West Coast VI). But the cost is a barrier: “People can’t afford to buy that kind of food” (Int. 2, South/West Coast VI).

Participants emphasized not only the nutritional richness of salmon but also the absence of diet-related diseases in traditional lifestyles. “They talk more about the absence of diabetes, cardiovascular issues… things most of us struggle with now” (Int. 3, Fraser Valley). Others observed the visible impact: “You can see it in some of the children…with skin-related issues” (Int. 4, Fraser Valley). Elders also noted benefits of traditional food practices, such as leaving bones in canned fish: “It helps with osteoarthritis, bone, joint, and cartilage health” (Int. 4, Fraser Valley). This contrasts sharply with the present: “When there was a lot of salmon, you had backyard barbecues… now it’s one fish, and the rest is burgers and hot dogs” (Int. 4, Fraser Valley).

Salmon is considered a complete “superfood” by participants. “It’s not just protein…it’s ancestral. Our bodies digest it better. We’re seeing a lack of it result in more type 2 diabetes, especially in Indigenous communities. Our elders’ health is failing from relying on processed, cheap food” (Int. 6, Mid-Fraser). Food sensitivities are rising too: “I had a sensitivity test done… the only foods I could eat without flare-ups were salmon, deer, moose, elk, berries, potatoes…the same foods my ancestors ate” (Int. 6, Mid-Fraser). The increasing distance from land-based diets is causing intolerances to modern, processed foods.

Lifestyle changes also factor into health issues. “I spent five years working in diabetes…it’s clear that the switch from physically harvesting food to buying processed, canned goods with long shelf lives has had a devastating impact. This all changed within a 50- to 100-year window” (Int. 7, Upper Skeena). Yet, the cultural and physical connection to salmon remains strong: “People still want fish, crave fish, need fish” (Int. 8, Mid-Fraser). There’s scientific backing too: “Omega-3s in salmon affect brain development. It used to be at every meal…salmon and rice, salmon and potatoes. Now it’s drastically reduced. We’re supplementing omega-3s while living in [what should be] a salmon-abundant area” (Int. 8, Mid-Fraser). The spiritual and psychological loss tied to the decline in traditional foods is palpable.

“Even if we can buy food at Walmart, our DNA remembers the abundance we’ve lost. You can see it in every measure…diabetes, incarceration rates, everything. I believe if salmon numbers increased, all those human health indicators would improve” (Int. 8, Mid-Fraser).

Beyond nutrition, fishing itself contributes to wellness. “During [the] fishing season, I lose 10–15 pounds just being on the river. It’s good exercise, and mentally, it helps a lot. It’s peaceful and purposeful” (Int. 10,

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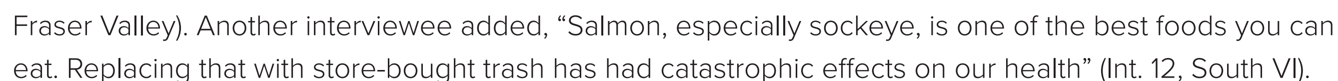


Fraser Valley). Another interviewee added, “Salmon, especially sockeye, is one of the best foods you can eat. Replacing that with store-bought trash has had catastrophic effects on our health” (Int. 12, South VI).

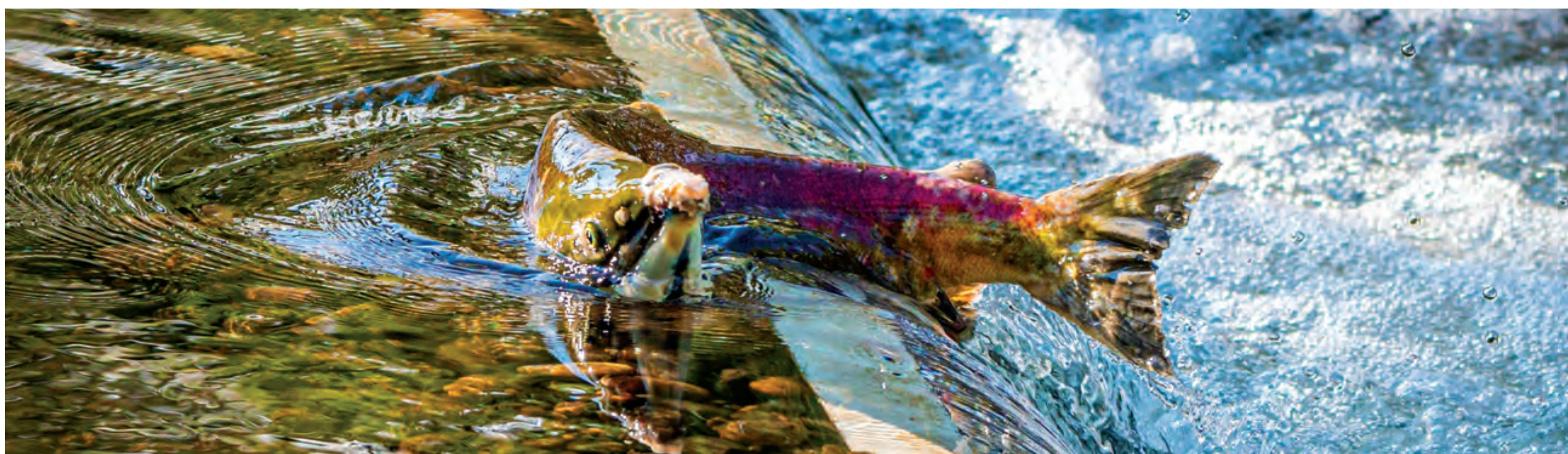
Fishing is physically demanding, not just on the water, but also on land. “Being on the water is dangerous. You’re hand-selecting hundreds of fish daily. And it’s not just the fishers; there’s intense labor on the beach too. People work hard to keep the fish from rotting. It’s a family affair, not just men out there” (Int. 12, South VI).

Condition of Salmon

Concerns about the health and quality of the fish itself have grown. “Now we have to ask…is this safe to eat?” (Int. 2, South/West Coast VI). Water temperature and quality impact the fish: “You can tell by the firmness of their body. When it’s been a hot summer, they come back with scabs and parasites” (Int. 5, Mid-Fraser). Others noted: “The salmon isn’t as firm. It’s softer” (Int. 6, Mid-Fraser). Environmental changes are to blame: “We throw out up to half our catch. Low water levels and warm temperatures cause fish to get roughed up. Their meat quality suffers” (Int. 6, Mid-Fraser).

Smaller fish are another issue. “They’re smaller for sure. We may have to redefine what counts as a Jack Chinook” (Int. 7, Upper Skeena). This affects preservation: “Before, three sockeye would fill a case of jars. Now you need at least five. That means they’re not getting the energy they used to in early marine life” (Int. 7, Upper Skeena). This isn’t anecdotal either, “I’ve seen the data. They’re legitimately smaller” (Int. 8, Fraser Valley).

Looking ahead, there’s a sense of uncertainty mixed with hope. “I know someday there may be no fish, or none of the prime fish we like. So, I enjoy it now while I can. Hopefully, our fish can come back” (Int. 10, Fraser Valley). Others find some reassurance in comparisons: “This year, we got fish from Alaska. Not one sea lice. Not to make a comment about Canadian fish, but it was interesting” (Int. 12, South VI).



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What Salmon Means to First Nations (Culturally)

The interviews revealed a profound cultural, spiritual, and communal significance of salmon to First Nations peoples. Salmon is not merely a source of food; it is deeply interwoven with identity, tradition, and worldview. Many participants emphasized that salmon is central to their sense of self and collective identity. One participant expressed, “We need to protect the salmon. It’s who we are as the salmon people,” underscoring how deeply identity and fish are linked (Int. 2, South/West Coast VI). Another noted, “Anytime you want to find a First Nation… go to a salmon-bearing river. You’ll always find them” (Int. 2, South/West Coast VI), reinforcing the idea that First Nations communities have always existed in relationship to salmon-bearing waters. The interconnection was further highlighted in sentiments such as, “If the salmon are thriving, we’re thriving. And if they’re not, then we’re not” (Int. 8, Mid-Fraser). These statements illustrate that the well-being of the people and the salmon are inextricably linked.

The presence of salmon brings tangible shifts in community atmosphere and spirit. As one participant shared, “When the sockeye come in… there’s this feeling of good spirits… we really lighten up as people” (Int. 12, South VI). Processing fish together was described as a spiritually uplifting experience: “It lifts, this cloud lifts off of us for a few days while we’re processing those fish” (Int. 12, South VI). This spiritual relationship extends beyond sustenance to reverence. One person described holding a salmon and feeling a connection to their ancestors and the fish itself: “You have this relationship with the fish… willing to give its life… for us to be fed and nourished. That’s a huge sense of reverence, spiritual connection, physical health… immense sense of gratitude” (Int. 8, Mid-Fraser).

The interviews also revealed a deep concern about the loss of traditional knowledge and teachings related to salmon. Elders and fishers spoke of a generational rupture, where youth no longer learn the traditional skills or understand the former abundance. “Our children [are] suffering now… they’re not learning to survive the way we survived” (Int. 1, North VI & Mainland Islets). Others echoed this, stating, “We have a generation here of youth… that have never traditionally fished a salmon” (Int. 5, Mid-Fraser), and “Times have changed… so much of our knowledge is no longer there. It’s gone” (Int. 1, North VI & Mainland Islets). Access limitations and regulatory restrictions were seen as contributing to this erosion. “Even the change in that to where now… we might get 14 days a year fishing all five species of salmon… it changes how we can bring our youth out” (Int. 11, Fraser Valley). This temporal and spatial disconnection from salmon has led to what one participant described as a shift from relationship to abstraction: “This kind of loss of continued connection… has us retreat into conceptions of fish… rather than fishing them” (Int. 3, Fraser Valley).

Despite these challenges, some participants continue to actively pass on fishing traditions. One fisher explained, “I have grown up fishing on our territory… with a rod and reel, with spears, dip nets… my parents had both my sister and I on the land since we were babies” (Int. 6, Mid-Fraser). Others emphasized the pride in being able to maintain and share these skills, especially in the face of declining

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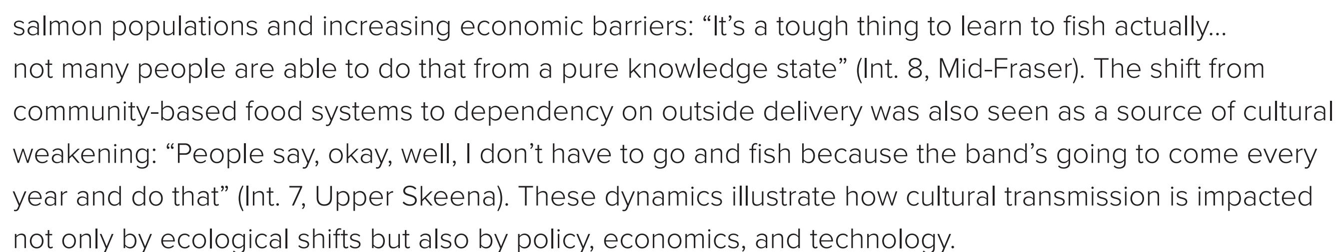

salmon populations and increasing economic barriers: “It’s a tough thing to learn to fish actually... not many people are able to do that from a pure knowledge state” (Int. 8, Mid-Fraser). The shift from community-based food systems to dependency on outside delivery was also seen as a source of cultural weakening: “People say, okay, well, I don’t have to go and fish because the band’s going to come every year and do that” (Int. 7, Upper Skeena). These dynamics illustrate how cultural transmission is impacted not only by ecological shifts but also by policy, economics, and technology.

Modern technology and lifestyle changes were frequently cited as furthering the disconnect. One participant warned, “The real assimilative force... is these devices... creating a new culture that we’re constantly having to fight through” (Int. 12, Fraser Valley). This digital colonization, combined with the cost and logistical barriers of accessing the water, has made it increasingly difficult to maintain relationships with salmon. Yet, amid these pressures, the cultural memory and emotional weight remain strong. Photographs of salmon fishing are common in family homes (Int. 8, Mid-Fraser), and even children express longing for fish as comfort food: “Anytime I ask [my granddaughter] what she wants to eat, she’s like, ‘I want fish and rice’” (Int. 11, Fraser Valley).

In sum, salmon holds immense cultural significance for First Nations peoples. It is not simply a resource but a teacher, relative, and spiritual entity that nourishes both body and soul. While this relationship remains central to identity, the current loss of access, ecological decline, and intergenerational disconnect pose serious risks to sustaining the cultural, ceremonial, and knowledge-based traditions built around salmon.

Relationship to the Water/Territory

Participants consistently described a profound, identity-shaping connection to water and the surrounding land, underscoring the central role of these elements in cultural continuity, personal well-being, and community resilience. This relationship is not merely environmental but spiritual, emotional, and ancestral, woven into lived experience and ways of knowing. As one participant shared, “My relationship... to the water and fishing. It’s dear to my heart” (Int. 1, North VI & Mainland Islets), a sentiment echoed throughout the interviews.

Water was described as a space of healing, grounding, and restoration. Participants spoke of the land and water as living relatives, entities that are inherently tied to who they are and how they move through the world. “Being on the water is so special because it’s cleansing... it’s a place to go and just be myself. It’s so inherent” (Int. 6, Mid-Fraser). Another reflected, “If you’re having a tough day... you might want to go sit beside a creek... and let the water kind of take it away. Water is very important” (Int. 5, Mid-Fraser).

The land, too, was described as foundational to self-understanding. One participant stated, “It’s what defines us. Most definitely,” while also noting the visible difference in youth who have become

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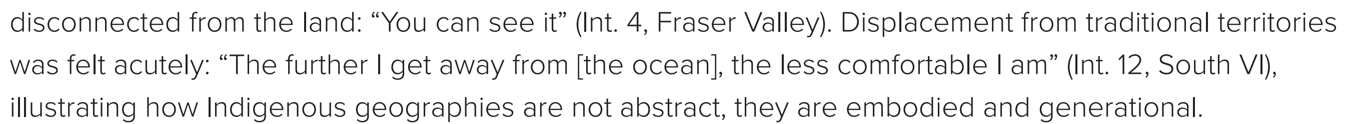

disconnected from the land: “You can see it” (Int. 4, Fraser Valley). Displacement from traditional territories was felt acutely: “The further I get away from [the ocean], the less comfortable I am” (Int. 12, South VI), illustrating how Indigenous geographies are not abstract, they are embodied and generational.

Several interviews recalled a time when fishing and being on the water were routine parts of daily life. One participant reminisced about a childhood spent by the river, fishing not out of necessity but because it was a safe, joyful space: “You’re just kind of there because you’re there, and it’s a happy, safe place” (Int. 7, Upper Skeena). However, this way of life is now threatened, with another participant lamenting that “not many of us get to do [that] anymore because that practice has died out” (Int. 6, Mid-Fraser).

This deep connection to land and water directly informs concerns about the future of salmon. The health of salmon was not viewed in isolation but as a direct indicator of environmental and community well-being: “If the land is struggling, we’re struggling. And if we’re thriving, I’d probably say the land is thriving” (Int. 8, Mid-Fraser). Participants expressed concern over increasingly dry seasons, predator imbalances, and ecological degradation: “Are the salmon going to make it up the river all right?” (Int. 2, South/West Coast VI).

Yet, this concern is not passive. It is paired with a strong sense of responsibility and advocacy. One participant described their active involvement in various decision-making spaces, from fisheries to flood mitigation, to ensure the ecosystem remains viable for future generations. “When I’m there, I’m speaking for all those that can’t speak” (Int. 11, Fraser Valley). Another affirmed that First Nations should be leading conservation efforts: “We’re the ones that still have the cultural values of looking after our relatives” (Int. 12, South VI).

Salmon were also seen as symbolic, mirrors of resilience. “They just keep swimming and keep swimming. And surviving. So that’s inspiring to me, to just keep fighting and keep pushing” (Int. 12, South VI). This vision encapsulates the intertwining of cultural survival and ecological stewardship, revealing a hopefulness rooted in responsibility, continuity, and reciprocal care.

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DISCUSSION

This qualitative study revealed that the health and well-being of FNs peoples are fundamentally linked to the health of salmon, the land, and traditional foodways. Across all interviews, participants emphasized that salmon is not simply food, it is medicine, identity, connection, and law. As such, the decline of salmon populations is not only an ecological crisis; it is a public health emergency that directly impacts Indigenous physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being.

Salmon as a Determinant of Health

Participants spoke with clarity about the role of salmon in sustaining community health. Traditional diets centered on salmon were described as protective against chronic illnesses, such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and inflammatory conditions. In contrast, today's reliance on processed, store bought foods contribute to rising rates of Type 2 Diabetes and other chronic illnesses. This pattern echoes findings from FNs populations across British Columbia, where seafood, particularly salmon, contributes significantly to EPA and DHA intake, supports healthier lifestyles, and is associated with lower smoking rates and higher physical activity (Marushka et al., 2018). The nutritional density of salmon, rich in omega-3 fatty acids, protein, and micronutrients, was cited alongside its cultural and emotional benefits, offering a holistic form of nourishment. Elders and community members noted a stark difference in health outcomes between generations who were raised on land-based diets and those now reliant on processed store-bought food. This shift, brought on by colonial dispossession and ecological degradation, has contributed to rising rates of preventable diseases, a well-documented trend in Indigenous public health literature (Kuhnlein et al., 2013; Reading, 2009).

In addition, harvesting salmon is a physical and social activity that promotes fitness, family bonding, mental clarity, and cultural continuity. Participants described fishing as a source of exercise, stress reduction, and purpose. In contrast, the current inability to harvest due to scarcity or policy restrictions has led to more sedentary, disconnected lifestyles, especially among youth, contributing to a cascade of physical and mental health issues that are compounded by intergenerational trauma and food insecurity.

Food Insecurity, Scarcity, and Cultural Dislocation

The findings also highlight how food insecurity among FNs is not just a question of access, but of cultural and historical disconnection. Participants described the psychological burden of not having enough salmon to feed their families, elders, or communities. The emotional weight of dividing a single catch among many or having to substitute ancestral foods with "junk" or "rations," was described as degrading to both body and spirit. Furthermore, this emotional weight was often tied to feelings of shame due to the inability to provide for oneself and family. Participants spoke about how this shame has been used to inflict the persistent racial trope of the "Lazy Indian," a stereotype that was never rooted in Indigenous

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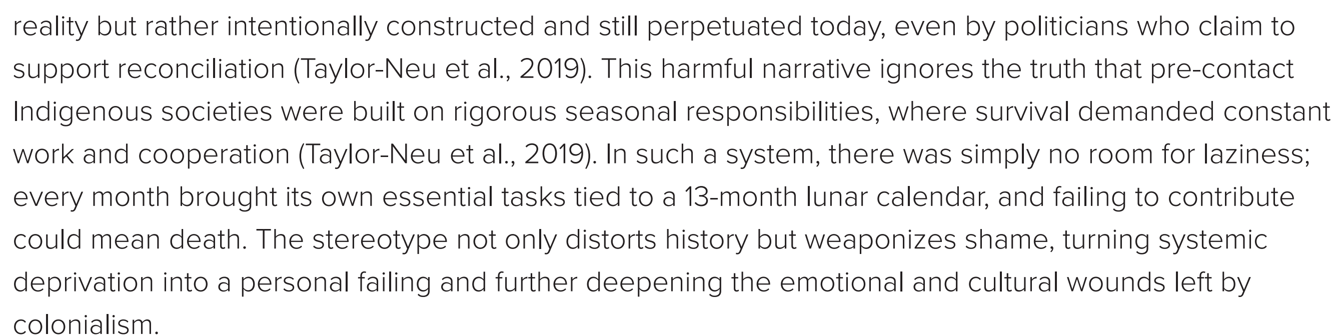

reality but rather intentionally constructed and still perpetuated today, even by politicians who claim to support reconciliation (Taylor-Neu et al., 2019). This harmful narrative ignores the truth that pre-contact Indigenous societies were built on rigorous seasonal responsibilities, where survival demanded constant work and cooperation (Taylor-Neu et al., 2019). In such a system, there was simply no room for laziness; every month brought its own essential tasks tied to a 13-month lunar calendar, and failing to contribute could mean death. The stereotype not only distorts history but weaponizes shame, turning systemic deprivation into a personal failing and further deepening the emotional and cultural wounds left by colonialism.

Scarcity not only reduces nutritional intake, it erodes the ability to uphold cultural values, such as sharing, reciprocity, and care for elders. One participant's reflection, "It's easy to be a good person when you're fed," captures how hunger and poverty challenge the enactment of relational Indigenous laws. From a public health perspective, this represents a social determinant of health that is both systemic and structural, rooted in colonial policies that have long undermined Indigenous food sovereignty.

This scarcity mindset, as described by several participants, is also intergenerational. The historical trauma of being forced off traditional lands, banned from fishing, and made dependent on government rations has contributed to a persistent, internalized fear of "not having enough." These fears are not irrational, they are grounded in lived experiences of dispossession, surveillance, and enforced dependency on Crown government. Addressing this legacy requires not only improving food access but restoring Indigenous control over local food systems and lands.

Policy, Power, and Public Health Inequities

Participants were clear in naming government policies, particularly those imposed by the DFO, as significant contributors to inter-community conflict, inequity, and health disparities. Inequitable allocations, inconsistent enforcement, and opaque decision-making have fractured FNs' unity and undermined traditional protocols of trade and sharing. These divisions, according to some, were deliberately engineered to weaken Indigenous solidarity and resistance.

This aligns with a growing body of public health scholarship recognizing policy itself as a determinant of health (APHA, 2013). In this context, fishing regulations function not only as resource management tools but as instruments of governance that control who eats, who shares, and who thrives. These policy structures shape access to culture, self-determination, and ultimately, health.

The psychosocial toll of this systemic inequity is profound. Participants described stress, fear, and hopelessness about the future of salmon, and by extension, the future health of their communities. Some spoke of young people who have never known the experience of fishing, while others grieved the loss of communal fish camps and seasonal rhythms that once brought spiritual uplift and healing. In this way, health outcomes are not only biomedical but profoundly cultural and ecological.

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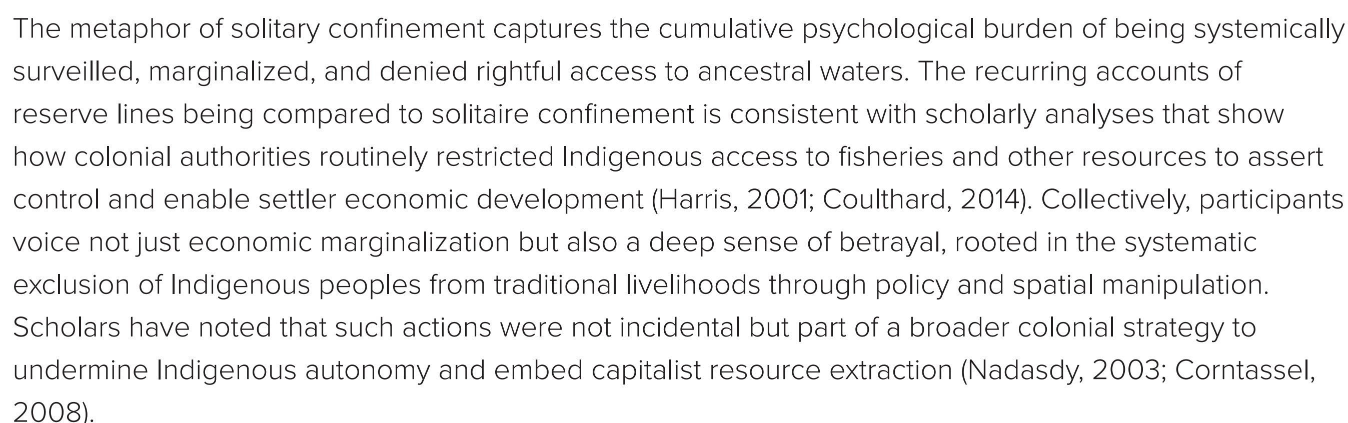

The metaphor of solitary confinement captures the cumulative psychological burden of being systemically surveilled, marginalized, and denied rightful access to ancestral waters. The recurring accounts of reserve lines being compared to solitaire confinement is consistent with scholarly analyses that show how colonial authorities routinely restricted Indigenous access to fisheries and other resources to assert control and enable settler economic development (Harris, 2001; Coulthard, 2014). Collectively, participants voice not just economic marginalization but also a deep sense of betrayal, rooted in the systematic exclusion of Indigenous peoples from traditional livelihoods through policy and spatial manipulation. Scholars have noted that such actions were not incidental but part of a broader colonial strategy to undermine Indigenous autonomy and embed capitalist resource extraction (Nadasdy, 2003; Corntassel, 2008).

These conditions contribute to chronic stress, anxiety, and trauma, particularly when experienced across generations. The effects ripple throughout communities, impacting individuals' sense of identity, safety, and self-worth. Moreover, these enforcement practices are not just about regulations, they reflect an ongoing refusal to recognize Indigenous legal orders, Treaty Rights, and human dignity. As one participant noted, "we don't want to answer the question that the Cowichan decision is starting to answer" (Int.12), pointing to the continued institutional denial of justice, which further undermines collective mental and emotional well-being. The overreach and hostility of federal enforcement do more than regulate fisheries, they perpetuate intergenerational harm and reinforce mental health disparities already rooted in colonization and systemic exclusion. The cumulative impact of living under constant surveillance, militarized scrutiny, and legal limbo cannot be separated from the mental health realities faced by many First Nations individuals today.

Cultural Continuity as Public Health Strategy

Despite these challenges, participants expressed a strong sense of responsibility to protect salmon and the waters they inhabit, not as resources to be exploited, but as relatives to be cared for. This stewardship ethic is a core component of Indigenous health and well-being. Water was consistently described as healing, sacred, and grounding, with many noting how time on the land promotes mental clarity and spiritual wellness.

The loss of access to fishing sites and waterways, through development, environmental degradation, and policy exclusion, was understood not just as territorial dispossession, but as a public health risk. Cultural continuity, including the ability to pass on fishing knowledge and practices, was seen as central to healing from intergenerational trauma and restoring wellness.

Participants also identified solutions. Some are actively involving youth in fishing practices despite barriers, while others are advocating in environmental decision-making spaces to assert Indigenous rights and protect ecological systems. These acts reflect a public health strategy rooted in self-determination,

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cultural revitalization, and collective care, principles supported by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action and the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP).

Conclusion

The findings underscore that salmon is not simply a traditional food, it is a determinant of health. Its decline has profound consequences for First Nations' physical health, mental well-being, cultural identity, and community cohesion. A public health approach that centers Indigenous perspectives must recognize the loss of salmon and traditional food systems as more than environmental degradation; it is a driver of health inequity and intergenerational harm. Restoring health among First Nations cannot be separated from restoring relationships to the land, water, food, and each other. This aligns with the United Nations' One Health model (refer to Appendix 8), which emphasizes the interconnectedness of human, animal, and environmental health (United Nations Environment Programme, 2021). In the context of First Nations, the health of salmon and river ecosystems is inseparable from the health of communities.

Policy reform, ecological protection, and the re-establishment of Indigenous food sovereignty are essential public health interventions. As participants emphasized, if the salmon are thriving, the people are thriving. Supporting the return of salmon is not just environmental work, it is health equity work, cultural healing, and a step toward Indigenous resurgence.

Salmon were also seen as symbolic, mirrors of resilience. "They just keep swimming and keep swimming. And surviving. So that's inspiring to me, to just keep fighting and keep pushing" (Int. 12, South VI).
This vision of the salmon as resilient beings offers more than metaphor, it reflects a cultural ethos of persistence, survival, and hope. In this light, efforts to restore salmon are not only about reversing loss, but about honoring resilience, of the salmon, the people, and the reciprocal relationships that sustain both.

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SUGGESTIONS

Advancing the health and well-being of First Nations through salmon recovery and restoration requires a public health approach grounded in Indigenous rights, knowledge systems, and culturally specific determinants of health. Guided by the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP), the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Calls to Action* (refer to Appendix 7), and the principles of Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession (OCAP), several key recommendations can be identified.

Support Indigenous Governance and Food Sovereignty

Participants emphasized that restoring salmon access must be led by First Nations and guided by traditional governance systems. Consistent with UNDRIP Articles 18 and 20, which affirm Indigenous peoples' rights to participate in decision-making and maintain traditional economic systems (United Nations, 2007), First Nations must be enabled to co-develop and lead fisheries policies - including allocation decisions. The TRC Call to Action #18 urges governments to recognize and implement Indigenous healing practices, including access to traditional foods, which are essential to restoring physical, spiritual, and cultural well-being (TRC, 2015). Supporting Indigenous food sovereignty, as a fundamental determinant of health, requires systemic policy reforms that address historical exclusions and ensure equitable allocation of fish resources.

Reinvest in Land-Based Knowledge Transmission

Traditional fishing and food preparation practices are integral to physical health, mental wellness, and cultural identity. Intergenerational teaching, particularly for youth, must be actively supported through culturally embedded education, community health initiatives, and land-based healing programs. These initiatives respond directly to TRC Calls to Action #13 and #22, which emphasize the preservation of Indigenous languages and knowledge as part of health service delivery (TRC, 2015). Programs should be co-designed with communities and reflect OCAP principles to ensure that data, knowledge, and resources remain within First Nations' control (FNIGC, 2014). Public health agencies should prioritize funding for youth-led fishing camps, elder-youth mentorship, and culturally relevant nutritional programming.

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Integrate Environmental Stewardship into Public Health Planning

Participants identified salmon health as a barometer of ecological and community well-being. As climate change and industrial degradation compromise water systems, there is a growing need to embed environmental monitoring, habitat restoration, and conservation within Indigenous public health strategies. This reflects UNDRIP Article 29, which affirms Indigenous rights to the conservation and protection of the environment and productive capacity of their lands and resources (United Nations, 2007). Community-led monitoring and stewardship programs should be funded as essential components of climate adaptation and public health resilience.

Address Intergenerational Trauma and Scarcity Through Culturally Rooted Mental Health Supports

The erosion of salmon systems has not only impacted diet but also contributed to loss of identity, stress, and emotional distress, particularly among those who recall earlier abundance. Healing from intergenerational trauma must include land-based practices, food sharing, and relational ethics rooted in Indigenous worldviews. TRC Call to Action #21 calls for funding of Indigenous healing centres and culturally appropriate mental health services (TRC, 2015), while OCAP underscores the right of communities to shape how healing is defined and pursued. These initiatives must be long-term, trauma-informed, and community-driven to rebuild the social fabric disrupted by colonial policy.

Ultimately, restoring salmon abundance is a public health imperative rooted in Indigenous rights, environmental justice, and cultural resurgence. Aligning with UNDRIP, TRC, and OCAP frameworks ensures that this work is not only ethical but also effective. Long-term investment in Indigenous leadership, food systems, and ecological stewardship is essential to improving health equity and sustaining cultural well-being for generations to come.

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FUTURE RESEARCH IMPLEMENTATION & LIMITATIONS

Future research on the impact of the decline of wild Pacific salmon on FNs health in British Columbia should prioritize expanding the geographic scope and depth of data collection. This includes obtaining more interviews and health data from northern regions of the province, where communities may be underrepresented in current research yet significantly affected by salmon population changes. A more focused and region-specific data analysis should also be conducted across Vancouver Island to better understand how impacts may vary across different First Nations communities, considering local ecological, cultural, and socioeconomic contexts that are specific to the Island. Ecologically, Vancouver Island has different watershed dynamics, salmon run patterns, and oceanographic conditions compared to the mainland. These environmental distinctions affect both the availability and the health of salmon stocks, meaning that the consequences of salmon decline may manifest differently across Island communities than in mainland regions. Many First Nations on Vancouver Island face unique socioeconomic and infrastructure challenges, including relative geographic isolation, limited access to alternative protein sources, and strained health and social services. These compounding factors can intensify the health impacts of reduced salmon availability, particularly in remote communities on an island, where salmon remains a vital and irreplaceable food source.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between salmon availability and health, a mixed-methods study should be implemented. This would combine qualitative insights, such as lived experiences and Traditional Knowledge, with quantitative analysis of salmon allocation, obtainment, and measurable health outcomes within affected populations. Such an approach can provide a more holistic view of how food sovereignty and cultural ties to salmon are linked to physical and mental well-being.

Comparative studies should also be incorporated into future research. These include comparisons between Haida Gwaii and other regions of British Columbia to examine governmental differences in salmon allocation policies and health outcomes. Additionally, a cross-border comparison between British Columbia and Washington State could offer valuable insights into the future of First Nations in BC, particularly if salmon populations continue to decline without improvements. These comparisons could highlight the broader effects of environmental change, policy differences, and conservation efforts on Indigenous communities across the Pacific Northwest. By implementing these strategies, future research will be better equipped to inform culturally relevant, regionally specific, and effective policy responses that improve the historically neglected health of FNs.

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APPENDIX 1: TWO-EYED SEEING

The Two-Eyed Seeing (TES) framework is the guiding principle that influences the Integrative Science co-learning space and was first taught by Mi'kmaw Elder Albert Marshall in 2004 (IISH, 2025). This framework refers to learning to see from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing, and from the other eye with the strengths of Western knowledge and ways of knowing, ultimately, learning to use both eyes together, for the benefit of all. This approach is used to honour both Indigenous and Western ontologies and methodologies, as well as to draw attention to the relational aspects of diverse understandings of complex matters. Research is often grounded in Western epistemological frameworks, the TES approach ensures that Indigenous ways of knowing and sharing knowledge are meaningfully integrated throughout the research process, from design to dissemination. In this study, the research team committed to a TES framework, which informed every stage: developing research questions and the interview guide, facilitating the interviews, collecting and analyzing data, and presenting the findings.

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APPENDIX 2: SOCIAL ECOLOGICAL MODEL

The Social Ecological Model (SEM) is a theoretical framework used to understand the complex interplay between individual, interpersonal, community, and societal factors that influence behaviors, health outcomes, and well-being. It is widely applied in public health, education, community development, and research with Indigenous communities to emphasize how environments shape experiences and outcomes.

At the individual level, personal factors such as knowledge, skills, attitudes, and biological predispositions directly impact behavior and decision-making. The interpersonal level includes relationships with family, friends, and peers, which can offer support, norms, and social pressures that influence behavior (McLeroy et al., 1988). Moving outward, the organizational level involves institutions and systems, such as schools, workplaces, and health services, that can enable or restrict access to resources and opportunities (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Beyond that, the community level encompasses the broader networks and environments where social relationships occur, such as neighborhoods, cultural communities, or local infrastructure, which can facilitate or hinder engagement, belonging, and access to services (Golden & Earp, 2012). Finally, the societal or policy level involves larger structural forces such as laws, policies, colonial legacies, economic systems, and cultural norms that shape the conditions under which individuals and communities live (McLeroy et al., 1988).

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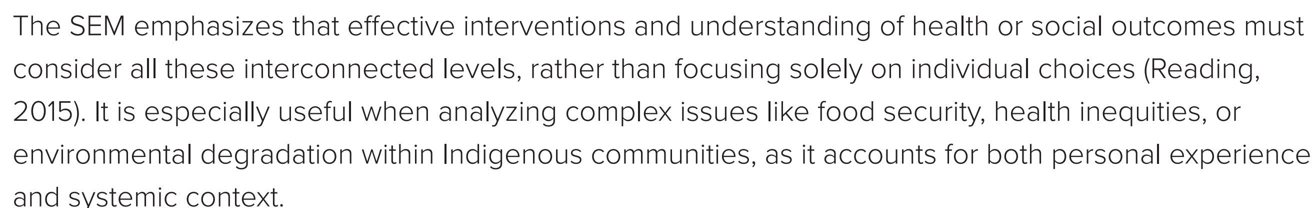

The SEM emphasizes that effective interventions and understanding of health or social outcomes must consider all these interconnected levels, rather than focusing solely on individual choices (Reading, 2015). It is especially useful when analyzing complex issues like food security, health inequities, or environmental degradation within Indigenous communities, as it accounts for both personal experience and systemic context.

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APPENDIX 3: DELGAMUUKW V. BRITISH COLUMBIA

Delgamuukw v. British Columbia (1997) is a landmark Supreme Court of Canada decision that clarified the legal nature of Aboriginal title in Canada. The case arose from a land claim by the Gitxsan and Wet'suwet'en peoples over 58,000 square kilometers in British Columbia. The Court held that Aboriginal title is a unique, constitutionally protected right under section 35(1) of the *Constitution Act*, 1982, granting Indigenous peoples exclusive use and occupation of their traditional lands for a variety of purposes, not limited to traditional practices. Crucially, the Court emphasized that oral history must be properly recognized and considered as valid evidence in Aboriginal rights cases, correcting the trial judge's failure to do so. While the Court did not make a final ruling on title due to these evidentiary issues, it ordered a new trial and set a framework for how governments may justify infringements on Aboriginal title, requiring meaningful consultation and, where appropriate, compensation. This case has had a lasting impact on Indigenous rights jurisprudence in Canada.

1. Delgamuukw v. British Columbia, 1997 CanLII 302 (SCC), [1997] 3 SCR 1010, https://canlii.ca/t/1fqz8

APPENDIX 4: FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

Food security refers to the consistent access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food for an active and healthy life (FAO, 2006). The decline of salmon populations, coupled with the lasting impacts of colonization, has severely affected food security for many First Nations communities. Salmon is a traditional food central to Indigenous diets, economies, and cultural practices; its reduction due to overfishing, habitat destruction, and climate change has disrupted this vital food source (Bennett et al., 2018). Colonization further compounded food insecurity by displacing communities, restricting access to traditional territories, and imposing policies that undermined Indigenous food systems and governance (Coté, 2016). Together, these forces have diminished First Nations' ability to maintain self-sufficient, culturally appropriate food systems.

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APPENDIX 5: CANNING SALMON

First Nations communities along the Pacific Northwest coast have practiced salmon preservation for thousands of years, with canning becoming a significant adaptation during and after European contact. Traditionally, preservation methods included drying, smoking, and fermenting salmon to ensure year-round food security and support trade and cultural practices. With the rise of industrialized canning in the 19th century, Indigenous peoples engaged in the salmon canning industry, often as skilled laborers, but also faced exploitation and displacement from traditional fishing territories. Contemporary scholarship emphasizes the resilience of Indigenous knowledge systems, highlighting how First Nations are reclaiming traditional preservation methods and integrating them with modern practices to support food sovereignty, cultural revitalization, and environmental stewardship (Turner & Turner, 2008; Langdon, 2007). These efforts are not only about food but also about asserting rights, maintaining intergenerational knowledge, and sustaining the ecological balance of salmon populations.

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2. Turner, N. J., & Turner, K. L. (2008). "Where our women used to get the food": Cumulative effects and loss of ethnobotanical knowledge and practice; case study from coastal British Columbia. *Botany*, 86(2), 103–115. https://doi.org/10.1139/B07-020

APPENDIX 6: UNDRIP

***The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP) is a comprehensive international human rights roadmap to advance reconciliation with Indigenous peoples.** It articulates and affirms a broad range of collective and individual rights that constitute the minimum standards to protect the rights of Indigenous peoples and contribute to their survival, dignity, and well-being (FNFC, 2023).

UNDRIP was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2007. UNDRIP has been adopted by both Canada and the Province of BC as the framework for reconciliation. The Province of British Columbia passed the *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act* (DRIPA) into law in November 2019. Canada's adoption of UNDRIP under the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act* (UNDA) received Royal Assent on June 21, 2021.

1. United Nations. (2007). *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples.html

2. First Nations Fisheries Council of BC (2023). *Stemming the Tide: Getting Below the Surface - Introducing An Indigenous Framework for Safeguarding Wild Fish, Aquatic Habitats and First Nations Communities through the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. https://www.fnfisheriescouncil.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/FNFC-Stemming-The-Tide.pdf

APPENDIX 7: TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION'S CALLS TO ACTION

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) was created in 2008 as a result of the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement, the largest class-action settlement in Canadian history. The TRC's purpose was to document the history and lasting impacts of the residential school system on survivors, their families, communities, and others affected. In total, the TRC heard from 6,500 witnesses over 6 years.

The TRC's final report was published in 2015, creating a historical record of the experiences and impacts of the residential school system. One outcome of the report was a document detailing 94 Calls to Action across a wide range of areas including child welfare, education, health, justice, language and culture. One of the Calls to Action was for federal, provincial, and municipal governments to adopt and implement the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP).

1. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2015). *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action*. https://ehprnh2mwo3.exactdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf

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APPENDIX 8: ONE HEALTH

The United Nations One Health Model is a collaborative, multisectoral, and transdisciplinary approach that recognizes the fundamental interconnection between the health of humans, animals, plants, and the environment. It emphasizes that sustainable health outcomes depend on integrated strategies that address these domains collectively rather than in isolation. This model has gained prominence in the wake of global challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, emerging zoonotic diseases, and antimicrobial resistance. Central to the model is the understanding that human health is deeply linked to the ecosystems we inhabit, including food systems, water sources, and the well-being of animals with whom we share these environments.

Governance of the One Health approach is led by a Quadripartite alliance composed of four key international organizations: the World Health Organization (WHO), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH), and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). Together, these agencies developed the One Health Joint Plan of Action (2022–2026) to guide implementation globally, build capacity across sectors, and ensure coordinated responses to health threats. The plan prioritizes pandemic prevention, food safety, climate resilience, and health equity through intersectoral collaboration.

One Health principles advocate for a holistic and preventive approach to public health, emphasizing early detection, shared surveillance, and cross-disciplinary action to reduce risks that emerge at the interface of people, animals, and ecosystems. This includes recognizing that roughly 60–75% of emerging infectious diseases are zoonotic in origin, and that failure to integrate environmental considerations into public health planning increases vulnerability to pandemics and chronic inequities. Moreover, by promoting sustainable environmental stewardship and strengthening food systems, One Health contributes directly to several UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The One Health model is not just about managing disease outbreaks, it also speaks to broader issues of health equity, environmental justice, and cultural survival, especially for communities whose health and identity are intimately tied to land, water, and traditional food systems. In this way, it offers a framework that resonates deeply with Indigenous-led perspectives on health and well-being, which have long understood the inseparability of ecological and human health.

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