

# Cannery Days: Museum Exhibits and Heiltsuk Perspectives

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The museum exhibit *Cannery Days – A Chapter in the Lives of the Heiltsuk* grew out of my search for new ways to talk about Heiltsuk people and their relationship to fish. Preparing this exhibit gave me an opportunity to illustrate this relationship without diminishing the lives and experiences of Heiltsuk people. This paper discusses some of the issues that arose for me in the preparation of that exhibit and in writing my Master's thesis in anthropology (Brown 1994a, 1994b).

*Cannery Days* was developed in collaboration with the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology (MOA) between 1991 and 1993, and was installed in May 1993. MOA has a mandate to recognize the voices and diversity of peoples throughout the world, and this exhibit fits that goal. It also reflects the growing awareness in museums, in anthropology, in universities and in the media about the way the history and culture of First Nations has been presented and interpreted.

## *The Central Role of Fish in Heiltsuk Life*

Over a period of at least ten thousand years, numerous First Nations in the Pacific Northwest evolved a sophisticated coexistence with each other and with the rich natural resources of their lands and waters. Until contact with Europeans, they enjoyed unlimited access to and control over fisheries that they used for social, economic and cultural purposes. In an absolute sense, these resources were their wealth.

First Nations cultures and economies have been consistently misunderstood by non-Native society. Non-Natives have particular trouble understanding how fish can be so important to us. There are two fundamental reasons for this misunderstanding. One is the inability of non-Native people to understand how an entire culture could be based on fish. Another is the failure to understand that sophisticated cultures could exist without agriculture and writing. These misunderstandings persist today.

This issue has more than academic interest for me. Three genera-

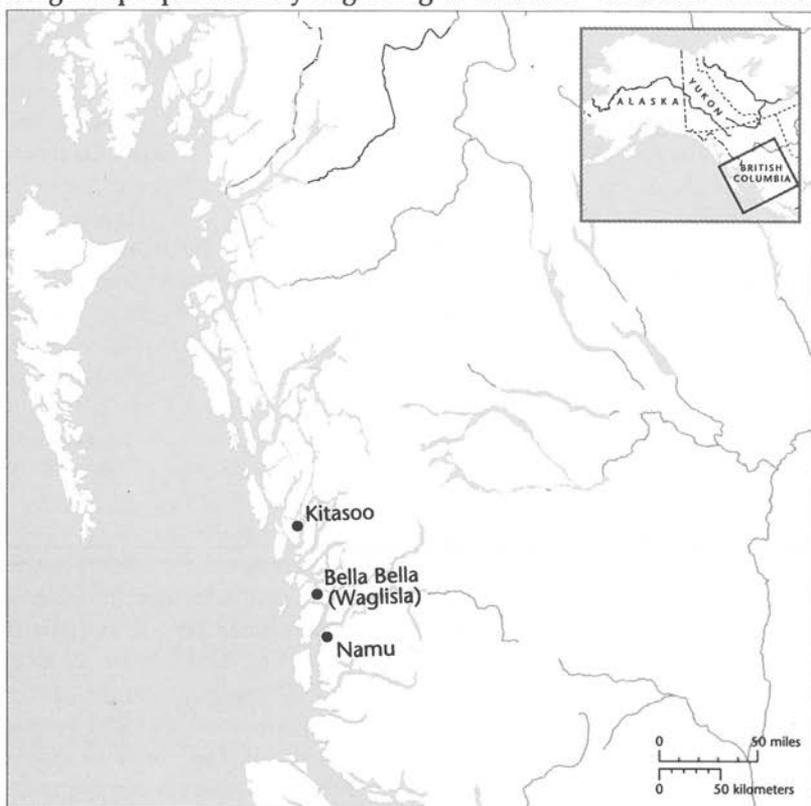
tions of my family have fished and worked in canneries on the central coast of British Columbia. Even though I now live in a city, fish remain a big part of my life. My family cans salmon every year. My mother maintains an ongoing trade network with family and friends in Bella Bella and Kitasoo, and this trading network has been in existence for as long as anyone can remember, from time immemorial. Nevertheless, it is a way of life that is poorly understood by the general public, and First Nations find it frustrating to have to try to translate and present this worldview in a form that the general public can understand and support.

During my studies at the University of British Columbia, I became aware that conventional academic studies discuss the relationships between people and fish very differently from the way they are discussed in First Nations communities. Despite an extensive literature on the modern fishing and processing industry and on the role of First Nations in the development of those fisheries, most academic writing masks the crucial importance of fish to First Nations people. Some recent studies analyze fish as a common property resource and focus attention on issues of conservation and the larger economy (Marchak *et al.* 1987). Other studies look at the history of the salmon fishing industry from a particular ideological perspective or from the standpoint of a special interest group. In such studies, cannery workers are portrayed as an exploited labour force and their work as supplementary to the fishing industry. For example, anthropologist James McDonald views the involvement of Native women and children in the canneries as exploitative and disruptive of their way of life (1984: 49). Alicja Muszynski analyses the place of Native women in the formation of the B.C. salmon industry from a Marxist perspective (1986). By contrast, my exhibit focuses on the historic and ongoing importance of the fisheries to one distinct First Nation on the central coast.

Because of my experience in the modern fishing industry as well as my knowledge of our traditional fishery, I began to question the way this relationship is represented in the literature. Yes, it is true that Heiltsuk people worked in canneries for ten cents an hour. It is also true that they worked long hours under poor working conditions. But the way we are written about basically devalues the life and times of my mother, her mother and me. There is a great deal more to cannery life than is told in the literature. It is a human story with highs and lows. The exhibit let me show an important chapter in the lives of my people and it allows them to speak for themselves.

I was motivated to incorporate this exhibit as a major component of my Master's thesis for two reasons. First, I have a personal stake in

this matter. The recent B.C. Court of Appeal decision in five cases relating to aboriginal fishing rights concludes that there was no aboriginal right to sell fish commercially.<sup>1</sup> This shows a profound and unsettling failure to understand the social and economic fabric of past and present First Nations societies in British Columbia. Second, with the current First Nations treaty negotiations in B.C., there is an urgent need for Native people to begin an intensive education process about the importance of fish in our lives, making more use of the news media, museum exhibits, video recordings and other communication systems. For this reason, I began searching for different ways to illustrate this special relationship. This paper explores how the cultural, social and economic importance of fish to First Nations can be illustrated, using a form that Aboriginal people are only beginning to examine—museum exhibits.



Northwest Coast of British Columbia.

Because of time constraints, I concentrated on the Namu cannery, now abandoned, where people from Waglisla (Bella Bella) travelled to work for many years (see map above). Approximately 1,400 people live

in Waglisla today, with 500-600 more Heiltsuk people living in Vancouver and elsewhere. Many of them worked in the Namu cannery. I argue that the voices of women and men who lived and worked in Namu do give a fair representation of life and work in the British Columbia fish processing industry. As much as possible, I allowed the participants to speak for themselves in the exhibit, both in personal interviews and from archival sources. These voices speak eloquently both about cannery life and about the past and present meaning and importance of fish and fisheries to Heiltsuk people.

The distinction between traditional fishing and the modern fishing industry is an important issue in the exhibit. In 1888, the federal government banned the sale of all produce from traditional fisheries and also banned the use of traps or spears even to fish for salmon for personal consumption (McDonald 1987: 207). I wanted the exhibit to show the historic importance of fish to First Nations. I also wanted people to be able to see that fish continue to be the wealth of our Nations. I especially wanted to show the devastation that the Indian 'food fish' regulation of 1888, which equated Indian fisheries strictly with subsistence harvesting, had on First Nations societies.

Native people have long-standing concerns about the damage caused by the modern industrial fishing industry to our traditional fisheries. In 1916, the Chiefs of my community, Bella Bella, wrote a letter of protest to the Indian agent, Ivan Fougner, stating,

From all time our fathers have taken salmon from the rivers near our home, for dry salmon is to us what bread is to white people, we cannot do without it. During the past few years there has been a growing demand for humpback and dog salmon at the canneries [*sic*] of Bella Bella and Namu, the result of this demand is we find that some rivers which used to supply us with humpback salmon now contain very few, and we are afraid that it will be the same with dog salmon. Will you please do your best to protect our interests in the matter. (Fougner 1916: 387)

The concerns expressed by the Heiltsuk Chiefs in 1916 are equally valid today. Historian Dianne Newell says the Indian 'food fish' regulation raised two profound issues for First Nations:

First, it separated Indian harvesting and use of fish for personal consumption from that for economic, social or cultural purposes. . . . The distinction between Indians fishing for their own food and fishing for any other purpose was an artificial one as far as Indian culture and practice was concerned. Secondly, it divided resource production from resource management, officially transferring all management of this crucial Indian food and commercial resource from Indians to the state., (Newell 1993: 108-9)

This is why it has been important to clarify terms. In the exhibit, I use the term "traditional fisheries" to refer to First Nations fisheries for *all* purposes including food, trade, barter and sale. The continued use of the term "food fishery" by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans and by the fishing industry downgrades and trivializes our aboriginal right to use our economic resources for the benefit of our Nation as we have done and continue to do.

### *The Challenge Facing First Nations*

It is frustrating for First Nations to continually have to prove that we have a distinctive way of life. Gaining public support is very important for us; however, we do not have the resources to deal with our many difficulties. Most administrators serving band councils in BC are over-worked and are trying to deal simultaneously with a whole range of issues: natural resources, social problems, drugs and alcohol, sexual abuse, education and welfare. When First Nations get to meet with the Department of Fisheries and Oceans about issues related to fisheries, they are faced with bureaucrats, administrators, lawyers and scientists. While our negotiators may make some apparent gains, they still have to go home to cope with many other urgent problems.

At the same time, powerful and well organized industrial lobbies are trying to sway public opinion against First Nations. The challenge facing us is to convey to non-Native people that our fisheries are the wealth of our nations. So far, we have not been successful. If we are to get public support, we have to tell our story to the public. This has been part of my motivation to prepare the exhibit.

### *Anthropology from a Heiltsuk Perspective*

My determination to change the way First Nations have been represented in the literature comes from strong feelings about my identity. One of the things the different First Nations of British Columbia share is our determination to retain our identities and cultures. Thomas Berger recently remarked,

Native people will not be assimilated, and their fierce wish to retain their own culture is intensifying as industry, technology and communications forge a larger and larger mass culture, extruding diversity. . . . The Native people have survived Draconian measures for half a millennium. They may be poor, they may be oppressed, but they know who they are. (Berger 1992: 161)

To date, First Nations have been extremely frustrated with the way

their history and way of life have been represented and interpreted. Virginia Dominguez points out that one far-reaching consequence of non-Native scholars writing the history of other peoples is that

When we acknowledge that an idea, object, history or tradition is not ours, we distance ourselves from it. When we proceed to use, incorporate or represent it, we arrogate the right to employ what we acknowledge is not ours. . . it is something we do because of our perception of it as other. The implicit hierarchical nature of otherness invites seemingly innocuous practices of representation that amount to (often unknowingly) strategies of domination through appropriation. (1987: 132)

A First Nations student in anthropology and museology, I continually struggle with these issues. Although change is slow, First Nations are starting to confront these issues and to develop resolutions. About the challenges museum and anthropologists face today, Dr. Michael Ames, Director of UBC's Museum of Anthropology, writes:

As Native intellectuals regain control over their own images and their own destinies, they will also claim the right to provide the answers. It will be wise to listen carefully, even if we may not always agree, because the growing intellectual autonomy of indigenous people will have considerable impact on how anthropologists and museums deal in the future with 'natives.' (Ames 1990: 80-87)

Nancy Marie Mitchell, a Native American anthropologist, says it well:

If these majority institutions looked to their tribal counterparts for more than a token appearance, some real contributions could be made to this field. . . . Perhaps the major contribution I see coming from an indigenous agenda for museums is the granting of humanity to those people talked about in exhibits. Not only is it more engaging for a museum visitor to learn about an identifiable 'real' person, it is also more respectful. . . . Who will believe now that the subjects of research can offer more than just raw data for other peoples' theories? Their voices can be heard if one just listens. (Mitchell 1990: 16-19)

It has been suggested by anthropologist Wayne Warry that researchers concerned with Native issues should be guided in their work by an adherence to the principle of Native self-determination. He advocates a shift from independent to collaborative research for several reasons:

Research findings, cloaked in jargon, have been unintelligible to communities or have been largely irrelevant to community needs. . . . Native leaders now advocate research that is collaborative and meaningful to their communities. Native research takes place in an increasingly politicized and chaotic policy-making environment. . . . Our responsibility is to make

explicit a participatory methodology whereby our own and the Native voice are differentiated and strengthened. . . . Collaboration ensures self-reflection and invites critical reassessment of our method. (1990: 61-70)

As a Heiltsuk woman and a student of anthropology, these words reinforced my goal of granting humanity to Heiltsuk people through a collaborative exhibit. I also thought it important that the research be useful and relevant to my community and that it be presented in a language that was understandable to my Nation and to the general public.

As an anthropologist, I find that my Heiltsuk origin confers several advantages. First, I do not carry the baggage of non-Native anthropologists. Although some community members were initially a little reserved when I went to their homes, that rapidly disappeared and people were both generous and forthcoming. Most members of our community view anthropologists with distrust and scepticism. Heiltsuk history and culture has received less documentation by ethnographers than that of our neighbours, the Kwakwaka'wakw peoples (Kolstee 1988; Black 1989: 274). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, anthropologists carried an ideal model of an unspoiled 'pure' Native culture. Bella Bella was ignored, perhaps because of its early involvement with missionaries (Black 1989: 275). Franz Boas, for example, concluded by the 1920s that "the whole culture of the Bella Bella has practically disappeared" (Boas 1928: ix).

The Heiltsuk Band Council now screens anyone wishing to carry out research in Bella Bella. Since I was born there and come from a large, well-known and respected family, it was easier for me to get formal permission from the Band Council than it might be for other researchers. I was also acutely aware of the need to show proper respect to community members. Once people understood what my research was about and knew that I would not misuse or distort what they said to me in interviews, our conversations became more comfortable and people were generous with their time and knowledge. They also grew excited about the exhibit.

Another advantage comes from my knowledge of the people, our territories and our involvement in the traditional and modern fisheries. I knew what to look for, whom to seek out, and where to begin looking. I also had access to the archival materials and photos in the Heiltsuk Cultural Centre. Because my family has been involved for years in the fishing and fish processing industry, they told me who was most knowledgeable and directed me to people with good photo collections of Namu. People trusted me with treasured family photos, many of them never before seen outside the family, and they allowed me to use them in the exhibit.

Most Heiltsuk families have members who have worked and fished in Namu and other central coast canneries for three or four generations. Looking at photos of Namu brought back a flood of warm memories for many of the men and women who spoke to me about fishing days and cannery experiences. These events were discussed with pride as people recalled incidents from their family histories. By using old photographs to look at the history of canneries like Namu, I was able to gain a better sense of how Heiltsuk women connected their social life and family life to cannery work. One elder, Liz Brown, remembered that when her sister Selina McKay got married, it was the biggest wedding ever held in Namu. Other photos reminded her of the time when management at Namu cannery removed the 'Indian' and 'White' signs from the washrooms.

My life experience allowed me to evaluate critically accounts written by outsiders and to add balance by allowing people to speak for themselves. Although in the past I had often reminisced with family and friends about our cannery experiences, I was overwhelmed by the depth of feeling and by the knowledge that surfaced in the interviews, especially with older members of our community. Of particular interest to me was their concern about our traditional fisheries.

On a more personal note, as a member of the community I was able to participate fully in community life. I attended a settlement feast that was hosted by my father's family. First Nations people from up and down the coast attended, and it was a big reunion. This event, combining family activities with all I was learning about Heiltsuk history and the Namu cannery renewed my belief in myself as a Heiltsuk person and as an anthropology student. I have always been proud of who I am, but going home strengthened my identity as a Heiltsuk.

Before this trip to Bella Bella, I found academic life extremely frustrating. The university world I experienced was very abstract and very different from the world in which I grew up. I felt like I never belonged or was understood. I was also torn between my ambivalent feelings towards anthropology as it used to be, and the new 'post-colonial' anthropology, where the voices of indigenous peoples are now beginning to be heard. My personal experience and the positive responses from my community confirmed my decision to prepare an exhibit. The exhibit is now in Waglisla, my home community, and will eventually travel to other small communities and places on the coast like Oweekeno, U'Mista Cultural Centre, Klemtu, Bella Coola and Port Edward cannery as well as to urban museums like the Richmond, Delta and Steveston museums.

## Note

1. See *Canadian Native Law Reporter*, [1993] 4 CNLR *With Cumulative Indexes*. Saskatchewan: University of Saskatchewan. *R. v. Gladstone* (1993); *R. v. Lewis* (1993); *R. v. Nikal* (1993); *R. v. NTC Smokehouse Ltd.* (1993); *R. v. Vanderpeet* (1993).

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