

Dm sibilhaa'nm da laxyuubm Gitxaala: Picking Abalone in Gitxaala Territory

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In the face of aggressive overfishing of *bilhaa* (abalone) by non-Indigenous commercial fishermen, the Canadian Department of Fisheries and Oceans closed all forms of harvesting of *bilhaa*. This paper describes the longstanding ecologically appropriate harvesting practices of Gitxaala, an indigenous nation on the northwest coast of North America. The paper documents the antiquity of Gitxaala fisheries practices. The paper concludes by arguing for a return to a Gitxaala controlled *bilhaa* fishery.

Key words: abalone, indigenous fisheries, northwest coast, Gitxaala, Kitkatla, Tsimshian, traditional ecological knowledge

Introduction

Abalone, or *bilhaa* as Gitxaala people call them, are prized globally as a food, an object of spiritual importance, and as a decorative inlay. From Australia to Africa to Asia, people consume this slow growing single shelled snail. Along the Pacific Northwest of North America, several species of *bilhaa* can be found that have been used for millennia by Indigenous peoples as food, items of trade and exchange, and as decorative inlays, as jewelry, and sewn onto robes and ceremonial regalia (Blake 2004). When Europeans arrived, they adapted to this local demand and used large *bilhaa* from near Monterey Bay in California as a currency of trade in the early maritime fur trade (Gibson 1992:9, 228-229).

Bilhaa have not fared well under the commercial pressures of the global economy. Traditional harvest practices and historic limitations in technology served to restrain human

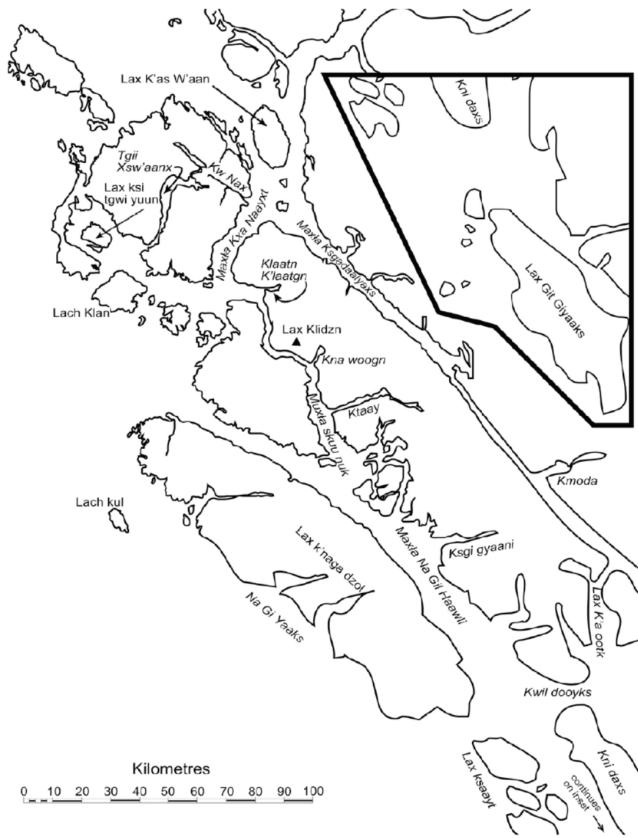
harvests to extreme low tides. The advances of a capitalist market economy and 20th century developments in underwater diving have almost universally destroyed the global *bilhaa* stocks. This is no less true in the traditional territories of the Gitxaala where *bilhaa* had been harvested sustainably for millennia. Then, in the space of three decades, *bilhaa* were fished to the edge of extinction by a non-aboriginal commercial fishery.

The development of the non-aboriginal commercial dive fishery in British Columbia is a classic example of competitive greed combining with ineffectual resource management to decimate a resource.¹ Prior to 1972, *bilhaa* harvesting was unregulated (Adkins 2000). Most harvesting in this period was either recreational or aboriginal. The pre-1972 annual harvest rates were estimated to be less than 15-20 tons (Campbell 2000). However, the combination of increased price to fishermen for *bilhaa* with uncontrolled increases in fishing capacity led to a rapid takeoff of the non-aboriginal *bilhaa* fishery in the 1970s (Campbell 2000). Annual rates of harvest quickly shot up to 481 tons in 1977 and then were held to 47 tons from 1985 to the closure of the fishery in 1990 (Adkins 2000; Campbell 2000). A significant portion—about half—of the non-aboriginal commercial fishing effort was concentrated on British Columbia's north coast in Gitxaala traditional territory (Adkins 2000). During the period in which non-aboriginal commercial catch data was maintained (1977-1990), the catch per unit effort declined by 46 percent (Campbell 2000). Canada's Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) calculated that by 1984 the *bilhaa* stocks had been depleted by more than 75 percent (Campbell 2000).

In a world in which *bilhaa* have been so devastated, it is interesting to note that there is a paucity of materials from the northwest coast about the indigenous *bilhaa* fisheries. Two monographs that draw from California (Chiang 2008; Field 2008) engage with local histories and practices

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Figure 1. Gitxaala Place Names



of bilhaa fisheries. Chiang has an interesting discussion of racialization of fishermen along the Monterey coast in the 1880s. Field's collaborative ethnography turns on issues of the symbolic power of these amazing mollusks. Chaing and Field's monographs are complemented by more than two decades of archaeological research by Jon Erlandson and colleagues who have produced a rich body of findings related to red abalone in the Channel Islands of California (see, e.g., Erlandson and Rick 2010; Erlandson, Rick, and Braje 2009). Most of the extant literature related to British Columbia post-dates the fishery collapse and closure in 1990 and is focused on bilhaa recovery plans. This paper provides the first detailed description of indigenous bilhaa harvest practices in British Columbia.

In the face of the coast wide collapse of the British Columbia bilhaa fishery, it may seem that there is no serious alternative but a total shutdown. However, there is a harvest approach that does not threaten or undermine bilhaa's ability to thrive. Drawing upon long-term research with members of the Gitxaala Nation, this paper describes the ways in which an indigenous people have harvested bilhaa in an ecologically sound manner. This is accomplished by first providing contextual information on Gitxaala, the Gitxaala system of

governance regulating resource harvesting, and then discussing the bilhaa fishery. The paper concludes by arguing for a return to a community controlled bilhaa fishery.

Gitxaala: People and Place

Laxyuup Gitxaala (Gitxaala's territory) lies along the northern coastline of British Columbia. Our stories and songs speak to us about who we are and about the things, such as bilhaa, with which we share our laxyuup. Our coastal nation extends from near the present day site of Prince Rupert southward more than 100 miles. This is an area of the world framed, in the mainstream imagination, by images of spirit bears and misty lichen and moss-draped rainforests. It is a region of noted ecological diversity—a magnet for ecotourists and environmentalists alike.

Our home community is the village of Lach Klan, located in the northwest portion of laxyuup Gitxaala. Today, most community members live away from the village in places like the nearby Prince Rupert or further afield in metropolitan areas such as Vancouver, Canada. Nonetheless, social networks are maintained through the circulation of Gitxaala's own food, traditional foods.

Gitxaala society is shaped by social relations between people, non-human people, and place (Menziess and Butler 2007). To be a person in Gitxaala society is to know one's history, to whom one is related, and from where one comes. This sense of place and belonging is rooted in a living oral knowledge.² Our oral knowledge—history, songs, traditions, ecology, practices—has grown here through the active intersection of an Indigenous people within and against the ebbs and flows of our natural and social landscapes.

Our society is organized in a number of ways: clan, class, and house group. Each Gitxaala individual (with the exception, in the past, for slaves) belongs to one of four clans: *ganhada* (raven), *gispuwada* (blackfish), *lasgeek* (eagle), or *laxgibu* (wolf). Clans do not, however, exercise any specific political authority. That rests with the *sm'ooygit* (hereditary leaders) and their house groups. Clan affiliation does inform who can marry whom.

Ownership of, access to, and rights of use of resource gathering locations are governed by multi-generational matrilineages called *walp* or house groups. Notwithstanding the prominence of a paramount *sm'ooygit* or leader at the village level, the effective source of political power and authority with respect to the territory rests with the house leaders. Membership in a particular house group is determined matrilineally, by one's mothers' position. This social unit is the effective political building block of Gitxaala society. Each house owns and has responsibility for a patchwork quilt of social use areas. Taken together, the house territories, situated around natural ecosystem units such as watersheds, form the backbone of Gitxaala's collective territory.

Titles, or hereditary names, are an important aspect of Gitxaala social organization. Hereditary names are passed along from one generation to the next through the

feast system. Hereditary names are linked to histories, crest images, rights, responsibilities, and territories. An important subset of hereditary names provides access to and control over key harvesting areas within laxyuup Gitxaala. This system of hereditary names, clans, and house groups provides the institutional structure within which harvesting of natural resources was and is governed.

As Caroline Butler and I have described elsewhere, “the integrated and community-based nature of Gitxaala resource use structures a balance between community needs and ecosystem health” (Menzies and Butler 2007:445). Community members organize harvesting in accord with a notion of “need-based resource use—harvesting the minimum required for food, trade, and sale for a reasonable livelihood” (Menzies and Butler 2007:456). This form of harvesting relies upon self-regulation and is reinforced through oral histories of times when people forgot themselves and mistreated our animal relations (Menzies 2006:99; see also Berkes 2008 for a more general discussion of indigenous forms of resource management). Mistreatment was met with retribution as the animals withdrew themselves from availability and crisis and disaster was visited upon the people (Menzies 2006). Harvesting is, thus, structured to address the needs of our animal relations (i.e., ecosystem health) and the needs of our community. This approach to harvesting within Gitxaala society is well encapsulated in the concept of *syt giüilum goot* (being of one heart) whereby the relations of humans and our non-human relations coexist in a network of social obligations and responsibilities (Menzies and Butler 2007).

Gitxaala Bilhaa Fisheries in Context

Bilhaa is one of a set of Gitxaala cultural keystone species. Cultural keystone species are species that “play a unique role in shaping and characterizing the identity of the people who rely on them.... These are species that become embedded in a people’s cultural traditions and narratives, their ceremonies, dances, songs, and discourse” (Garibaldi and Turner 2004:1). Until the late 20th century, Gitxaala people were unhindered in the harvesting of bilhaa within the traditional territory and in accord with longstanding systems of indigenous authority and jurisdiction. However, the rapid expansion of a non-aboriginal commercial dive fishery through the 1970s-1980s brought bilhaa stocks perilously close to extinction. The DFO responded to this non-aboriginal induced crisis by closing the total bilhaa fishery. DFO made no apparent effort to accommodate indigenous interests.

The closure of bilhaa fishing has left a palpable sense of grief amongst Gitxaala people, especially community elders who have grown up with bilhaa as a key item of food and trade. Community members feel embittered that one more time a significant part of their normal lives has been closed to them by the Canadian government. Since the arrival of the first European in our midst, Gitxaala people have made clear the extent and nature of our rights, use, and occupancy of our territories. From the *yaawk* (feasts) held for the 18th century

ships skippers James Colnett and Jacinto Caamano through the various visitations of government officials, Gitxaala and our leadership have plainly expressed a longstanding ownership of these territories and the rights to use and profit from them. The exclusion from harvesting bilhaa is for Gitxaala just one more attempt to marginalize and exclude us from our capacity to carry out our normal livelihood practices.

When I first began professional research with Gitxaala in 1998, I heard over and over a story that I came to call “the abalone story.” The pervasive and ubiquitous nature of this story led me to write about it in an article published in the *Canadian Journal of Native Education* in 2004:

At the heart of the account was a government sponsored research project into the health and location of abalone conducted in the recent past. The government researchers explained that their project would benefit the local community. This would be accomplished by collecting location and population data that would make the job of protecting the abalone grounds from over harvesting and poaching more effective. After some consideration, community members agreed and a number of surveys were completed. Following the departure of the researchers, a fleet of commercial dive boats turned up on the abalone grounds that had been described to the researchers. The end result was the complete degradation of the local grounds and ultimately a complete closure of commercial abalone fishing on the coast. The community members who had participated in the study felt betrayed by the process. (Menzies 2004:22)

I go on in the article to discuss the story as a cautionary tale for researchers—as that was for whom I was writing the article in the first place. The story is also an account of the real and heartfelt loss and sense of betrayal that the community feels. For generation upon generation, community members have harvested seafood in a way that our ancestors have before them. Attempts have been made to accommodate non-Gitxaala in business, in research, and settlement, but it would seem that each instance has left the community worse off than it was before.

The “abalone story” reminds us that the impact on Gitxaala people is more than just a loss of a favored food; it is part of an ongoing colonial entanglement of disruption, resistance, and also accommodation. Nonetheless, over the course of the past two centuries, the practice of fishing, including for bilhaa, has remained highly significant to Gitxaala. Fishing constitutes a critical component, alongside of the harvest and processing of terrestrial resources, of what it is to be Gitxaala. The products of harvesting from the sea and intertidal zones are used for food, clothing, medicinal, ceremonial, and, importantly, trade. The ability to engage in trade and exchange was, and remains, an integral aspect of Gitxaala culture and society.

Gitxaala people have continued to engage in fisheries since European arrival up to the present time. While maintaining the continuity of this practice, we have also actively adapted new technologies and techniques of harvesting, processing, and trading of a variety of sea foods including, but not

restricted to: finfish, sea mammals, invertebrates of various types (such as bilhaa, clams, cockles, mussels, barnacles, crabs, chitons, sea cucumbers, sea urchins), seaweed, and kelp. Government policy, regulation, and related systematic attempts to displace Gitxaala and other indigenous peoples from their traditional territories have also contributed additional pressures for change.

Canadian fisheries policy has developed historically so as to displace and marginalize indigenous fisheries (see Diane Newell 1993). Elsewhere, I have outlined the role that Indigenous peoples played in the development of British Columbia's resource industries (Menziess and Butler 2001, 2007, 2008). Suffice to say that while critical to the development of the industrial fisheries, aboriginal peoples were systematically marginalized from key areas of these developing industries. As with all human societies, however, change in the organization of production does not in and of itself mean that a society or culture comes to a stop or ceases to exist. Nor does it mean that fisheries cease to be a relevant culturally integral aspect of being Gitxaala. In fact, the various attempts over the last century and one-half to remove Gitxaala from fisheries has not been uniform in its application. For the most part, those resources that escaped the gaze of outsiders remained generally within and under the control of Gitxaala. Until the mid-1970s, bilhaa was one of those resources that remained outside of the regulatory gaze of the Canadian state.

Bilhaa—Harvest, Processing, and Use

The Gitxaala approach to bilhaa harvesting is and has been explicitly organized to ensure the continuation of the biological stock. Gitxaala harvesting practices reflect the cultural keystone role of bilhaa as a treasured entity, a social being with whom we share relations, and as an important cultural marker of being a ranked member of Gitxaala society. The effect of this relationship is to place a cultural limitation on the harvesting of bilhaa. Bilhaa have been harvested as far back as any living person can recall and prior to the time of European contact (Butler 2004). Evidence for the antiquity of bilhaa harvest can be found in references to bilhaa in Ts'msyen and Gitxaala *adawx* (oral history), contemporary academic publications (such as, but not restricted to, faunal analysis from north coast archeological sites) (Natalie Brewster, personal communication, November 2, 2007; Andrew Martindale, personal communication, February 15, 2007), and from contemporary accounts of longstanding practice.

Adawx, Ceremonial Practice, and Use of Bilhaa

References to the presence, power, and importance of bilhaa to Ts'msyen and Gitxaala people are recorded in the *adawx* and are used on ceremonial regalia to denote power and prestige. The cultural importance of bilhaa plays a role in shaping resource-harvesting practices. In combination with the principle of *syt giutulum goot*, the high value placed

on bilhaa as a symbol of prestige and rank acts to impose a cultural limitation on harvesting levels. This is so in two ways. Firstly, the use of bilhaa as decoration and adornment is restricted to a minority of high-ranking community members. Secondly, the cultural importance of bilhaa as a signifier of rank obligates harvesters to treat bilhaa with respect such that unrestrained harvesting was and is a violation of social norms and is subject to community sanction.

Throughout Gitxaala and Ts'msyen *adawx* are accounts of how bilhaa and bilhaa adorned objects become important cultural markets. For example, "Explanation of the Abalone Bow" is an *adawx* that describes how the Bilhaa Bow became a chief's crest (Boas 1916:284, 835). In the narrative *G-it-nagun-a'ks*, bilhaa also feature as an inlay on "a good-sized box" which is one of several gifts exchanged between a *naxnox*, *Na-gun-a'ks*, and the people of *Dzagam-sa'gisk* (Boas 1916). Drawing upon his work up to that point, Boas (1916:398) also notes that "ear-ornaments of abalone shell" are mentioned in the Ts'msyen *adawx*. Viola Garfield (1939:194) also notes, "At any ceremonial large wool ornaments with abalone shell pendants were worn in the ears of the women who sing in the chief's choir, so that the status of each was clearly indicated to the tribes at large."

Bilhaa is clearly a marker of high rank and prestige within Ts'msyen and Gitxaala society. Marjorie Halpin documents how crests that were restricted to high ranked individual often had names that would include shining and the individual's associated regalia might use bilhaa shells to indicate their high status. In a description of a mid-19th century feast, Halpin (1984:16) explains, "We would have noted that the men who made the speeches wore the more elaborate headdresses, richly decorated with shining abalone" (see also Halpin 1973).

Jay Miller further highlights the cultural importance of the notion and concept of brilliance and luminosity. In his monograph, *Tsimshian Culture: A Light Through the Ages*, Miller outlines the cultural importance of light, beams of light, and spirit or *naxnox* powers/beings. According to Miller (1997:39), "The use of abalone, copper, and polished surfaces on chiefly artifacts provides further support for the mediation of light." John Cove's (1987) monograph on Ts'msyen shamanism and narrative also discusses the cultural concept of brilliance—this time in reference to special rock and water mirrors. Bilhaa shells become incorporated within this cultural complex as a critical material manifestation of cultural history and spiritual practices of the Ts'msyen and Gitxaala peoples.

Contemporary Academic Accounts

The archeological and related peer-reviewed publications on the subject of bilhaa are sparse but illuminating in their discussion of the importance of bilhaa to the Ts'msyen peoples, of which academic accounts typically include the Gitxaala. Halpin and Seguin (1990) list bilhaa as one of the shellfish gathered by the Ts'msyen. Quoting Halpin (1984), Halpin and Seguin (1990:276) note, "Special crests that could

be made of real animal heads and skins, and included ermine and abalone decoration, were restricted to the chief.”

Madonna Moss (1993), in a survey of shellfish harvesting,³ gender, and status, lists bilhaa as one of several shellfish harvested with a prying stick from the low tide zone. Richard Bolton (2007), working with Andrew Martindale on Dundas Island, identifies, among other shellfish, bilhaa shell as a constituent of shell middens that date to times prior to European arrival.

Archeologist Michael Blake (2004) has found empirical evidence of bilhaa ornaments dating back more than 1,400 years before present in a burial mound in the lower Fraser River region. Blake’s work complements the ethnographic descriptions of Boas and others on the cultural importance and antiquity of bilhaa use amongst the Indigenous peoples of the Northwest Coast region.

In a recent archaeological pilot project within Gitxaala territory, a fragment of abalone shell was found in a shovel test at an ancient Gitxaala village site in Curtis Inlet.⁴ This village is of ancient provenance and, according to Gitxaala adawx, is the place where the important hereditary leader, Ts’baasa, first established his village within Gitxaala territory. This is a significant find as it is the first archaeologically recorded finding of abalone in a shell midden site within the heart of Gitxaala territory. The presence of an abalone shell fragment in the shell midden indicates human use at or before the time of European arrival.

Contemporary Accounts of Longstanding Practice

Harvesting methods for bilhaa involved hand picking at low tide or use of a passive trap set at low tide and then harvested at the next low tide. This trap method involved the use of either sealskin or a flat light colored plank. The trap would be weighted down at the low tide level. As the water covered it, bilhaa would gather on the light colored material. At the next low tide, any bilhaa that stayed on the trap would be harvested.

The typical manner of picking bilhaa is at the low, low tides. It is *ha’walks* (taboo) to pick bilhaa from in the water or under the water beyond what a person could normally reach scrambling along the beach (people call the shoreline “beach” in English, but we are really speaking of fairly rocky, step shorelines) or from a small canoe or skiff moving along the water’s edge. A similar method of harvesting bilhaa is described for the Haida (Jones, Sloan, and DeFreitas 2004). In both cases, the combination of technology and environmental conditions act as a potential ecological limiting factor on harvesting. However, techniques and tools could have been used to over harvest bilhaa. Yet, bilhaa were not over harvested until the development of the non-aboriginal market oriented bilhaa fishing in 1972.

Sigidmnaanax (Matriarchs) Agnes Shaw, Charlotte Brown, Violet Skog, and Janet Moody all described in some detail the old ways of harvesting bilhaa, steaming the harvest

on the beach in the sand with heated rocks, skunk cabbage leaves, and water, and then drying the cleaned meat in the sun or near a slow fire. Agnes Shaw and Charlotte Brown describe harvesting bilhaa on the west coast of Banks Island. Violet Skog, lamenting the loss of bilhaa, said:

Bilhaa was the first to go. We used to have lots. My mom used to dry them at Banks. Now we can’t find anything. It’s so hard to get the seafood now. Everything is just gone.

Janet Moody also describes harvesting bilhaa on Banks Island. Dried bilhaa were traded with people from up the river for, among other things, moosemeat, oolichan grease, and soapberries.

Like most women of their generation (these women are in their late 70s to 90s today), a great deal of time was spent living and working in the hereditary territories. The annual cycle of food harvesting and preparation involved extensive periods of time at special resource harvest sites for foods such as, but not restricted to, seaweed, halibut, bilhaa, seal, deer, goat, or salmon. Charlotte Brown describes the work of collecting seaweed on Banks Island. While she was at Banks Island as a child and a young woman with her family (at her uncle’s and father’s traditional site) she would also be involved in picking bilhaa:

May at Banks—we got seaweed, bilhaa—there was lots of it. They were too big to cook in the stove so we would dig in the sand and put leaves inside. Then we put hot rocks on top with a hole in the top. We’d pour in water and steam them. Then we’d hang them to dry after they were cooked. We used skunk cabbage leaves. After the fishing was done, we’d stay and dry fish. Sometimes 700 fish. We’d hang them up and dry them. We got halibut woks [then sliced, dried fish] when we got seaweed. We would move into a small camp with just two houses to dry the halibut.

Bilhaa were easy to pick—there were so many that you could hear them making noise—their shells hitting together. (Most of the older people that I have spoken with have commented, at one time or another, of the noise that the bilhaa used to make before the *K’mskiwah* harvesters reduced the local stock. The bilhaa would gather in large clumps and the sound of their shells hitting one another was clearly audible.) Mrs. Brown wasn’t able to recall how many bilhaa her family harvested—lots was her comment—enough, at any rate to have bilhaa as a regular food item throughout the winter and to use to trade with peoples from the Skeena, Nass, and Kemano for goods such as soapberries and oolichan grease.

Sm’oogyit Matthew Hill explained to me in a conversation that a typical family group might harvest about 500 pounds of bilhaa for the winter. A larger family would harvest more bilhaa. Even more would be harvested if a yaawk was being prepared.

Sm’oogyit Jeffrey Spencer, in an interview in February 2002, made the following comment about bilhaa harvest and abundance and its importance as part of household food provisioning:

Bilhaa, there was really lots round here. No one bothered you if you catch 100 lbs. Not anymore, they all go to the Chinese. In Vancouver, I went to buy some sea cucumbers in Chinatown. I went to buy seven, thinking it would be maybe \$50. For a seven-inch live one, it was \$35. That's our livelihood taken away from us. So now we just live on bologna and wieners. Bilhaa, we used to boil them and then string them. Hang them in the smoke house. When you want to cook it, soak in salt water you get from the ocean. There was no such thing as a deep freeze or run out of power. Cockles and clams, we did the same thing. We smoke seal, sea lion. Slice them up and smoke them. Salmon and seafood—that's how we survived.

Kenneth Innes, a contemporary resource harvester highlights the lessons he has learned about bilhaa harvesting and the problems with the contemporary fishery:

Like with the Bilhaa. The Creator made the water only go down so far. So you can only harvest what you see. The commercial fishery dives for them and wiped them out. The sea urchins and goeducks will be the same. They can get at all of them if they dive.

The late Russell Lewis, who was an active resource harvester, had this to say:

My mom was really good at trading. I mean she was well known by the Gitxsans and the Nisga'a in the canneries and more mostly North Pacific. She did a lot of trading there. And she would trade bilhaa, seaweed, a whole bunch of stuff that she preserved here; that's what she did, what I remember anyways. So, they did a lot of trading with bilhaa.

Q: Did you know what she traded for, what did she get in return?

Most of the things that I seen there, was from up there, there was either, if you were going to the Nisga'a, you gotta get their grease or whatever, or the other one was soapberries, I remember soapberries, a lot of that, back then.

Bilhaa evokes strong meanings to people, strong feelings, and a deep attachment to place for Gitxaala. Methods of harvest continue to be transmitted through a community of practice. Youth are instructed in the principles of syt güülm goot, people visit their traditional harvesting sites, and our histories and songs are retold even in the face of the DFO closure of the bilhaa fishery.

Shutting Down the Fishery

The closure of the bilhaa fishery has had a significant impact upon Gitxaala people. Specifically, the closure has resulted in a loss of a critical food resource, a loss of a critical trade item, and an increase of surveillance upon aboriginal harvesters.

The sense of loss and desire is reflected in Elder and Sm'oogyit Jeffery Spencer's comments in a November 2001 interview:

Seaweed and bilhaa and...ooh, I want to talk about bilhaa—chew it in my mouth. I never taste that for a long time. [laughter] Pretty hard to get. Don't allowed to get

it. Don't allowed to get it. I just don't know why. I just don't know why.

In a separate interview, Janet Moody comments:

It's...when the fisheries knew that bilhaa is abundant, they opened it, they got license, and like I said, they used divers, they went down and started picking them, and that's when they disappeared. Like I said, you can just stand there and you can hear them.... Sounds really nice, when they're walking like that. Today they're all gone. And to me, it's not our fault. It's not our fault, it's their own work. And we still do have a right to harvest that for our own use, cause we don't sell it. We eat it ourselves. And it's them that did harm on it. And now they're trying to punish us, and telling us not to get bilhaa, and that's wrong. It's our tradition, it was given to us. Our heavenly father gave us what kind of food to eat, what kind of medicine that we use with plants, he gave us how to survive, and it's the fisheries that's spoiling that, that's why it's gone from us.

Speaking to the issue of perceptions of monitoring harassment, Russell Lewis says:

That's what's really hurting, myself; I can understand the species at risk thing, but you shouldn't go that far, it's not very good—just going out there myself now to try and do my harvest, I'm scared; who's watching me? I went over there to pick, and not even five minutes after I got off there, that boat come around. So I knew how they found us, I knew right away that they got the eye in the sky there. So it's not too much anybody can do, so [pause] it's really sad and me when I go out to try and harvest any of my food, I'm wondering, is somebody there watching me? I know I've always been boarded, and searched, and that really hurts, when we're trying to harvest our own, for our traditional use, for our use only. I have a hard time, I have to meet with the DFO, and [pause] it's hard for me to put it into words how I feel about them, because I have to work with them. I can understand the frustrations from our community onto me, because I get a lot of questions, "why are they [DFO] tied here;" well, we try to negotiate about that, we were successful in lowering that harassment or whatever you want to call it, the monitoring.

At the same time as Gitxaala community members perceive increased and excessive monitoring on their food harvesting practices, they also consider there to be a lack of sufficient attention placed on monitoring commercial dive fishermen and recreational dive fishermen. On many occasions, I have heard comments to the effect that enforcement of the large-scale illegal harvesting operations is insufficient and that excess enforcement appears to be applied to Gitxaala community harvesters. During my many visits to Gitxaala, I too have observed DFO vessels in the nearby inlet and at the community dock more often during zero tides than at other times. Serendipitously, I had the opportunity to confirm this from DFO enforcement offices in March 2009.

While participating in a workshop on the oolichan fishery in Prince Rupert in March 2009, I had a chance to speak with DFO enforcement officials. During one of the breaks in the two-day workshop, I outlined my observations to one of the

officers. When I suggested that I would need access to the ship's log to see if my observations were correct, the officer said to me, "No need to do that. We always go out on the zero tides because that's when the local people are picking abalone." When I asked about enforcement of the dive fleet, he said that there isn't the time or manpower to monitor the underwater fishery. "It's easy to see someone picking abalone on a zero tide—it's a lot harder to catch a diver," he explained. It would seem that community sentiment is correct: DFO is focusing on aboriginal harvesters rather than targeting the commercial and illegal dive fishermen who work without regard to zero tides.

Returning to a Sustainable Fishery

Despite DFO surveillance, bilhaa continues to be illegally harvested by non-Gitxaala people to the detriment of both Gitxaala and bilhaa. In Gitxaala, we have restrained our own harvests within the context of our own authority and jurisdiction. However, that in and of itself is insufficient as long as the illegal non-aboriginal fishery persists. There is a solution with the potential to benefit Gitxaala and bilhaa—returning management control to Gitxaala under our traditional system of harvest and governance. As my colleague Caroline Butler and I (2007:4556) have documented elsewhere: "Gitxaala people have been taught by their Elders to take only what they need, not to overexploit the natural resources. "Take what you need" was in fact the standard response in reply to questions about how to use the resources sustainably, and what the Elders taught them about harvesting." Across the Hecate Straights on Haida Gwaii (Queen Charlotte Islands), the Haida and their non-aboriginal neighbors have been able to establish control over bilhaa in Gwai Haanas (the national park in the southern islands) drawing upon the powers of Parks Canada and Haida authority and jurisdiction over their traditional territory (Jones, Sloan, and DeFreitas 2004) by establishing a co-management regime.

Drawing upon Gitxaala resource harvesting principles and our associated harvesting practices and techniques, a sustainable bilhaa fishery is possible. The Haida co-management model is one path that could be followed. In Gitxaala, however, hereditary leaders and community members prefer to manage under our own authority and jurisdiction. Linking new fishery science knowledge with the Gitxaala house governance and the principle of *syt güülum goot*, a revived and sustainable bilhaa fishery is possible in Laxyuup Gitxaala.

Notes

¹Gitxaala people have been involved in the development of the cash economy in British Columbia. See Menzies and Butler 2001, 2008. See also Knight 1996. However, Gitxaala were not involved in the commercial dive fishery for bilhaa.

²For detailed descriptions of Gitxaala and related Tsimshian peoples' social organization, see McDonald 1991; Menzies and Butler 2007; Miller 1997; Roth 2008.

³This study surveys shellfish harvesting of the northwest coast ethnographic area with particular attention to the Tlingit.

⁴The author conducted an archaeological pilot study in the central and southern portions of Gitxaala territory in August 2009. Prior to this survey, practically no archaeological research had been conducted in this region. The closest sustained archaeological research in this region has centered on Prince Rupert Harbour where, in the 1960s, George MacDonald began an ambitious program of excavation. The Prince Rupert Harbour research has, in the absence of detailed work elsewhere on the north coast of British Columbia (excepting Martindale's recent Dundas Island Project), developed into an orthodox vision in which the Harbour is seen as the central area of habitation and economic activity outside of the mouth of the Skeena River.

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