

Respecting Resources, Respecting the Land

Hydaburg culture revolves around sockeye

By Paula Dobbyn

Marvell Nix felt frenzied. Summer in Alaska is a fleeting season when fish return, berries ripen, plants bloom, and outdoor projects loom. For a short time, the world comes alive with a vengeance. And on this particular summer day, Nix had a lot going on.

It was the last Saturday a year ago July in Hydaburg at the culmination of a week of cultural activities in Nix's hometown. The Hydaburg resident had spent the morning preparing food for a community feast that evening.



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She then helped a group of local women carry a new 42-foot totem pole weighing several hundred pounds, moving it from a carving shed to the community's totem park. Nix and the other women hoisted the red cedar pole into place using ropes and muscle strength. A few hours later, Nix engaged in ceremonial dancing and celebrations at the school gym. The festivities marked the conclusion of two days of totem pole raisings and Hydaburg's 2011 annual culture camp, designed to pass traditional tribal knowledge from elders to youth.

Nix sneaked out as the celebrations unfolded and a large crowd devoured a spread of fresh seafood, beach greens, pasta salad and venison.

"I felt bad leaving, but it had to be done," Nix said.

As evening approached, Nix slipped down to the harbor. The sun shone bright as waves lapped at the wooden pilings of the weather-beaten dock. Fishing boats bobbed in the water. Her spouse, Herb Nix, pulled up in his boat and began off-loading

Camp members prepare to lift and walk a totem from the carving shed to the totem park for raising.

the day's catch: a pile of sockeye salmon, their primary source of food.

Side-by-side, the couple hauled the fish onto a blue tarp on the dock. Blood flowed from the salmon's crimson flesh as Nix methodically filleted the salmon her husband had headed and gutted.

"It's hard work," she said, glancing up from the table, her arms covered in fish blood. "But it's worth it. This is what gets us through the winter."

The Nixes spent the rest of the evening processing the salmon back at their small wooden house overlooking Sukkwan Strait. They filleted most of the catch. A smaller portion they cut into strips, marinating it in a brown sugar-soy sauce mix and hanging it to dry in the family's smokehouse.

The skies opened as they finished, drenching the ground with cold rain.

"Our timing was good," said Nix, sitting on her porch and lighting a cigarette.



[LEFT TO RIGHT] Totem carvers Cliff Carle, Jim Bell, T.J. Young, Marty Frank, Toni Rae Sanderson and Jeff Peele.

HEAVY RELIANCE ON SALMON

All five species of Pacific salmon present in North America ply the waters in and around Hydaburg, located on the southern tip of Prince of Wales Island in Southeast Alaska's coastal temperate rainforest. Sixteen major streams near Hydaburg support sockeye. Of the five Pacific salmon species, sockeye is by far the most important to the Haida, one of three major tribes in the Southeast panhandle.

"Sockeye are our most prized resource. For over a month every year, that's all we talk about. We live and breathe sockeye salmon," said Tony Christianson, Hydaburg's mayor.

Virtually all Hydaburg households use fish to meet their subsistence needs and 80 percent to 90 percent use sockeye salmon, according to the Alaska Department of Fish and Game.

The average Hydaburg resident—most of whom are Haida tribal members—consumes nearly 100 pounds of sockeye per year.

Sockeye are known for their deep-red color and prized for their high oil content, which gives them a rich and distinct flavor. Sockeye are also the first type of salmon to return in the summer and typically run longer than the other four species, usually beginning in late June, peaking in July and continuing until mid-August. Their numbers also tend to be more stable than the other species, so tribal fishermen can usually depend on catching a good number of them.

"It's how I made my living for over 40 years," said Francis "Amps" Carle Sr., a retired commercial purse seiner and lifelong Hydaburg resident. "I think I had a lucky boat. It seemed to find fish everywhere."

A septuagenarian with health issues, Carle still participates in the subsistence sockeye fishery, relying on family and friends to help. On the same day Nix and her husband were processing fish on the dock, Carle directed operations from his kitchen table by cell phone, delivering instructions to family members out fishing. Behind him, a friend visiting from Metlakatla hovered over a stove as she sealed jars of kippered sockeye.

"She doesn't have her own family so she helps me out sometimes," Carle said.

Help is rewarded with a share of the catch.

Carle's local knowledge of the sockeye fishery, and that of other elders, is an important element in how the Haida manage their salmon stocks in coordination with federal and state regulators. The tribe also uses Western science, operating a weir at Hetta

Lake, a key sockeye system near town. They use it to count the number of salmon that return to spawn and inform tribal members if they should fish elsewhere due to a weak run, said fisheries biologist Cathy Needham, who contracts with the tribe.

RESPECTING SALMON

The Haida's relationship to sockeye dates back thousands of years. Originally from Canadian islands formerly known as the Queen Charlottes in British Columbia, now called Haida Gwaii, the Haida are believed to have arrived on Prince of Wales Island in the 1700s.

Hydaburg's location is by design: it's surrounded by numerous sockeye streams. The town, which marked its 100th anniversary in November 2011, was originally a summer fish camp. But in 1911, four outlying Haida villages hit hard with smallpox and other Old World diseases, consolidated in what is now Hydaburg, according to research by University of Alaska anthropologist Stephen J. Langdon.

Salmon feature centrally in the Haida's traditional world view. One of the main tenets of the Haida's cosmological beliefs is that salmon are sentient beings, according to Langdon's studies. In essence, they are "people" who communicate to humans through their actions as well as observing and judging human behavior. Under the Haida's traditional way of thinking, salmon only return to spawn if they are treated respectfully.

Taking only what one needs, not wasting and sharing with others are cornerstones of how the Haida tribal members approach their relationship with wild food, Christianson said.

"Salmon are our most important resource," he said. "It's about not disrespecting them. If you do, there'll be conse-



quences. You'll lose your way."

While reliance on salmon remains central to the Haida, younger people are increasingly getting lazy when it comes to subsistence and the work involved in putting up fish and game, Nix said.

"A lot of them are losing interest. They just want the stuff from the store," she said.

Computers, video games and other diversions also compete for young people's time and often get in the way of traditional food gathering. But Hydaburg is trying to reverse those trends with events like the culture camp and restoration of the town's totem pole park.

CULTURAL RESURGENCE

Every year during the last week of July, Hydaburg—population roughly 350—holds a three-day culture camp attended by about 200 youth from Hydaburg, Craig, Klawock, Kasaan, Ketchikan and beyond.

Elders and youth gather for carving, basketry, regalia-making, beadwork and other crafts. Story-telling, language and dance classes are offered. Instruction in hunting, fishing and wild-food preparation also factor in.

Catching and processing salmon features centrally in the curriculum, said Margaret Lockhart, tribal human services director.

"It's about refining my skills. I've been fishing and hunting since I was 8 or 9, but this is a big part of our culture and I don't want to forget anything," said Andrew Kashevarof, 15, a sophomore at Hydaburg High School who participates in the camp.

Hydaburg is the largest, and one of the few, Haida communities in the United States. There isn't much opportunity for Haida kids to absorb cultural knowledge, so the camp offers a one-of-a-kind chance to acquire skills, Christianson said.

"I think the word is 'roots.' We are watering the plants so the roots will grow deep into the land, providing a solid foundation for the future of our cultural identity," Christianson said.

Hydaburg Mayor Tony Christianson [LEFT] stands in front of one of the new totem poles erected in July 2011. **After filleting** on the dock, Marvell Nix [RIGHT] prepares sockeye strips to dry and cure in her smokehouse.



WHY WE'RE HERE

The camp begins when the major pulse of sockeye from the ocean to their natal rivers starts to wane. It's timed that way so people aren't too busy fishing to take part, Christianson said.

But it's still a juggling act.

Like Nix, Sam Mooney was also multi-tasking during the 2011 camp. As preparations took place for the evening community feast, Mooney—the

town's deputy mayor—manned a booth outside the gym, where he sold beaded jewelry and sterling-silver bracelets etched with Haida designs.

While he was making money and catching up with friends, Mooney was itching to get fishing.

"I should be out there," he said, gesturing toward the water. "It's why we're here."

Hydaburg is blessed because of its abundant wild food—from salmon and halibut and shellfish to berries and deer and other wild game, said Mooney, who spent many years living in the Seattle area.

"The only thing that keeps you back from getting what you need here is motivation," Mooney said. "I couldn't afford to eat the food that I get here if I lived in the city."

Cherilyn Bell, a Haida dance instructor, agreed. "In this community, nobody goes hungry," she said. "Sockeye are our way of life. I tell my kids when they ask what's for dinner, 'You can have fish and rice, or rice and fish.'"

By late afternoon, Mooney packed up his booth and headed home for a short break. Soon he was back for the camp's closing ceremonies and the community dinner at the gym. A dance group in full regalia performed a salmon dance to celebrate the iconic fish that underpins Haida existence.

When it was his turn in the food line, Mooney scooped a large piece of baked sockeye onto his plate.

He gestured toward the fillet, which was seasoned with salt, pepper and roasted onions.

"It's the energy that fuels the Haida people," Mooney said. 🍷

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