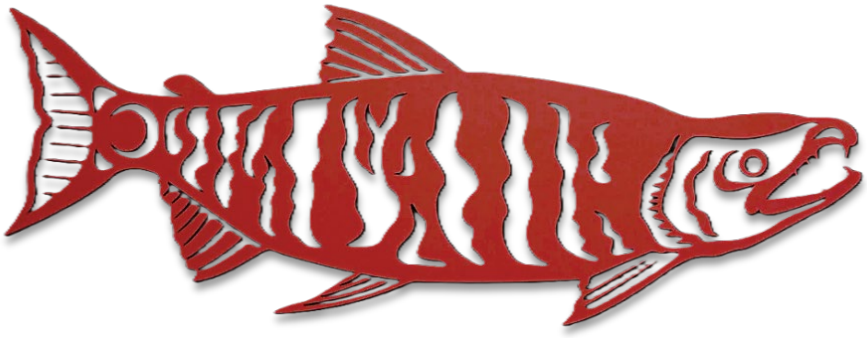
LIĞʷIŁDAX̌ʷ RESEARCH CENTRE

We continue to feature exciting history from the archives in our regular newsletter updates to the communities. While some of you may know these stories already, others might not. So, we're pleased to share Vol. 3, Edition 7 of **Tales from the Vault.**



CHUM SALMON BY ROY HENRY VICKERS, 2017

Return of the Ğʷaxnis (gwah-nees - chum salmon)

Each year, when the ğʷaxnis return to our waters, they bring with them more than food. Their return is part of a deep relationship between k̓utəla (ku-tala– salmon) and Liğʷiłdaxʷ peoples, remembered in stories, prayers and teachings passed down through generations.

Around Campbell River, ğʷaxnis return mid-September and can be found in local waters through the fall, into November and even later in some areas. They are often among the last to spawn each year. [1]

Over a century ago, Franz Boas published accounts based on material collected by George Hunt in Fort Rupert. These records offer a glimpse into the relationships between Liğʷiłdaxʷ peoples and salmon, including the prayers and practices surrounding their return. One account describes the arrival of the first ğʷaxnis.

When the k̓utəla arrived, the wife of a chum fisher met her husband on the beach to receive the fish. Before the salmon were prepared, she prayed to them. Her words were recorded by Hunt and later translated by Boas:

> "O Supernatural-Ones! O, Swimmers! I thank you that you are willing to come to us. Don't let your coming be bad, for you come to be food for us. Therefore, I beg you to protect me and the one who takes mercy on me, that we may not die without cause, Swimmers!"

Her prayer expresses gratitude for the salmon and asks for protection for those who receive them.

This respect extended beyond words and into the way the fish were handled and prepared. Practices differed depending on whether a fish had been caught by spear or hook and line. After preparation, the slime, blood and innards were gathered in a basket and returned to the ocean.

Returning these remains was part of a reciprocal relationship. The k̓utəla had entered the human world and given themselves as food, and their remains were returned so their spirits could return to their own world.

Other recorded accounts describe the important role women played, offering prayers and greetings throughout the fishing season. While cleaning the k̓utəla, women thanked them for returning and asked them to come again the following year.

Together, these accounts reveal practices that recognized salmon as more than a source of food. The prayers, care taken in preparing the fish, and return of their remains to the ocean reflect the responsibilities that accompanied their arrival.

While historical records may speak to the past, they can never replace the knowledge of our Elders. They can, however, offer insight into the respect and gratitude that have always been central to our relationship with k̓utəla.

More than a hundred years ago, a woman stood on the beach and spoke to the ğʷaxnis as they arrived:

"I thank you that you are willing to come to us."

And still, every fall, they return.

Sources

[1] City of Campbell River, Environmental Work Windows of Least Risk (2020), p. 5; Fisheries And Oceans Canada, Effects of Modified Hydrology on Campbell River Salmonids, p. 34.

Dr. Deidre Cullon, Dancing Salmon: Human-Fish Relationships on The Northwest Coast (PHD Dissertation, University of Victoria, 2017), Especially Pp. 106–111 And 128–130. https://dspace.library.uvic.ca/items/d6fe8d87-8335-4b33-bbff-4b4c39b1ba74

Franz Boas and George Hunt, Ethnology of The Kwakiutl, Based on Data Collected By George Hunt (1921), Pp. 302–304 And 609–610.