

What We Heard

Getting to Know Communities, their Fisheries and Fishery Guardians, and their Experience with the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy Program

“The Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy has been an important program for us to do this work, but it’s really limited.”

- In the Northwest Territories, Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy Program agreements are coordinated by Aquatic Resource and Oceans Management Program coordinators. Participants in the workshop included one of these coordinators as well as representatives from some member communities who are involved in fishery and natural resource issues.
 - The role of the aquatic resource and oceans management group is to submit regional proposals on behalf of communities. These proposals reflect First Nations priorities.
 - Member communities benefit from this arrangement by not having to carry costs while awaiting reimbursement from the Department and fewer reporting requirements. They also work closely with the coordinator to develop and implement their agreement.
- Participants have been accessing the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy program since 1995. Until about 2012, annual funding was used to buy equipment, now totalling 14 vessels or about two to three boats per First Nation. Reprofiled funding from the department has also been used to buy six larger harbourcraft vessels.
 - Funding in recent years has primarily been used for operational expenses, such as salaries for staff, communications materials, travel to meetings, research and monitoring services, boating safety items, and monitoring staff training. A portion of the funds is also directed to the marine insurance policy and boat registrations.
 - Funding may be used for other environmental issues, such as the 2007 “Keepers of the Water” national watershed forum or traditional knowledge with Elders programs.
- Participants would like more funding to meet increasing demands, such as engaging on the Northern Integrated Commercial Fisheries Initiative, activities related to the management of Great Slave Lake, and starting a fishery guardian program. *“There’s never enough funding through the program. Other funding sources help us build capacity of community monitors and our projects.”* A few also want the funding to apply to more than just aquatics activities.
- Important water bodies for First Nations in the region include Great Slave Lake, Slave River, and Yellowknife River, among other smaller waterways. Participants find these water bodies are under a lot of pressure from recreational fisheries, which have increased with GPS and marine maps. *“Historically, recreational fish harvesters used guides, but now people are all over the place.”*
 - One community is interested in researching the impacts of urbanization, industry and other development on fish and other aquatic resources in creeks and rivers that are connected to Great Slave Lake. For example, *“we have no way of monitoring where Baker Creek grayling go once they are in the Lake.”*

- Participants want clarity about how the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy program funding (and funding from other programs) may be impacted with treaty land entitlement. *“If our current funds get capped during treaty, it’s not enough.”*

Technical Activities

“Data collection is a fundamental part of the program, but it’s not sufficiently funded.”

- Participants are involved in data collection through the program, but there is only enough funding to collect a portion of the data, in limited areas, and there is no interpretation of results. *“Ultimately, we need more funding so data can be used more effectively.”*
 - Some have leveraged the Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training Strategy to help fund data collection activities, including angler surveys, water sampling and fish fin clips (fish samples). *“The data all goes to the aquatics technician to analyze. It also goes to the Department.”*
 - One community has an aquatics trainee who takes water samples near the water treatment plant once a week, as well as air samples in Richelieu Island. Data is then entered into Excel for analysis. *“We’ve trained three aquatic technicians over the past seven years so we have five that we can rely on.”*
 - Community-based resource management programs are used for catch and fishery monitoring, but most community monitors are trained to collect fish and water samples. This monitoring takes place during the summer months.
- Participants report having limited involvement in the Department’s stock assessment activities and only one habitat restoration project to date. *“We’ve done some stock assessment on inconnu in the past, as well as some subsistence harvest data research.”*
 - While stock assessment research may involve community technicians, the Department does not always share final reports or plans as to how they may want to continue the research. *“They have an obligation to collaborate and share with the partners.”* Participants also want both traditional knowledge and science reflected in studies. *“But the program doesn’t cover traditional knowledge.”*
- Participants said none of the technical activities being funded through the program are meeting the needs of communities. They want to build capacity and sufficient resources to be able to undertake and manage these activities. They also want data-sharing agreements for every funding pot and every deliverable.

Food, Social and Ceremonial Fisheries

“Government is not fulfilling its obligations to First Nations. It’s not just about subsistence needs – economics need to be recognized.”

- Participants note that while there is sufficient food fish for their communities, the quality of some fish has caused impressions that it may not be good to eat. For example, the flesh is too soft or there are parasites (green liver). *“Our people still enjoy fish, but they are concerned about the impacts of development. The tar sands and Site C dam are closer to us – all of these projects affect us.”*
 - Participants would like these issues to be studied and funded through the program *“to find out what’s causing soft flesh in fish and the effects of contaminants in fish.”*

- Participants also think the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy needs to more clearly address economic rights. *“Our governance is linked to our economy – we have always traded – and this is important for co-management.”* This includes Indigenous economic ventures, such as recreational guides and lodges.

Co-management and Rights Issues

“We want to access the Aboriginal Fishery Guardian program because it goes hand-in-hand with co-management. We need to be able to lay charges and designate areas for access.”

- Participants want co-management of all technical activities: data collection, stock assessments, habitat restoration, and catch and fishery monitoring. *“We want co-management across the board: lands, resources, and water rights.”*
- Participants are not comfortable with the Department’s approach to integrated fisheries management planning for Great Slave Lake. *“It puts us in a position to be stakeholders.”* They are also concerned about the territorial government’s plan to revitalize the Lake’s commercial fishery without the scientific knowledge (biomass) of fish stocks. *“They’re also rolling out a heavy tourism agenda which significantly impacts resources. I call it ‘frontier’ attitude – people come here to enjoy recreational living, but that’s our way of life.”*

Aboriginal Fishery Guardian Program

- Participants want access to the Aboriginal Fishery Guardian program, including to increase catch and fishery monitoring activities.
- Participants are concerned about the lack of monitoring and enforcement of recreational fisheries – and the impacts of this industry on fish stocks. *“DFO does not have the monitoring capacity to cover Great Slave Lake, let alone the other areas.”* One noted that the territorial government issues licences and has recreational fishery regulations, but *“they don’t enforce them.”* Another said RCMP officers have authority to enforce the *Fisheries Act*, but *“it depends on their interests – and the officer.”*
 - One participant spoke about overfishing and illegal fishing by tourists on Little Buffalo River. *“We call the Department and Environment and Natural Resources all the time, but they don’t catch them. By the time DFO gets to the location, they’re gone.”* To resolve this problem, the community would like recreational fishing to have to use lodges. *“At least we could get a survey this way.”*
 - Another would like fishery guardians to have the authority to lay charges because *“when we come across those breaking the rules, we have no way to stop them.”* Still another wants the fines to be directed as revenues for the community.

Understanding Training and Training Needs

“The big skill sets need to be looked at – career progression and enforcement.”

- Field technicians (First Nations monitors) are the only positions funded through the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy program, and these jobs are seasonal. *“We are challenged in terms of the availability of these monitors and retention from year to year.”*
 - Community monitors have been trained in first aid, CPR, predator defense, shotgun handling, WHMIS, boating safety, small vessel operation and proficiency, MEDA-3,

GPS, water sampling, and aquatic environmental monitoring and sample collection protocols (fish, water, and plankton/benthos). They have also been trained to do incident reporting, but that is not fully funded by the program.

- Participants see the following training needs, in addition to establishing career progression paths for First Nations monitors to be trained in enforcement and to manage aquatic programs:
 - Program administrator: hands-on training to be able to work with communities *“It’s not about a business diploma”*
 - Field technicians: ice safety and rescue, traditional knowledge collection and proprietary management, swiftwater rescue, data entry and data management software, policy development, communication, and understanding climate change.

Improving the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy Program

“All of the species within our territory are a priority – in lakes, rivers, creeks, streams and inland waters.”

- Participants think the best way to improve the program is by replacing the Great Slave Lake Advisory Committee with co-management for First Nations and the Department. *“The advisory committee is not the consultative body for the Lake.”*
 - They also want the program to be adequately funded to support their technical activities and aspirations.

Measuring Success

“Our Elders will determine the success of this program.”

Improving the Aboriginal Fishery Guardian Program

“We want to access the program to deal with recreational and commercial fisheries.”

- Participants support improving this program by making it accessible to all Nations. They also want to build the enforcement capacity of fishery guardians to have jurisdictional authority in the area.

Ideal Fishery Guardian Team

- Participants view an ideal fishery guardian team including First Nations monitors and land users, First Nations enforcement officers, and Elders as the traditional knowledge experts. They also see a role for youth trainees, a program administrator, and fishery managers on the team.
 - Ideally, this team would have communications and safety skills, as well as education and land-based experience. *“They also need experience collecting and managing traditional knowledge.”*
 - Participants also think the duties of the fishery guardian team should include data collection, coordination, planning, data management, networking and co-management of all duties with the Department.