

How Lax Kw'alaams Turned a White Elephant into a Sustainable, Locally Owned Fishing Industry

In the fishing industry, things can change in a blink of an eye says Josh Kierce, Chief Financial Officer of the Coast Tsimshian Fish Plant, the biggest employer in Lax Kw'alaams on the northwest coast of British Columbia between the rich headwaters of the Nass and Skeena Rivers.

“A reliably abundant fish species can deteriorate over time,” says Kierce. “You have to stay active and always look for new opportunities.”

In 2011, Lax Kw'alaams First Nation found a new opportunity in an old, long-unprofitable seafood processing facility. The processing plant was built in Lax Kw'alaams and operated by the federal government in the 1970s to capitalize on the wealth of salmon in the area. Although a major employer, the plant was unable to turn a profit even when it moved into the hands of commercial operators.

The Nine Allied Tribes of the Coast Tsimshian comprise the Lax Kw'alaams First Nation with approximately 4,000 members. The Band Council saw the potential for the processing plant to provide long-term, sustainable jobs and economic development for the community.

However, they knew it would have to operate differently to achieve these outcomes. This meant relying less on salmon and more on groundfish to diversify the products it processed and to generate months of additional employment for seasonal plant workers.

The Lax Kw'alaams were able to secure a \$7.5 million dollar loan and made extensive renovations to the plant to update and increase its capacity. When the Coast Tsimshian Fish Plant opened in October 2012, it was the biggest and most technically advanced processing facility in the region. The plant can process an average of 400,000 pounds of fish per day, with on-site storage capacity of one million pounds. In a season, this means it can process over 42 million pounds of groundfish and 17 million pounds of salmon.

Today, the Coast Tsimshian Fish Plant is the major employer in the community, with more than 70 people working full time year-round and up to 170 workers during the peak processing season. The plant has also begun turning a profit in recent years and remains focused on benefitting the community. “The community is very supportive. When we need workers, the community always helps out,” says Kierce.



The community also helps by bringing in the bulk of the groundfish the plant processes, as Lax Kw'alaams owns and operates two large trawlers. But the challenge with a processing facility this size and in a remote location makes it difficult to source enough fish to keep the plant busy.

It's very important to build relationships with others in the fishing industry to secure additional supply says Kierce.

Being the only processing plant in such a remote, but rich, fishing region is both an advantage and disadvantage adds Kierce. "Being close to the fishing grounds of the North Pacific allows us to sell a high-quality product. However, there are high logistic costs to export our fish down south."

At the very outset of the plant's renovation and launch, staff received training in a wide range of areas from first aid to forklift operation. Education and training are now being offered to develop a secondary industry around the processing plant in order to provide added value to its product by marketing it locally. Community members have even been exploring ideas such as establishing a food truck business.

The fishing industry is a challenging business says Kierce who is a chartered accountant and grew up fishing in Prince Rupert. You need knowledgeable people, industry veterans who can teach and train others, he says. "To succeed in the fish processing business, it's important to diversify your harvest and product offerings. It's also important to consider sustainable fishing practises and protecting aquatic life by eliminating ghost gear."

Finally, for any community looking to get into the business, Kierce advises that they build strong relationships with people in the industry to create and grow opportunities.



Best Practise:
*Community Values and Adaptability
Drive Economic Development*

