

What We Heard

“We wouldn’t have a monitoring program without the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy Program. We’d never be able to afford it. But we could probably do a lot more.”

Getting to Know Communities, their Fisheries and their Fishery Guardians

“People used to go out and catch what they needed. Then, the commercial fishery moved in and took it all. When the fishery closed in 1997, it closed for everyone.”

- Participants have food, social and ceremonial licences for their communities to fish Atlantic salmon, trout, char, and cod. One also harvests herring, whelk, smelt, scallops and seals.
 - Participants designate fish harvesters in their communities to fish for food in both marine and inland waters. *“Whoever has a boat is fishing for family and extended family.”* One community has distributed almost all of their tags to harvesters in the past two years, as more people are working, which means more boats and more demand for fish tags. *“It’s pretty much full usage.”*
- Participants have four fishery guardians each to serve their communities. One also has administrative and coordination support in their Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy agreement. *“People in our communities trust us and our guardians.”*
 - Fishery guardians monitor fishing activity, engage fish harvesters in fishery rules, and monitor natural resources, such as bird colonies and the presence of invasive species. *“It’s difficult to stop them from doing other things that are concerns of the community.”*
 - Both guardian programs are being funded, in part, using own source revenues, as core funding in agreements does not cover all costs. *“We’re investing to keep them going and it gets expensive; especially, with the price of gas.”* While participants report that fishery guardians are supposed to be seasonal workers, most are being employed year-round using community funds.
 - Participants are concerned about the costs of maintaining their guardian programs with occupational health and safety requirements, vessel and equipment maintenance, and training needs. *“Our territory is vast and conditions are not always smooth. Our guardians may need to stay someplace for two or three nights. They also need reliable and up-to-date equipment to remain safe.”*
- Participants are also concerned about the impacts of development in their territories and increased human activity, such as the use of quads and angling. *“It’s no longer just local residents, they’re coming in from other places.”* While guardians are patrolling the roads and waterways, they *“feel a bit overwhelmed as they are trying to respond to everything.”*

Technical Activities

“There’s a lot of local knowledge out there, but we can’t ignore the science. There’s a balance.”

- Participants are involved in data collection, stock assessments, catch and fishery monitoring, and enforcement of fishing rules. They may also be involved in habitat

restoration and fisheries enhancement, but through different funding programs, impact benefit agreements or other initiatives. *“We’re involved in all activities, whether it’s in our agreement work plan or not.”* One community’s guardians are involved in activities related to the marine protected area in their territory, which includes cleaning up ghost nets and abandoned fishing communities.

- Participants want all of these technical activities to be funded through the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy program. One would also like funding for wildlife activities in the off-season, as well as species at risk projects and community education initiatives.
- Participants report that data collection has evolved since the program began. *“It’s very hard to get data from people, but we’ve overcome this obstacle.”* One community used incentives (buying prizes each year) to encourage harvesters to submit their catch logbooks. Another has put their own protocols and policies in place to document data.
 - One participant went from getting catch log information to putting together forms so they could *“get information that is useful for everyone on what’s going on and what’s in the stomachs of fish, etc.”* However, they note that more data equals more work to input into spreadsheets and to create graphs and charts. *“We need a bigger chunk of money to pay for this.”*
 - Another wants funding to gather Indigenous knowledge in their community. *“Elders provide data collection thousands of years old.”*
- While participants actively engage community members, Chiefs and Councils in technical activities, they note that their agreement does not fund these activities. Both want more educational materials to support these activities, especially if education materials reflected culturally appropriate information. *“We need visuals to explain the rules. It’s a different cultural protocol. The Department has thousands of employees to do this. And, we could use our staff to enhance the material.”*

Co-management

“Our Nation is doing what the Department does: providing input into resource management plans, monitoring fisheries on streams and riparian zones, and co-research. It’s not just staff, it’s community members as well.”

- Participants have different experiences with fisheries co-management:
 - One said their data and knowledge about decreasing char in a brook was used by the Department to move net markers farther away from the river.
 - Another said the state of fish stocks in some rivers are not properly assessed because there is no counting fence to do so. *“Our Indigenous knowledge is saying one thing, but in the absence of western science, they’re saying another. In the absence of data, the fishery stays open.”*
- One participant wants more information from the Department to better inform their community’s fisheries management decisions. *“We have our own rules, but I’m not sure if the Department has incorporated them into the fishing season.”*
- Another wants the Department to trust the community’s ability to manage. *“We’ve seen a reduced departmental presence in Labrador anyway: habitat and science have also moved away. Someone has to do it and we see ourselves as the right ones.”*

Enforcement Activities

“We look after food, social and ceremonial. The Department looks after business and commercial. We’re not sure who looks after recreational.”

- Participants report that core funding through the program is used primarily to pay for the salaries and activities of fishery guardians, which is augmented by community revenues.
- Fishery guardians work on land and on water to fulfill their duties. They also keep a log of their activities. While the principle function of guardians is to do catch and fishery monitoring; in some cases, they also distribute tags to remote communities.
 - Participants report that fishery guardians work hard to ensure fish harvesters submit their tags and catch logs after the fishery. One said guardians *“go house to house, if they have to, to get the tags back.”* Another said guardians *“do interviews to get the information if members don’t hand in logs, so we’re guaranteed to get the data.”*
 - Guardians in one community also enforce the rules of their Nation. *“We have our own traditional rules so our Nation takes more responsibility for the rules that need to be followed.”* However, both participants report that the word ‘enforcement’ is not really used in communities as it is not well-received. *“From our point of view, enforcement is seen as negative – more of policing and we don’t react well to policing of wildlife.”*
- Participants are concerned about the lack of monitoring and enforcement coverage in some regions of Labrador, including some lakes during the busy parts of the season. One wants additional signage to be posted throughout the region which explain the rules and list contact information for the Department.
- Participants support cross-designation authorities to be given to their guardians. For one community, this includes designation to monitor in national parks.

Understanding Food, Social and Ceremonial Fisheries

“The food, social and ceremonial program may be the most significant program we have in place as so many people relate to it.”

- Communities are dependent on fish and game for food, but the *“level of dependency may change by community.”* One has a community freezer to store fish, game, seals and berries for Elders and other members who cannot hunt or fish.
- Participants report that there is not enough fish in their agreements to provide for the food needs of community members and that members have had to refrain from fishing or hunting traditional foods, including cod and caribou. *“There are no big grocery stores here so fish is very important to our people, along with seals and a few shorebirds; especially, with caribou being off limits.”*
 - One correlates food fish to the importance of fishery guardian work. *“When the number of fish go down, we’re the most impacted. That’s why monitors are so important.”*
 - Another wants more emphasis placed on ‘conservation and rights.’ *“Everyone looks at it as a right, but not necessarily as conservation and a right – how do you blend the two?”*

- Participants also note the importance of protecting fish species for cultural as well as food needs. For example, the protection of capelin for one community is not only important for the food it provides to members, but also the food it provides to other fish and sea birds. *“The Department should close the commercial capelin fishery and let the stocks rebuild.”*

Understanding Training and Future Training Needs

“Other Indigenous people in Atlantic Canada could be teaching us about the different regulations and the intentions of those regulations.”

- Participants support training in administration, policy, communications, technical activities, biology and other science, habitat, climate change, enforcement, and fisheries management decision-making. This includes receiving up-to-date and on-going training on fisheries regulations and policies and *“bridging the gap between the language of science and local knowledge.”* It also includes safety training to use equipment and to navigate local waterways.
 - One community is doing their own training using funding from different sources. Another does not have the budget to do so. One thinks communities should participate in departmental training sessions, such as for first aid and boating safety.
- Fishery guardians received training at the Coast Guard College in Sydney when they were first hired. Participants want more frequent training for guardians, including to help them enhance their skills on the water. *“We need to develop the skills and knowledge base of fishery guardians.”* They also support locally delivered training to make it easier for community members.
 - Guardians in one community are getting trained through the Coastal Restoration Fund to steward coastal habitat monitoring and restoration of priority species, such as capelin, salmon and char. Another has a partnership with St. Mary’s University to deliver training.

Understanding Relationships

“There is a direct link between the guardian program and an improved relationship between our Nation and the Department. It’s been normalized in the community.”

- Participants generally have good relationships with the Department; especially, on the ground. *“They’ve been really good to us.”* However, there are some issues:
 - Communities want more science in the area to gather unknown data. They also support more data-exchange between science at the Department and communities. *“We have our structure in place and a two-way exchange of information between Council and the community. The Department has its own process. Maybe integrating the two would be good.”*
 - One said the Department was always asking for more information, but without increasing program funds. *“We see the rationale for reporting requirements, but we need the funds to do it.”*
- Fishery guardians from both communities do joint patrols with fishery officers a few times each year. They also collaborate on the monitoring and enforcement plan each year through pre-season, in-season and post-season meetings. *“It’s always important to monitor and notify fishery officers to work out how to handle the situation.”*

- One participant used to work at the Department and recalls that fishery guardians used to be on the Department's schedule. *"There was comradery and information-sharing. Communications is a big thing – but it works both ways."*
- Participants regularly engage and report to community members on their work, including during annual general meetings and during the off-season. *"We also go out to communities to see if they have any concerns."*

Improving the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy and Aboriginal Fishery Guardian Programs

"Lack of funding remains the largest obstacle for us."

- Participants agree that the most important way to improve these programs is by increasing the funding. Both communities want a few more fishery guardians. They also want more funding for educational and engagement activities, and scientific research. For example, one wants to hire fishery technicians and the services of a biologist.
 - One participant thought the program should include capital funding so communities can enhance their programs with up-to-date equipment. *"If we're doing a lot of the work and the Department is devolving some of it, we should have the same equipment."*
- Participants support improving communications between communities and the Department's sectors, especially science and conservation and protection. For example, one wants the Department to show more interest in fish stock assessments; potentially, in partnership with universities or other research institutes.
- Participants also support continued capacity-building through the programs, including with ongoing training. One thought training costs should be supported through other funding sources.

Measuring Success

- Success for one participant is when the Department has a policy protocol that takes into account Indigenous knowledge. Both participants also think the success of the Aboriginal Fishery Guardian program should be measured by the skills, knowledge, training and capacity of guardians to fulfill their duties safely and effectively.