

What We Heard

“The development of the Aboriginal Aquatic Resource and Oceans Management program brought the importance of the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy program funding to light.”

- Participants only learned about Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy program funding in 2004 when Fisheries and Oceans Canada was developing the Aboriginal Aquatic Resource and Oceans Management program in their region. *“It became apparent that AFS was a pot of funding to help communities, but before that, it was managed almost 100% by the Department.”*

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

“A lot of fish are eaten by community members, but it is also used for bartering and ceremonial purposes. This needs to be better handled if we move to commercial.”

- In the Northwest Territories, Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy agreements are coordinated by aquatic resource and oceans management group coordinators. Participants in the workshop included these coordinators as well as representatives of member communities who manage the food fishery and/or the work of community monitors.
 - One community wants to start receiving program funds directly to their Nation. They point to another community in the region that has this arrangement (and is not a member of an aquatic resource and oceans management group).
 - One coordinator submits a proposal each year to secure Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy program funds for member communities.
- Participants report that Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy funds are used for three activities:
 - to equip communities with vessels and other equipment used in aquatic resource and oceans management activities, such as research: *“AFS agreements function as a capital pot to help purchase equipment to carry out AAROM activities.”*
 - to support seasonal community monitors (now called ‘community guardians’) to monitor water and recreational fisheries during the summer months
 - to help monitors participate in departmental and university-based research projects
- Participants point out, however, that funding from territorial government programs, such as the water stewardship strategy and the cumulative impact monitoring program, supplements the work of community monitors/guardians. The aquatic resource and oceans management program also funds resource technicians in some communities.
- Participants have been informed by the Department that funding through the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy and Aquatic Resource and Oceans Management programs follow strict and rigorous criteria. A few think program funding should support the fisheries aspirations of communities, including involvement of community members in the commercial fishery and involvement of guardians in managing and licensing communal–commercial fisheries. One sees this shift to be consistent with the federal *Reconciliation of Indigenous Rights and Self-Determination* agenda.

Food, Social and Ceremonial Fisheries

“We haven’t seen a total drop in food fisheries, but we have oral evidence of domestic changes.”

- Participants have community members who fish for the food needs of their communities. Another said fish is used for food, bartering and ceremonial purposes. One community has members who are interested in getting back into the industry, too, including youth.
- One participant said their community’s fish harvesters cannot keep up with the food needs of members. *“We want to take as much as we can, but the biomass is not well understood.”* This community wants the Department to support more technical research and science on the lake so that food and commercial fisheries can be better managed.
- Another participant said their community became more involved in food fishery issues after their fish harvesters were charged for fishing inside the boundary. *“It spurred us to ask why they were charged when they had rights to fish – it encouraged us to be negotiating.”*
- Still another participant thought a more structured food fishery was needed to serve Nations across the territories and to improve the health of Indigenous people. *“Many communities are blocked off and fish is becoming more popular than ever. We need to take advantage of the trends, such as dried fish, and get this food to our people.”* The high cost of taking part in the fishery is one barrier participants thought the program could address.

Technical Activities

“We want science to be acted upon: gather the data, discuss and share that data, and make decisions. It takes so long for science to say something conclusively.”

- Participants are unanimous that the technical activities supported through the program are not meeting the needs of communities. One views the funding as a ‘top up’ for their technical program.
- Participants want to be more involved in technical work and science related to fish species in their waterways, but they acknowledge that this will require more capacity-building in communities. *“We’ve taken all of the technical capacity that exists in our communities.”* They also stress the importance of balancing traditional knowledge with western science – and they want the value of traditional knowledge to be recognized in technical activities.
 - One community has run a small camp for Elders to introduce youth to the traditional uses of fish and comparing past to present uses. Another has held a traditional knowledge fish camp to develop indicators of fish and fish stocks in their territory.
- Participants are primarily involved in the collection of data although they note that much of this work is funded through territorial government programs. This data collection relates to fish, water quality, and the impacts of climate change.
 - Many are interested in doing stock assessment work and habitat restoration. *“We see pressure on fish stocks right now and we want to protect them.”* There is also strong support for stock assessments to be done in Great Slave Lake and other popular fishing lakes and rivers. *“The commercial fishery was created without using proper science – some say the fishery is underutilized, but there is no science on which to base this claim.”* One said that while stock assessments have been done over a number of years on Great Slave Lake, none of the data has ever been analyzed. *“We never get the data back.”* Communities also experience this trend with other federal

research initiatives, such as the Canadian Aquatic Biomonitoring Network. *“It’s a great program, but communications coming back to communities is not great.”*

- Some see declines in fish stocks, such as jumbo whitefish in Great Slave Lake and Arctic grayling in Kakisa Lake, and they want to research the reasons why. *“Sucker fish in tributaries which communities rely on for smoking fish have [also] disappeared. Another wants dredging done in Great Slave Lake to open up natural habitat channels that were blocked in the 50’s and 60’s.*
- A few communities are involved in species at risk, lands and wildlife activities, and water monitoring program, but these activities are not funded through the program.
 - One receives contract-based project funding support from the Department to participate in fish habitat research through the provision of traditional knowledge. Another said fisheries enhancement work in the area is done by universities and/or the Department.
- Several participants talked about the mercury research conducted over many years and the effects of poor communications by governments on health warnings, which created fear among the population about the dangers of eating fish. *“They need to present their findings better because these warnings caused a fishery not being fished. This led to fish growing bigger and accumulating too much mercury. We now need a ‘fish out’ of larger fish to get back into the fishery.”*

Aboriginal Fishery Guardian Program

“Enforcement of fishery rules is desperately needed because our lakes are so accessible from the south. It’s not territorial harvesters coming and whole-sale processing fish on site.”

- Participants want to be able to access the Aboriginal Fishery Guardian program so they can build a fishery guardian team. Most see community monitors/guardians assuming fishery guardian duties. They also want to train more people in their communities as guardians and to have them assume enforcement-related and other resource duties. *“We essentially have technicians right now working on water quality. We want to expand or formalize these guardians to monitor the fishery and be trained on wildlife, too.”*
- Participants are concerned about the very active recreational fishery in the region and limited patrols by fishery and renewal resource officers. *“It’s hard to get patrols in these areas – the Northwest Territories is so large and enforcement personnel so few.”*
- Participants say there is some confusion about the Aboriginal Fishery Guardian program and the Dehcho Guardian Program, which is a component of the Dehcho K’ehodi Stewardship Program (Indigenous Leadership Initiative).
 - Regardless of the other program, participants want to benefit from the Aboriginal Fishery Guardian program. For example, one would like to see co-management of bylaws in the Mackenzie River basin and other local fishing areas. Another wants more Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy program funding directed to the guardian program.

Co-management and Rights Issues

“The implementation of our Treaty is pushing us towards a co-management role”

- Several participants want to transition the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy program into a co-management program which fully supports all technical activities required to manage a

fishery, including data collection, stock assessments, habitat restoration, catch and fishery monitoring, and enforcing fishing rules.

- One also thinks community monitors should be funded through the guardian program to manage communal–commercial fishing on the lake.
- Participants think the Great Slave Lake Advisory Committee, which was established by the Department to provide advice and recommendations regarding fisheries in the lake, has outlived its usefulness. *“As the Rights holders, we should be the ones involved – others are just stakeholders.”*
- Indigenous communities around the lake are focused on participating in fisheries decision-making and there are high expectations that the Department will continue to advance recently initiated work. Several also want the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy program to specifically support the management of different fisheries on this lake.

Understanding Training and Training Needs

“No one can afford the shopping list of training needs.”

- Participants named a range of areas in which they (or their staff) have been trained. However, most courses and training programs are not funded through the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy program. In fact, one participant was not aware of any training offered through the training. Past training in communities included:
 - Boating certifications (e.g., small vessel operator proficiency (SVOP), MEDA-3, radio operator, etc.), GPS, on-the-job water sampling, data collection and on-the-land skills, wilderness first aid, Canadian aquatic biomonitoring network (CABIN) protocol, environmental monitoring, and gun safety.
- Participants noted the following training needs:
 - Program administrator: occupational health and safety training, science and social research protocols, advanced use of Excel and data analysis programs.
 - Fishery manager: data collection, management and analysis.
 - Field technicians: basic technical and safety skills to do water and fish sampling, white-water safety and rescue.
 - Fishery guardian: enforcement courses and environmental certifications, as well as an understanding of both Canadian and traditional law *“They must work together through protocols.”*
- Participants stress the need to encourage and advance post-secondary education of community members through training activities and career progression opportunities. They also support training in traditional practices and protocols. One saw the need for balance in Indigenous school systems between traditional methods and core scientific, math, engineering and technical courses.

Understanding Relationships

“It’s a matter of trust: when we have our own people doing our work, the trust is there. With outsiders, it’s harder to have that trust. It must be built.”

- The most important relationship for participants is among Indigenous communities.

- Participants have relationships with various parts of the Department, including science, resource management, and conservation and protection, but they would like to continue to build these relationships. *“Last year, we got officers to charge recreational harvesters and the charges held. But it took 10 years to get them up there.”*
 - Participants particularly emphasize the need for more enforcement and better management of Great Slave Lake. *“We only interface with DFO about three times a year.”* They also want scientists to come back and talk with the community about the results of research that they have undertaken in traditional areas.
 - One noted the absence of a local departmental officer serving the region. *“We interact with the Regional Director in Winnipeg a lot these days.”*
- Participants used to collaborate with other federal departments related to environmental and food fish safety issues, but this work is now done with university researchers. Several also noted having relationships with territorial government department, such as Environment and Natural Resources and Industry, Tourism and Investment.

Improving the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy Program

“Do not try to water down what Aboriginal groups feel is important to them. Fully fund this program with multi-year funds.”

- Participants want program funding to be updated to reflect the rate of inflation and additional requests by the Department to do work in other areas. *“Limited funding hinders our ability to conduct more technical work that is needed.”* They also want the program to create more employment opportunities for community members, including by supporting training and administration of the programs.
 - One finds the program meets their objectives fairly well, but limited funding prevents them from addressing unexpected issues, such as when a vessel needs repair.
 - Several think the funding process should be more transparent and reporting less bureaucratic. *“Drop some of the reporting requirements.”*
- Participants also think the program could be improved to better meet the food needs of communities; especially, in smaller communities. *“We have two grocery stores in Hay River, but in smaller communities, fishing is more important for food.”*
- One community would like to see the program objectives reshaped to better meet their needs. *“Orderly fishery is not being addressed nor is participation in fisheries management. Fisheries management skills and capacity are the basis of capacity building.”*

Measuring Success

“One measure of success is DFO’s knowledge of the concerns, efforts to address our concerns, and lists of concerns decreasing over time.”

- Participants measure program success by the number of persons employed to address fisheries issues and retained through programs. They also see success as First Nations collecting both traditional knowledge and technical data, resolution of outstanding fisheries management issues, such as recreational fisheries problems and the sustainability of Great Slave Lake fish, and the number of addressed infractions.

Improving the Aboriginal Fishery Guardian Program

“What is the possibility of having authority in the area? This would create employment within our communities and reduce the time it takes for fishery officers to come and deal with issues.”

- Participants support improving the program by making it accessible to all Nations. *“If there is a guardian program, then we need the funds to run it.”* One thinks governments should blend funding pots (not just fishery-specific) to make the guardian program more accessible and responsive to multiple resource management needs. *“Do more work on that, rather than making each community do it.”*
 - Some participants think two guardians per community would be a good starting point. Another asked if AFS funds could be used to hire a fishery officer.

Ideal Fishery Guardian Team

- Participants view an ideal fishery guardian team including a coordinator, resource managers, traditional knowledge and environmental scientist, biologist, researchers, and policy analyst. *“The team should roll-up all data into effective policies that protect current fish stock levels and keep people in line.”*