

Guilt-Free Seafood Powered by Shared Values

Vancouver's Organic Ocean is the world's first seafood supplier to provide DNA verification of the species it sells and identification of the river of origin for salmon harvested by First Nations. This is part of the customer assurance program that they, and their seafood producer-partners, share along with values of environmentally and socially responsible harvesting while working to protect the ocean's productive capacity.

Launched by independent West Coast fish harvesters, Organic Ocean has partnered with First Nations partners Harrison Salmon Producers and the Upper Fraser Indigenous Sustainable Harvesters Association (UFISH) since 2014.

"When it comes to commercial fishermen and Indigenous fisheries, there is a long history," acknowledges Dane Chauvel, Organic Ocean's Founder.

For nearly 100 years, First Nations were largely banned from commercial fishing in the Fraser and other major BC rivers. A great deal has changed since, mainly in the last decade, but culminating in the historic 2019 Fraser Salmon Collaborative Management Agreement. Under this agreement Fisheries and Oceans Canada will co-manage Fraser River salmon with the Fraser Salmon Management Council involving 76 First Nations.

Indigenous and independent commercial fish harvesters also shared a common problem with their catches and the care they took in handling them being underappreciated and undervalued by the existing seafood supply chain. Organic Ocean took a new approach and developed a channel to market that centered on supplying premium-branded seafood to chefs in the high-end restaurants and hotels. The business subsequently evolved to include the direct-to-consumer market through online ecommerce sales.

"We were looking for an opportunity to create our own logistical solutions in relation to storage, packaging and value adding," says Gordon Sterritt

of UFISH. Organic Ocean wanted to work with First Nations commercial fish harvesters who are involved in Fisheries and Oceans Canada's Pacific Integrated Commercial Fisheries Initiative to support environmentally sustainable and commercially viable fisheries for First Nations communities.

With funding from that initiative, Organic Ocean, Harrison Salmon Producers and UFISH partnered to re-open the historic Paramount cannery as part of a \$14 million rehabilitation of the commercial fishing waterfront at Steveston Harbour in Richmond, BC. The 80-year-old heritage cannery building was converted into a modern fish processing, cold storage and handling facility that will soon be federally registered. This will enable Organic Ocean to do end-to-end processing and vastly extend its export capability.



Paramount historic cannery reopening. Photo Credit: Harrison Salmon Producers



Photo Credit: River Select Fisheries Cooperative

Sterritt says catches that were once devalued by big seafood buyers are now in demand around the world.

To get to this point, First Nations commercial fish harvesters formed the River Select Fisheries Co-op to work together and build on a common approach. “When we went out looking for a commercial partnership, we found a partner that shared our values,” he says.

Organic Ocean’s collaboration with Harrison and UFISH has been “a happy partnership providing benefits to all parties,” says Chauvel. He attributes this success to their commitment to improving the economic well-being of the fish harvesters and their communities while ensuring the long-term stability of the ecosystem which supports those fisheries.

Dave Moore, General Manager of Harrison Salmon Producers agrees: “The strength of our relationship is built upon common values. Organic Ocean acts as a mentor in market development: when to push a product or slow down and build markets. We lean on their corporate capacity in finance and administration.”

In return Harrison and UFISH, and all the other First Nation commercial fishing enterprises involved in the River Select Fisheries Co-op, provide Organic Ocean

with a unique story to tell about their wild-caught product that supports Indigenous communities. “Our relationship closes the chain,” concludes Moore.

Moore also believes the Pacific Integrated Commercial Fisheries Initiative has done a world of good for First Nations fish harvesters. The program has not only provided vital funding but been supportive in enabling them to diversify into other businesses such as eco-tourism.

“As we struggle through a changing fishery, we would not have survived without this initiative,” says Moore.

Indigenous fisheries play an important role in many communities in Canada. They also serve as a main contributor of own source revenues and job creation.

Best Practise:
Shared Values