

Helping Inuit Harvesters Build Sustainable Commercial Fisheries

Nutritious Arctic char is freely available to pregnant women and nursing mothers in some Nunavut communities as part of the Nunavut government's Country Food Distribution Program to replace processed food with country food. Abel Tavalok who operates a small commercial fishery in Uqsuqtuuq on Qikiqtaq in the high Arctic is more than happy that the program is one of his customers.

"We have the best eating char in our region," says Tavalok. "Studies show it's very good for pregnant ladies and their children."

Nunavut Inuit households are eight times more likely to face moderate to severe food insecurity than in the rest of Canada. Food costs are considerably higher than down south as are rates of diabetes and childhood rickets.

For the past five years, Abel Tavalok, James Qitsualik and other local fish harvesters have been collecting samples of iqaluk (Arctic char) from traditional fishing sites around Uqsuqtuuq (also known as Gjoa Haven) to assess the abundance and health of the resource. The harvesters were trained and paid to collect these samples as part of the Government of Nunavut's Community Aquatic Monitoring Program, better known as N-CAMP. This program has since been followed by the launch of the Northern Integrated Commercial Fisheries Initiative; a Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) program designed to help Indigenous fish harvesters like Tavalok develop commercial businesses.

"I started my business three years ago, and so far, I have had eight guys work for me," he said. It was difficult to get started as there was a lot to learn but Tavalok says training and support from the DFO program has been "very helpful."



The goal of providing 200 char a year for study and analysis is to determine the feasibility of a larger scale, sustainable commercial fishery in Uqsuqtuuq. “I’m finding more people interested in getting our char,” says Tavalok.

And there’s good reason for this interest. A comprehensive scientific assessment of the nutritional and pollutant levels in those samples found that they are low in contaminants like mercury and high in nutrients. They’re also an excellent source of vitamin D that is crucially important for strong bones in young children and at levels sufficient to prevent rickets, which is a health problem in the region, the assessment concluded.

This analysis was part of \$5.6 million Genome Canada-supported project, “Towards a Sustainable Fishery for Nunavummiut”—a partnership between communities and university researchers—to foster economic development and improve food security in western Nunavut. The federally supported Genome Canada has a focus on deciphering genetic information, or DNA, to increase the understanding of different species and to use this information for the economic and social benefit of communities. The project was also a collaborator in the N-CAMP char sample collection activities.

The next step towards a viable commercial fishery is learning how to handle the fish to meet food safety requirements and how to market them says Stephan Schott, an economist from Carleton University who is collaborating with three biologists from Queen’s University on the Genome Canada project.

The City of Yellowknife could be a good market for frozen or perhaps traditionally dried char says Schott. With a sustainable supply of fish and other communities near Uqsuqtuuq getting on board, a fish processing plant could also be a possibility, and certainly some kind of cold storage facility, he said.

“The community is happy to see this get started,” says Schott who has worked in the Arctic since 2006. It’s taken him time to develop relationships with people in the community and to work with them as partners. “But in the end, it will be up to them to be the business owners and managers.”

The Northern Integrated Commercial Fisheries Initiative will continue to support training and other services on how to start and run this kind of business and other enterprises says Schott.

James Qitsualik, Vice-Chair of the Gjoa Haven Hunters and Trappers Association, is eager for this to go forward. Qitsualik has been dreaming about a commercial fishery with a processing plant for 10 years. “We have a ton of fish here. Gjoa Haven could be the fish capital of Nunavut,” he says.

The sampling program has proven there are plenty of very healthy fish and added to our traditional knowledge says Qitsualik. “We’re starting to see some results ... and once it gets going our people will have access to more fish and more employment.”

In addition to Uqsuqtuuq, DFO has also issued exploratory licences to help determine the feasibility of commercial fisheries in Iqaluit, Taloyoak, Kinngait and Qikiqtarjuaq over the past two years.

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