

WITNESS SUMMARY

Chief Willie Charlie

Witness Background

Chief Charlie is the elected Chief of the Chehalis Indian Band, as well as the CEO of its administration and development corporation. He is also the former Vice President of the Union of BC Indian Chiefs.

Band

Chehalis, whose members prefer to be called a tribe than a band, has a membership of just over one thousand, consisting of approximately 550 members on reserve and about 450 off reserve population. They are still considered Sto:lo Coast Salish people, but if you asked individual members most would consider themselves Chehalis. The Chehalis are very independent, both politically and administratively. They provide many programs and services for their membership including, a K-12 school, child care centre, fire hall, health programs, residential treatment program, employment services, and a development corporation.

Territory

Historically, Chehalis had 14 villages on Harrison Lake and 4 villages on Chehalis Lake, in addition to other villages. His people were originally located as far as up the top of Harrison Lake but the government of the day banished those who were located there. The government put them all on a small reservation on the Harrison River.

His people also spilled right down into the Fraser River, and so their territory came down right from Harrison Lake, Chehalis Lake, and Harrison River to its confluence with the Fraser River onto a place called Hooknose. So their traditional territories were very large.

Chief Charlie's grandfather grew up in New Westminster, so when they would travel from Chehalis to Aggasiz to Mission by canoe and then back home, they called it going around the world. It was really the Sto:lo world and Chief Willie Charlie feels fortunate to be able to tell stories about that entire area.

Traditional participation in the fishery

Chief Charlie relates that the Chehalis have a great history of fishing in their territory. Indeed, one of the reasons they defended their territory so fiercely was because of the great resource of salmon. Within their territory, they could catch fresh fish all year round. For example, in September, one can still get silver sockeye on the Harrison River. In the fall, one can catch all five species of salmon, everything from sockeye, coho, chum, spring (white spring) and steelhead, as well as sturgeon.

Whether sockeye were fished depended on the time and fishing would occur where and when it was plentiful. Historically, as is the case today, they would go to the Fraser to fish the early Chinook and early sockeyes, and depending on the time of year, they would fish the Harrison. The fish that go up the Harrison are really smart fish. Since one can see to the bottom of the river, one can see how the fish

react to a net when it is put out. The fish see the net, touch it and go around it. But in the fall when the fish are returning to spawn the river changes colour. At other times the Harrison River is a turquoise green, but it turns at this time to a milky green where you cannot see the bottom anymore. Chief Charlie does not know why, but it was easier to catch the sockeye then.

Chief Charlie describes two main fishing methods, by net and by spear. There is a prong-like spear and one that can be thrown. Also, weirs were once used on small streams and sloughs along the Harrison River and at Chehalis Lake, among other locations. The Harrison River is traditionally shallow, which meant that not long ago, even in Chief Charlie's father's time, they would go torch lighting or torch fishing on the Fraser River. Torch fishing is with a canoe, where they would put a sandbox in the middle of the canoe and then build a fire in the centre to attract fish and then spear them. The water was so shallow that fish bodies would come out of the water in some areas, so they could be speared. But that was when the Fraser was clear enough that they could see the fish.

Chief Charlie recalls that as far back as 25 years ago, his grandfather felt sorry for them because they had no more fish, and this was at a time when Chief Charlie still thought they had fish. His grandfather had talked about being able to walk on the backs of salmon and being able to see them from the mountain tops. Chief Charlie's wife's great grand uncle was Coquitlam Williams, who explained that Coquitlam means "where the water boils with fish". There would be so many fish going through that part of the water that it would seem to bubble with them as they were going through.

Cultural significance of the Fraser sockeye and fishing

Chief Charlie indicates that the salmon are their greatest resource, next to their children, and that is who they are after thousands of years. There are points on the Fraser and Harrison Rivers (often the entrances of the sloughs which are spawning channels) that have been named after Chehalis elders, going back six or seven generations.

The Chehalis' main diet is salmon. Depending on the season and the species of fish, community members would eat them fresh while other fish were best to can, smoke or wind dry. Today, Chief Charlie's sons are still involved in fishing and storing fish. They always want to eat fish, instead of saying "fish again for dinner?"

Chief Charlie explains how three years ago DFO came in and tried to define Chehalis' FSC needs and limit the Chehalis fishery. To the best of his recollection, DFO was trying to limit ceremonial harvest of spring Chinook to ceremonies at times of deaths only. Chief Charlie believes these limitations were in order to provide fishing opportunities to other user groups. He could not agree to those types of limitations on Chehalis' rights to fish for FSC purposes, because one cannot define what a ceremony is, and life is just as important as death. Their ceremonies have spiritual purposes and soul food is a huge part of that, as is putting fish on the table for your friends. His family thought they were not going to make it through last year with the amount of fish they had. Normally they would have five freezers full of spring salmon. This year they are feeling good that they will get through the winter and feed their friends when they come to their longhouse; it is a huge part of everything that we are.

Chief Charlie explains how many of his people have kept alive the “first of the year of ceremonies,” including the first salmon ceremony. His family would have these ceremonies for first salmon and first deer. These ceremonies pay respect to the animals giving up their lives for them. In the fall, Chief Charlie’s people celebrate Sto:lo new year, which is when they turn their canoes over, signifying that they have gathered everything they need for the winter. Since enough deer and fish have been gathered, they harvest and gather no more and go into the winter ceremonies.

Chief Charlie explains how in his culture, names come from the land. One cannot simply pick a name; it is a birthright, into which one must be born. Each name refers to the land and the resources that come from the land, as well as the person’s characteristics. A child is named once the elders believe that he or she has the right to carry the responsibility that comes with that name. Normally grandparents pass the name onto the grandchildren once they discover that child’s characteristics, and once named, a child must live up to that description. Chief Charlie was told that his name (Homa Squiah) means he will be a builder, but a builder in a different way, one for the revival of our culture and our stories and our people.

Names also represent one’s ancestry and the people that carried the name before you. By eating traditional foods, one feeds their spirit. The same is true about being a fisherman in that one does it because it is one’s role and responsibility in their family; it is in their blood. If you are a fisherman, that is your medicine; you know you are feeding your people and that it is a part of you.

Observations of historic abundance levels and of decline

For the past two summers, Chief Charlie has wondered while on the water, what their fishing has come to. There was a time when they would fish and by the end of the week, be tired of fishing. Now, because of the few salmon returning and the pressures of other fishers, Chief Charlie sees that there is more waiting than fishing.

Now, because of the little salmon returning and all the pressures of the various fishers on the water and the conflict on the water, Chief Charlie’s people can only fish in certain spots. Now sometimes there is up to a dozen boats sitting on one bar waiting to do a drift; so they have to wait maybe 3-4 hours to do a drift.

2009 was so bad one was lucky if he caught one or two fish. That year, the only salmon that did return in good numbers was the Harrison run, which is where community members live.

The Harrison River is a short distance and it is still cold – it is all glacial water. One can see clear cold water from the Harrison going into warm muddy water. Chief Charlie thinks that is why the runs in the Harrison are doing better. Harrison River fish also go on the outside of Vancouver Island and not through the Strait and so they are not subjected to the pressures from fish farms and have less chance of getting disease.

Chief Charlie had an uncle Buster, “Altus”, who was one of his great teachers. He told Chief Charlie about their people as the Sto:lo, or river people, who were a wealthy people because of the salmon.

Not because of how much salmon they could gather, but because of how easily they could live. They simply built a village on the riverbank and it made living easy. For example, the Sto:lo (Hul'qumi'num) language is very intricate and detailed. Sto:lo today are 24 bands, with the same language. However, elders can tell which village someone is from by how they speak. Since people never had to leave their villages because the salmon made living so easy, the slang and differences between villages are so noticeable. On the other hand, the language of some neighbours (from the other side of the Rockies) stretches so far because they had to pack up their houses and travel to survive.

Chief Charlie describes the historical ability of his people to feed visitors during one of their most sacred practices, the winter ceremony, which involves winter longhouses. He explains how his people had the luxury of taking time off gathering and being in ceremony for 2-3 months because of the great wealth of the salmon. People would go into a longhouse and stay for 5-7 days and then go to the next longhouse and travel to the next longhouse and would keep doing that for three months. Whoever was hosting the longhouse would feed all the visitors to that longhouse. The wealth of the salmon led to their culture's development in that way.

Aboriginal perspective / worldview

Chief Charlie's great aunts on his grandfather's side observed how he was very interested in their oral history and territory. He would stay behind inside to listen to elders talking, so he has a great recollection of their oral history. The more he learned, the more he realized he did not know. But he could show someone around the traditional territory and point out the names of the different mountains, waters, and the old village sites that walk one through different eras on the land.

Chief Charlie's understanding of the creation of the world goes back to before there was a world. The sun and the moon had fallen in love but they were separated in space and where those feelings met created the earth. In the beginning everyone was the same and it was only through evolution that some took different shapes and forms. Some became the wind, some became the four-legged, some became the plant people and root people, some became the ones that swim in the ocean, and some became human. There was an agreement that all living things would give themselves for food, shelter, clothing and they only asked to be respected and remembered and to have only what was needed taken from them. If someone had more than they needed they were expected to share with those less fortunate or those who could not get on the land to get their own.

Chief Charlie explains an important word in their language, which is the law of everything (Snewiith). It is the law of how people are supposed to be respectful to all living things and be respectful to one another, about how they get along as family and community, and how people may be born with a gift, and in a family you put all your gifts together and you become a strong family. According to this law, the bigger a person's family, the more gifts they have and more blessings they bring and the easier life becomes. Community living is very important to the Chehalis – living together, supporting and helping one another. In their culture, a person also represents their family – like an ambassador. People do not just see one person, they see their family. So when they ask “who are you” it is to know your parents,

your grandparents and the land you come from. Similarly, when they say they “know who you are” it means they know your land, and lineage and your name will tell the gift that you carry too.

So there is a law of everything. All their practices, beliefs, traditions all come back to that story of the creation and evolution and so according to Chief Charlie, one will probably find all First Nation peoples have the same respect for all his relations.

Traditional knowledge

One time Chief Charlie went to a grandfather who told him where to find the fish. The grandfather explained that when one sees certain plants, that is when the fish are here, and when there are certain birds other kinds of fish are there. He knew by the plants when the fish returned. Today, the Chehalis go by a calendar, but the grandfathers go by everything else, by the whole environment. It is the same with the water levels. They tell you where to go when the water is high or when it is warm, or when there has been rain. The elders are very in tune with those things.

According to Chief Charlie, the Chehalis still use traditional indicators to guide them in their fishing. He explains that his people were guided by the migration of birds, and other nations have similar indicators. The first Chinook is another sign. Chief Charlie explains that “that’s the king of the fish for us.” His grandfather used to be the regulator so when he caught that first fish then others would know that they could go fish. The white snowberry would be the indicator to say to go out. Another was the salmon berry, which, when it turned red, meant that the fish were coming. Today they talk about times and dates, but they know that everything functions by cycles and ecosystems.

Importance of traditional knowledge in management of the Fraser sockeye

In Chief Charlie’s opinion, DFO needs to be inclusive of First Nations’ history, knowledge, wisdom, and understanding of fisheries, both current and historical. This is especially important when it comes to management. In his view, the Chehalis are able to co-manage and should do so, not just as a privilege, but as a matter of right. Chief Charlie may speak to Chehalis’ capacity for fisheries management.

Since becoming Chief, Chief Charlie has raised with DFO questions about their jurisdiction, mandate, and management practices. In his view, a good manager of the fishery does not put fish at risk, but instead protects many different stocks and invests in ensuring the health of those stocks. Chief Charlie thinks DFO should rely more on traditional knowledge and consider ways to really involve traditional knowledge in management practices. Chief Charlie thinks it’s problematic to simply “pick and choose” when to consider and use traditional knowledge, and instead this wisdom should inform all fisheries decisions.

Chief Charlie may speak to Chehalis’ traditional salmon enhancement practices. Chief Charlie’s grandfather and uncles told him about the spawning channels that they have and the beavers they used to have. The beavers would dam up the spawning channels and Chehalis people knew to break those up when the spawners were returning, and then once again when the smolts were ready to go out.

As an example of where traditional knowledge may be important, Chief Charlie explains that specific salmon stocks go to specific spawning channels, but if a channel is full, they will go somewhere else and look for the next waterway. They will not just fill in the main ones.

Collaborative processes with other First Nations

Chief Charlie thinks that all First Nations want to be involved in fisheries management decision-making processes and have come to realize that they need to work together for the benefit of the fish.

Chief Charlie supports the objectives of the Intertribal Treaty Organization. He acknowledges that some believe that nobody can speak on behalf of another Nation. However, he sees hope for dealing with and sorting out internal First Nations politics on this issue. As he sees it, if First Nations do not come together, nothing will get done and they will not have an adequate and proper voice. What is needed is a clear mandate and a clear understanding so that there will be advocacy on behalf of the collective and not the individual. It is his sense that many of those involved in fisheries now understand that.