

WITNESS SUMMARY

Chief Edwin Newman

Witness Background

Chief Newman is a Hereditary Chief and Heiltsuk Elder. Over the last 50 years, he has held many political and community positions and was recently honoured at a special ceremony by the First Nations Summit for his work in the Fisheries. The following list highlights some of the positions he has held:

- Heiltsuk Nation Chief Councillor
- Heiltsuk Nation Council Member
- BC Aboriginal Fisheries Commission, Coastal-Co Chair
- Native Brotherhood of BC, President
- Federal Fisheries Ministers Advisory Council, Member
- President of Central Native Fisherman Co-op, President
- Native Fishing Association, Director
- Chief Negotiator, Heiltsuk Nation, BC Treaty Process
- Magistrate on behalf of the Province of British Columbia in Bella Bella and Klemtu for 9 years

Chief Newman was born in Bella Bella in 1926. His father was Kwagiulth and his mother was Heiltsuk. From the time he was 6-7 years old up until he was 14, Mr. Newman attended residential school. After leaving residential school, he was hired by a fisherman from Klemtu who taught him how to fish on a seine boat. Later, he became a commercial fisherman and has fished commercially for over 60 years.

Chief Newman has three sons whom he taught to fish. All three are commercial fisherman and fish within Heiltsuk's traditional territory.

Nation / Territory

The Heiltsuk consider themselves "The Salmon People".

Chief Newman is a member of the Heiltsuk First Nation, which currently has 2500 on and off reserve members. Heiltsuk territory is located on the central coast of BC.

Traditional participation in the fishery

Traditionally, Heiltsuk used stone weirs and traps, and caught fish as they returned to the streams.

Passing stocks, such as the Fraser River sockeye salmon, supplemented Heiltsuk's food source particularly when various streams dried up, were compromised, or Heiltsuk wished to implement conservation measures.

Observation of historic abundance levels and of decline

Chief Newman has observed the changes that have occurred since he was 14-year-old on the deck of seine boat. He recalls seeing a high abundance of fish back then, but also remembers an older fisherman at that time saying to him, "you should have seen it when I was young."

Chief Newman is concerned that inadequate access to salmon stocks has led to loss of Heiltsuk culture with respect to traditional fishery practices and knowledge, ceremonies and customs for the salmon, and the cultural uses of the fish. He believes that the health of salmon and of Heiltsuk cannot be separated. The decline of the salmon fishery has led to widespread unemployment, a loss of components of our culture, and a decline in independence and self-worth. He observes that very few young people are involved in fishing nowadays, and estimates that the average age of a fisherman today is 50.

Chief Newman explains that the sockeye food fishery is critical to the sustenance, health and well being of his people. While Heiltsuk have an FSC allocation of 22,000 fish, they have not been able to catch that number for many years. Therefore the community is forced to ration its intake of fish, and must rely on expensive, store-bought food flown in from the mainland.

The health of salmon and of Heiltsuk cannot be separated. In addition to stewardship and knowledge of local stocks, Heiltsuk maintain extensive knowledge of the difference between local and passing stocks, including the Fraser River sockeye salmon and migration routes through Heiltsuk territory, where they make a vital component of both the ecosystem and the Heiltsuk economy.

Cultural significance of Fraser sockeye and the act of fishing for it

Chief Newman explains that sockeye salmon fishing has been an integral and defining constant in Heiltsuk life. He once worked as an interpreter for Heiltsuk elders, and recalls an elder saying that "salmon is to us is like bread is to the white man." He has never forgotten that.

Chief Newman advises that ownership of resources has always been a key component of Heiltsuk culture.

Chief Newman explains that fishing was so important culturally that anyone caught disrespecting or playing with fish was banished from the tribe. He advises that this traditional form of punishment has been revived in recent times. The Heiltsuk Aboriginal Fisheries Committee had been trying to rebuild the stocks, but found that their own people were not complying with the process. Chief Newman explains that banishing someone is the hardest thing one could possibly do.

Chief Newman advises that conservation of marine resources is culturally taught through a number of ways. It begins with the older, more experienced fishermen mentoring and training younger members, taking them out on the water, showing them the traditional and modern methods of fishing and tracking and disclosing various fishing sites. Heiltsuk also pass down stories about the importance of respecting resources to their youth. In the Heiltsuk creation story, the first food the creator provided to their ancestor, Heema'sbat, was the salmon.

Chief Newman advises that Heiltsuk have dances to celebrate the resource. For example, he recounts dances based on the sea, including the sea kingdom dance. This involved all sea creatures, showing how important they were to Heiltsuk. This dance is still practiced today. He also recalls the salmon dance to celebrate return of salmon or first salmon caught of the year. The individual who caught the first salmon would distribute it among others, afterwards returning its bones to the sea in thanks.

Chief Newman advises that salmon have an important place in the potlatch ceremony. Heiltsuk put on a seafood smorgasbord for the potlatch, and salmon are always a part of it.

Collaborative processes with other First Nations

Chief Newman explains that the First Nations Fisheries Council (FNFC) was put in place to achieve a unified voice and obtain an agreement among the peoples. He believes that, over time, people will slowly come to understand that every nation cannot have a seat at the table because they do not have an AFS agreement or affected fish stream. In his opinion, management at the regional level is the way forward. There are opportunities for collaboration where commonalities exist but such regional representation should not take away Heiltsuk's ability to have its own voice when necessary. He points out that the FNFC is set up as regional body with 14 regional representatives from throughout the province (although those geographical regions have yet to be fully approved). Heiltsuk would be part of the central coast region.

Vision for involvement in the management of the Fraser sockeye fishery

Chief Newman emphasizes that Heiltsuk rely on salmon for their well being and want to save the resource more than anybody else. He believes that DFO needs to recognize, respect and utilize Heiltsuk's aboriginal knowledge as well as their practical experience as both commercial and subsistence fishers by honouring Heiltsuk authority over fishery management

Chief Newman believes that DFO needs to provide adequate funding to build capacity for joint management of their fisheries which includes substantive powers of enforcement. Specifically, his people need funding to build scientific capacity that would augment traditional knowledge and local experience and allow for more meaningful engagement with DFO. They also need sufficient funds to attend DFO meetings and properly engage in the management of their fisheries. Lastly, Heiltsuk authority for local enforcement activities must be respected particularly when economic development is being considered.

Chief Newman is particularly concerned for the need to harmonize Heiltsuk's interests with sports and recreational fishers who fish within its territory. The negative impact of these fishers on the passing stocks and Heiltsuk's way of life has not been adequately assessed. Chief Newman has seen hundreds of these fishermen fish in waters where Heiltsuk is not permitted to fish, and up to 500 airport landings during the month of July during the recreational fishing season with little or no benefit to Heiltsuk people or its economy. A concrete example is the ability of sports and recreational fishers access to Milbanke Sound, to the exclusion of Heiltsuk commercial fisherman. This has led to increased tension between Heiltsuk, sports and recreational fishers and the sports lodges.

Chief Newman also emphasizes the importance of rebuilding stocks in smaller river systems. He believes that DFO needs to devote resources to more than simply the Fraser, Nass and Skeena systems, providing funding for habitat restoration in smaller salmon spawning streams. Heiltsuk has found that innumerable smaller systems contribute to mixed stock salmon fisheries and their neglect creates reliance on passing stocks such as the declining Fraser River sockeye.

Perspective on prohibition on sale of FSC fish

Chief Newman knows of one or two Heiltsuk members who sold fish to other community members under their FSC licence. He explains that in these circumstances of scarce food, the amount of fish sold was marginal (not on any commercial scale) and those involved did so to help those that were physically or financially unable to fish for themselves. The money obtained from the sale of the fish was used to cover the cost of the fisherman's boat fuel. Under these circumstances, Heiltsuk authorities have not directed these members to stop such sales.