

SALMON WARS

**The Battle for
the West Coast
Salmon Fishery**

D E N N I S B R O W N



Fishermen burn Mifflin Plan area-licensing application forms outside the Vancouver office of DFO, April 1996.

occurred when Premier Glen Clark, who had just won the provincial NDP leadership, addressed the cheering crowd. "The federal government is stopping BC fishers but it isn't stopping the problems," cried Clark. "They should can the plan and stop it until they get it right!"²¹

On April 28, 1996, a large group representing fishermen's organizations, coastal communities and environmentalists travelled to Ottawa. The highlight of the lobby was the appearance before the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Fisheries of the media personality and environmentalist David Suzuki, who had family roots in commercial fishing. He confessed that it was strange for him to work with commercial fishermen, since he had been "beaten up by a few of them a number of times," but he believed he and the fishermen were of one mind. "We know that change must come, and I think the people in this delegation are prepared to pay a price to protect the future—but not by the Mifflin Plan." He went on:

I'm a biologist and I fear for the future of wild organisms that are being shoe-horned into agendas being set by politicians and economics, not biology. What is a biological problem gets fractured into bureaucratic subdivisions that ensure the fish will never be properly dealt with as a single entity and therefore protected properly. We believe local communities will be the unit of survival into the future, communities with a shared stake in the quality of the air, the water, the soil, and bio-diversity... Their future, it seems to me, is our best hope for the planet. Fishers have knowledge that cannot be duplicated by science.

Politicians come and go. Government experts and bureaucrats seem immune from long-term accountability for their decisions. Local communities aren't immune to consequences of these decisions. I believe they must have an opportunity for their knowledge and advice to be heard and acted upon... The concentration of licences in corporate hands at the expense of small boat owners may maximize profitability and the ease of management, but it sure doesn't maximize jobs or the viability of local communities.²²

The standing committee was impressed, but key Liberal cabinet ministers such as Fred Mifflin and David Anderson were not present. And the lobby came to an abrupt halt when Mifflin decided to travel to the West Coast to consult with the industry that same week. He and his senior staff only agreed to meet the lobbyists in the foyer of the DFO's headquarters for a few minutes. Even the *Vancouver Sun*—which had long criticized the commercial fishery—censured Mifflin: "History encourages the minister to believe that toughness is all that's needed here. The commercial fleet should have been reduced 10 to 15 years ago and the decisions now are much harder. The current plan comes in the midst of the worst crisis in the history of the fishery. But the urgent need to do something does not justify doing the wrong things in the wrong way. Mr. Mifflin should turn this ship around."²³