

CANNERY DAYS:

A CHAPTER IN THE LIVES OF THE HEILTSUK

By

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## Abstract

This thesis consists of an exhibit, *Cannery Days - A Chapter In The Life Of The Heiltsuk* which opened at the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology (MOA) in May 1993, and a written paper which discusses the processes and political issues involved in doing an exhibit on a subject that is not only complex, but poorly understood by the general public.

The context of the exhibit and this paper is the failure of non-Native society to understand that fish were and continue to be the economic wealth of B.C. First Nations. Within this context, the related issue of the invisibility of First Nations women and men in the fish-processing industry is addressed through the exhibit using quotes, photographs, and text.

The exhibit and this subsequent paper grew out of concern and unease about how First Nations and their relationship with fish have traditionally been presented in academic literature. The purpose of this thesis is to tell how my knowledge of the traditional fisheries, and my experience in the fishing and fish-processing industries, in combination with my training in the discipline of anthropology has been put to use in preparing an exhibit to tell about Heiltsuk people and fish. It will discuss the exhibit as a medium or bridge which allowed me to illustrate this relationship without diminishing the lives and experiences of Heiltsuk people.

Interviews with seventeen Heiltsuk women, four Heiltsuk men and one long-time employee of B.C. Packers open a window on a period of history which has not been well documented. To read conventional accounts of Native involvement in the fish-processing industry, their lives were grey and dreary. The exhibit reveals that for the people who lived and worked in Namu, it was not just a place to work, it had many meanings and warm memories.

Stages of the exhibit development from concept through mounting are described. Although the entire project took longer than I had anticipated, the exhibit was more

rewarding for me than a conventional written thesis. In following a strict ethical review process to ensure that the people had more control over the way their story is told, I was able to see the value of collaboration between myself, MOA and most importantly, Heiltsuk people.

This is seen in the quality of the results and because it allows First Nations to work with non-Native professionals in ways which maintain dignity and respect on both sides. Through a museum exhibit, I found a way to present a First Nations perspective that provides balance to written accounts. By putting a human face on the relationship between First Nations and fish, my exhibit was able to reach a wider audience.

The exhibit had two major themes; the continuing importance of fish to First Nations culture and economy and the pivotal role of Heiltsuk people in the development of the fish-processing industry. I find that this paper also has two themes. The first is an examination of the value of exhibits like *Cannery Days* in allowing First Nations to tell their own story. The second is an examination of my ability to function as an anthropologist without losing my identity as a First Nations woman.

The exhibit was well received by academics, First Nations and the museum public. This leads me to believe in the value of continuing fruitful collaboration between Native and non-Native researchers.

**Cannery Days**  
**A Chapter In The Lives Of The Heiltsuk**

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Since June 1992 when I spent time with the women and men, two of the women have passed away. I would like to pay my respect to the families of the late Annie Wilson and the late Maggie Windsor.

I would also like to honour three past Heiltsuk Sisterhood Presidents: Brenda Campbell, Mary Hall, and Kitty Carpenter. The contributions of these women are unique and their stories could only be hinted at in the exhibit and thesis.

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Having acknowledged these special debts, I would like to state that any responsibility for the content and interpretations in this M.A. Thesis are mine alone.

## INTRODUCTION

I am Heiltsuk from the village of Waglisla (also known as Bella Bella), British Columbia. A great part of the identity and strength of Heiltsuk people comes from our intimate relationship with fish. Fish is our life. Three generations of my family have fished and worked in canneries on the central coast of B.C.

In 1991, as a graduate student in anthropology at the University of British Columbia, I began the process of developing an exhibit at the University's Museum of Anthropology (MOA). That exhibit, *Cannery Days - A Chapter In The Lives Of The Heiltsuk* is the result of a collaboration between myself, the Museum of Anthropology and most importantly, Heiltsuk people. I have done my best to do justice to the time and effort which they gave so generously. The exhibit is theirs.

The exhibit and this subsequent paper grew out of concern and unease about how First Nations and their relationship with fish have traditionally been presented in academic literature. The purpose of this thesis is to tell how my knowledge of the traditional fisheries, and my experience in the fishing and fish-processing industries, in combination with my training in the discipline of anthropology has been put to use in preparing an exhibit to tell about Heiltsuk people and fish. It will discuss the exhibit as a medium or bridge which allowed me to illustrate this relationship without diminishing the lives and experiences of Heiltsuk people.

Due to strictures of time, resources and format, I decided to concentrate on the central coast in general and Namu cannery in particular because Namu is in our traditional territory. The experiences of Heiltsuk people are also representative of life and work in the B.C. fish processing industry. The exhibit primarily spans the post-war years up to 1967 when Namu cannery was closed, but it also gives a brief glimpse of Heiltsuk life today, where the fisheries continue to play an important role.

I was motivated to incorporate the exhibit as a major component of the MA thesis for two reasons. First, I have a personal stake in the matter. The recent B.C. Court of Appeal decisions<sup>1</sup> in five cases relating to aboriginal fishing rights, concluding that there was no aboriginal right to sell fish commercially, show a profound and unsettling failure to understand the social and economic fabric of past and present First Nation societies in B.C.

Second, with the impending First Nations treaty negotiations in B.C., there is an urgent need for Native people to make more use of the news media, museum exhibits, videos, and other communication systems - to begin an intensive education process about the importance of fish in our lives.

During my studies, I became aware that the history of the B.C. fishery is viewed very differently by First Nations and in traditional academic studies. Although there is an exceptionally large and diverse collection of literature on the modern fishing and processing industry, as well as specific aspects of the role of First Nations in the development of the fisheries, conventional writings mask the crucial importance of fish to First Nations people.

More recent literature has tried to present a summary overview of fish as a common property resource.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, this thesis focusses on the historic and ongoing importance of the fisheries to one distinct First Nation society on the central coast.

Most writings on the modern fishing and fish-processing industry in B.C. concentrate either on the origins of the crisis in the modern fishing industry or on the fish-processing sector in the larger urban centres. Therefore, the accounts are more conservation or economy-oriented. Some writers look at the history of the salmon fishing industry through a particular ideological perspective or from the standpoint of a special interest group.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Canadian Native Law Reporter*, [1993] 4 C.N.L.R. With Cumulative Indexes. Saskatchewan: University of Saskatchewan. *R. v. Gladstone* (1993) 4 C.N.L.R. 75 (B.C.C.A.); *R. v. Lewis* (1993) 4 C.N.L.R. 98 (B.C.C.A.); *R. v. Nikal* (1993) 4 C.N.L.R. 117 (B.C.C.A.); *R. v. N.T.C. Smokehouse Ltd.* (1993) 4 C.N.L.R. 158 (B.C.C.A.); *R. v. Vanderpeet* (1993) 4 C.N.L.R. 221; (B.C.C.A.).

<sup>2</sup> Patricia Marchak, Neil Guppy and John McMullan, *Uncommon Property: the Fishing and Fish Processing Industries in British Columbia* (Agincourt, Ontario: Methuen Publications, 1987).

More specifically, the literature about cannery workers portrays them as an exploited work force or treats their work as supplementary to the fishing industry. For example, anthropologist James McDonald views the involvement of Native women and children in canneries as exploitative and disruptive of their way of life (1984:49). Other writers like Alicja Muszynski analyse the place of Native women in the formation of the B.C.'s salmon cannery labour force from a Marxist standpoint (1986:109).

However valid some of their observations may be, undue concentration on the economic and ideological approach loses sight of the lives and experiences of First Nations people. The accounts also do not give us a feel of what cannery life meant to First Nations. My own experience in the modern fish-processing industry and knowledge of our traditional fisheries, caused me to question the wisdom of undue reliance on theoretical perspectives that fail to reflect the overall experiences of First Nations people.

The challenge facing me was to find a way of illustrating the special relationship Heiltsuk people have with fish that would present an accurate picture of their traditional fisheries and of the history of their involvement in the modern fishing and processing industry. I was also determined that my work would be a useful resource for the community. Thus, it would have to be written in terms understandable to community members.

In June 1992, I spent a month in Bella Bella to learn more about the traditional fishing activities and involvement of Heiltsuk people in the fish-processing industry. During my research, I interviewed twenty-two members of the Heiltsuk community and a former B.C. Packers Personnel Manager. These interviews uncovered a wealth of information. This research reinforced the idea of presenting my findings in an exhibit. It also became very evident that the Heiltsuk cannery experience would have to be presented in the context of the total relationship Heiltsuk people have with fish.

Additional data for the exhibit were obtained from various Northwest Coast ethnographies, archival material, and photographs collected inside and outside my community. This information re-affirmed the importance of fish to Heiltsuk people. I also

used the resources of the UBC Museum of Anthropology and was assisted in my work by the technical staff.

The exhibit fits well within the mandate and interests of MOA, which "has always been concerned with the study and portrayal of human achievements from around the world as a means of furthering understanding of other cultures" (MOA Guidelines, 1988:1-2). The approach also reflects a growing awareness in museums, anthropology, universities and the media, about the way the history and way of life of First Nations is represented and interpreted.

In setting out to tell the story of Heiltsuk people and fish, I found out that I had become the Curator of a museum exhibit. The very word "Curator" would not be used by members of my community to describe my role in putting the exhibit together. This illustrates the problem of interpretation with which I was faced. My decision as a Heiltsuk person, to mount an exhibit at the UBC Museum of Anthropology was also quite ironic given the ambivalent attitude of First Nations to anthropologists and museums. Nevertheless, I was convinced that the approach was valid.

The exhibit was installed in the Theatre Gallery in May 1993. The installation includes 25 frames with text, maps, and photographs. A comment book provided a participatory component. The responses in the comment book provided me with an unexpected source of data about the issues raised in *Cannery Days*. They also reinforced the need for more exhibits of this sort.

Through this exhibit I was able to discuss issues that were important to me, highlight the role of Heiltsuk women in canneries, and give a brief but long overdue glimpse of the strong role of the Heiltsuk local of the Native Sisterhood in Namu cannery and in our own community.

Although the entire exhibit process took much longer than I had anticipated, the exhibit was ultimately more rewarding for me than a conventional written thesis. In exploring the literature about First Nations and fish, I saw that the people were ignored.

Speaking through a museum exhibit, Heiltsuk people told their story much more clearly and effectively. As a result, the visitors of MOA gained a better understanding of the lives of First Nations and the special relationship Heiltsuk people have with fish.

While it is true that the ethical review process which ensures that First Nations people have more control over the way their story is told requires a significant investment in time, it does have two benefits. Once these conditions are fulfilled, the value of collaboration is readily seen both in the quality of the results and because it allows First Nations to work with non-Native professionals in ways which maintain dignity and respect on both sides.

The paper is organized as follows. I begin by speaking about the importance of fish, outlining how First Nations cultures and economies were founded and sustained over thousands of years by the fisheries resources on the Northwest Coast. Modern "industrial fishing" is distinguished from how First Nations have always used their wealth in fisheries. Recent B.C. Court of Appeal decisions are used to illustrate the difficulty which non-Native society have in seeing fish as wealth.

Second, I introduce the Heiltsuk Nation - our tribal territory, people and our traditional fisheries, and I touch upon the impact of modern industrial fishing. Special emphasis is placed upon the fish-canning industry.

Third, I critique a number of writings about the involvement of Native women in canneries and discuss how my own perspective as a Heiltsuk woman has affected this thesis and shaped the exhibit. The advantages of my cultural background and personal experiences both in research and in bringing a human dimension and depth to the lives of First Nations are identified.

Fourth, I explore the question, Why an Exhibit? This section develops the theme of validating the lives, work and experience of First Nations women and men, and explains why I was determined to prepare a museum exhibit rather than rely solely on a classic written thesis format.

Fifth, I document the stages of research, editing, preparing and mounting the exhibit and evaluate the success of the exhibit in generating interest and enthusiasm for the format and subject by technical staff of MOA, First Nations and the museum public. Finally, I summarize exhibit findings and conclusions.

## **IMPORTANCE OF FISH TO FIRST NATIONS IN B.C.**

Over a period of at least ten thousand years, numerous First Nations in the Pacific Northwest evolved a sophisticated co-existence with the rich natural resources of the lands and waters and with each other (Newell, 1993:4). Up to the time of contact, they enjoyed unlimited access to and control over their fisheries resources which they used for social, economic and cultural purposes. In an absolute sense, these resources were their wealth.

First Nations cultures and economies have been consistently misunderstood by non-Native society. In particular, non-Native people have trouble understanding how fish can be so important to us. There are two fundamental reasons for this misunderstanding. There is the inability of non-Native people to understand that an entire society could be based on fish (Carlson, 1990; Newell, 1993; Pearse, 1982). There is also a failure to understand that sophisticated cultures could exist without agriculture and writing. These misunderstandings persist until today.

It is important to state what I view as a critical distinction between the modern fishing industry and the traditional fisheries of First Nations. This distinction is clearly stated in the exhibit for three reasons. First, I wanted to show the historic importance of fish to First Nations, second, to illustrate that fish continue to be the wealth of their Nations and third, to show the impact of the Indian food fish regulation of 1888 (which equated Indian fisheries strictly with subsistence harvesting) on First Nations societies.

Native people have long-standing concerns about the impact of the modern "industrial" fishing industry on their "traditional fisheries." In 1916, the Chiefs of Bella Bella wrote a letter of protest to Ivan Fougner, Indian Agent, stating:

From all time our fathers have taken salmon from the rivers near our home, for dry salmon is to us what bread is to white people, we cannot do without it. During the past few years there has been a growing demand for humpback and dog salmon at the canneires [sic] of Bella Bella and Namu, the result of this demand is we find that some rivers which used to supply us with humpback salmon now contain very few, and we are afraid it will be the same with dog salmon. Will you please do your best to protect our interests in the matter (Fougner, 1916:387).

The concerns and feelings of unease expressed by the Heiltsuk Chiefs in 1916 about their traditional fisheries are equally valid today.<sup>3</sup>

Historian Dianne Newell says the Indian 'food fish' regulation raised two profound issues for First Nations:

First, it separated Indian harvesting and use of fish for personal consumption from that for economic, social, or cultural purposes...The distinction between Indians fishing for their own food and fishing for any other purpose was an artificial one as far as Indian culture and practice was concerned. Secondly, it divided resource production from resource management, officially transferring all management of this crucial Indian food and commercial resource from Indians to the state (Newell, 1993:108-109).

That is why it is important to make a distinction between our "traditional fisheries" and the "modern fishing industry" in the exhibit.

"Traditional fisheries" refers to the use of First Nations' wealth in fisheries for all purposes including food, trade, barter, and sale. The continued use of the term "food fisheries" by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) and the fishing industry downgrades and trivializes our aboriginal right to use our economic wealth in fisheries for the betterment of our nation as we have done and as we continue to do (Fougner, 1916; Newell, 1993; Pearse, 1982).

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<sup>3</sup> Peter H. Pearse, *Managing Salmon In The Fraser. Report to the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans on the Fraser River Salmon Investigation, with Scientific and Technical Advice from Peter A. Larkin* (Vancouver, 1992), 12. At present, according to the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) statistics, First Nations' traditional fisheries take a mere 3.4% of the total B.C catch. The Supreme Court of Canada has recognized that aboriginal fishing rights flow unextinguished from pre-contact times of 100% ownership and jurisdiction (*ibid*). It defies common sense to suggest that these rights are satisfied with the 3.4% presently left over from today's modern fishing industry and sport fisheries.

Accordingly, I use the terms "industrial fishing, salmon fishing and fish-canning industry" to refer to the post-contact fishing and fish-processing industries which harvest enormous amounts of fish coastwide to feed world market demand (Newell, 1993).

## **THE HEILTSUK NATION**

Heiltsuk people have occupied the central coast area for thousands of years. Long before the arrival of Europeans, Heiltsuk people had a well-developed culture which revolved around fish. Archaeological evidence found at Namu suggests that Heiltsuk tribal territory has been inhabited for at least 9,000 years (Carlson, 1990:60; Hobler, 1990:298).

Some early anthropologists classified the Heiltsuk as part of the "Kwakiutl" or "Northern Kwakiutl" (Hilton, 1990:321; Kolstee, 1988:45; Black, 1989:274). The Heiltsuk Nation is not, in fact, part of the "Kwakiutl" or "Kwakwaka'wakw" as they now call themselves.

In this thesis, I refer to the six Heiltsuk-speaking groups that settled at Bella Bella as the Heiltsuk Nation. The main Heiltsuk community of Bella Bella, known to us as Waglisla, is located on the east side of Campbell Island on the central coast of British Columbia. Today, 1,700 people live in Waglisla, with 500-600 Heiltsuk people in the Vancouver area and elsewhere.

Namu, the site of the cannery which figures largely in the text and exhibit, is also part of Heiltsuk territory (Large, 1968; Hobler, 1990). This was also confirmed by many of the women and men to whom I spoke.

## **The Central Role Of Fish In Heiltsuk Life**

Fish has always played a central role in the lives of Northwest Coast First Nations people. Today, over 200 distinct First Nations communities in British Columbia are located at or near important fishing sites. Fish are important to all First Nations communities, but are particularly important to coastal people like the Heiltsuk.

The seasonal migration to a number of resource sites was central to the economy of the Heiltsuk. For example, the summer and early fall salmon migrations involved a move to the traditional family salmon sites. These sites were owned by families each with their own distinct crests. They followed a seasonal round of activities dictated by salmon runs, hunting and other traditional pursuits (Hilton, 1990:314-315; Kolstee, 1988:45). Heiltsuk Elder, Phillip Hall explains it in these words:

Well Heiltsuk people, in the season, they moved around quite a bit. It wasn't as big before, they were all over the place - some in Roscoe, Nikas, Koeye and Houyat. After a while they gathered here [in Bella Bella]. When seaweed time comes - they all move to one place like, the one outside Ivory Island. There's a place down here, it belongs to Charlie Windsor, seaweed camp. In the fall, they dry fish and move into Houyat or across here at Nikas. They move out to Goose Island to dry halibut. They move in again summertime and they go down to the rivers and trade with somebody, whatever they're going to trade. They're always moving, seaweed, salmon, they're always moving (Hall, 1992, Personal Communication).

After the seasonal migration to different resource sites throughout their traditional territory, they returned in October or November to permanent winter villages to celebrate the ceremonial season (Hilton, 1990:314-315).

Heiltsuk people depend heavily on salmon. Heiltsuk Elder, Ed Martin remembers his grandparents "smoking 700 to 1,000 salmon at once" in their smokehouse at Houyet (Harkin, 1986:3). The ability to harvest such an abundance of salmon indicates the extent of Heiltsuk knowledge of the salmon resource. Like other First Nations in the Pacific Northwest, Heiltsuk people developed sophisticated fishing and fish-preservation technologies, yet managed to ensure they had adequate supplies of fish in their traditional territories over long

periods of time for themselves and for their neighbors. The late Angus Campbell, Heiltsuk Elder, recalls the importance of salmon to the people:

The most important food for the First Generation was smoked and dried salmon. These could be used later on when other fish started running. When people from other villages ran out of smoked and dried salmon, they would come to Mauwash and ask my great great great grandfather to fish there. There were three salmon traps in the creek at Mauwash...The First Generation always had a change of food in certain months, so they never hungered for anything (Storie & Gould, 1968:53-55).

An extensive trade and barter system was a major part of the Heiltsuk economy. Records from the late 1800s confirm that Heiltsuk people routinely traded with other Nations such as the Haisla (Kitimaat), Nuxalk (Bella Coola), the Tsimshian, and Namgis (Alert Bay) (Hilton, 1990:314-315; Kolstee, 1988; Newell, 1993:400).<sup>4</sup> Although poorly understood by non-Native people, this extensive barter and trade system continues today.

In the late 1800s, the central coast entered a period of industrial development. While this affected the social and cultural fabric of First Nation societies, the most profound impact was the near destruction of their traditional fish-based economies.

### **Industrialization of the B.C. Fishery**

The Pacific salmon industry began by exporting salted salmon in the 1830s. Emphasis then shifted to canning salmon for countries throughout the world from the 1870s to the present. As the new industry proved financially rewarding, salmon canning spread up and down the coast (Large, 1968:23; Knight, 1978:78)). In the early years of the fishing industry, the government of the day was still informed by the 19th century attitude that the resources of the sea were limitless and inexhaustible (Meggs & Stacey, 1992:1; Newell,

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<sup>4</sup> Dianne Newell, *Tangled Webs: Indians And The Law In Canada's Pacific Coast Fisheries*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 400. See also Barbara Lane, "Harvesting of Herring Spawn and Commerce in Herring Spawn by the Heiltsuk (Bella Bella) Indians of Central British Columbia From Aboriginal Times to the Present," (unpublished paper, 1990), who cites, for example, *William Fraser Tolmie: Physician and Fur Trader* (Vancouver: Mitchell Press, 1963).

1993). For instance, in an 1875 report on the subject of Indian Reserves,<sup>5</sup> the Attorney-General of B.C. comments:

Our numerous bays, inlets and rivers, contain inexhaustible supplies of the finest fish..No good reason exists why "Fisheries" such as those established by our merchants on Fraser River for curing and exporting salmon and other merchantable fish, should not be created in suitable places for the benefit of the Indians, and be in time profitably controlled and conducted by themselves...Many of the Indians are now employed in this industry as fishermen, at one dollar, or four shillings sterling a day. In the comparative cost of labour they would possess an enormous advantage as long as wages remain at their present high figure.

It is quite evident from the Attorney-General's remarks that the 'traditional fishing' practices of Indians were still recognized and that government officials took into account the critical role Indians played in the fishing and processing industry.

The first cannery started on the Fraser River in 1871. By 1876, three more canneries had opened on the Fraser River. Other canneries on the Skeena River began operation in 1875, the Nass River in 1881, and at Rivers Inlet and places like Namu on the central coast not too long after (Large, 1968:23; Knight, 1978:78).

By the late 19th century, most coastal groups were participating on a grand scale. First Nations women and men became the labour backbone of the salmon industry (Meggs & Stacey, 1992:8; Newell, 1993:93). Heiltsuk people like Liz Brown clearly understand that the development of the modern fishing industry relied heavily on the knowledge and labour of Native people:

The fishing industry depended on the Native people to educate them about fishing. You know, being local, they knew where all the fish was, and so they depended on them for that (Brown, 1992, Personal Communication).

From the beginning, labour in coastal canneries was scarce, and Indian women played an integral role in the rapidly growing canning industry. Cannery managers contracted with Native fishermen and paid them for their catch. Women and children worked in the cannery.

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<sup>5</sup> See Canada, *Report of the Government of British Columbia on the Subject of Indian Reserves*, 17 August 1875, 15.

Canneries started operating around the end of April and shut down during October. Most were run by a single company which provided housing and a company store for their workers. Canneries like Namu and Wadhams in Rivers Inlet were built close to Native villages to ensure an available source of labour.

In their attempts to do away with the competition for fishermen and plant workers, cannery owners voluntarily agreed not to "steal" Indians away from other canneries (Newell, 1993:147). At Namu cannery, Henry Doyle had his own labour strategy to guarantee Heiltsuk labour. In a letter to Henry Bell-Irving, Doyle writes:

...the canneries that in the past two years have had the service of certain tribes are to be left in undisputed possession of such tribes to the same extent that they have enjoyed in the past...Thus your having the Bella Bella Indians,...you would continue to have those, without any attempt on our part to try and induce, or accept, the services of members of those tribes to fish for us (Newell, 1989:67-68).

In 1880, an estimated four hundred Indian women worked in the Fraser River canneries. By 1895, one-third of B.C.'s canneries were located in the central and northern areas, most of them relying totally on the labour of Indian women (Mitchell & Franklin, 1989:60).

### **History of the Heiltsuk in the Modern Fishing Industry**

From the earliest beginnings, Heiltsuk people have been active participants in the fishing and processing industry. In the early 1900s the Heiltsuk already operated approximately thirty gasoline-powered boats (Knight, 1978:83). The annual reports of Indian Agents for B.C. chart the yearly migration of Heiltsuk people to canneries. The Bella Bella Indians, "who subsist largely on fish and game, both of which are plentiful," also worked at the Rivers Inlet Canneries (DIA, Annual Report, 1882:113).

Heiltsuk Elder, Elizabeth Hall, recalls that her family:

...usually go to Rivers Inlet first, then when it's slow in Rivers Inlet, we go to Namu. Rivers Inlet is a long ways in, and all around Rivers Inlet, on both sides, quite a ways - canneries here, canneries there, all kinds of different canneries (Hall, 1992 Personal Communication).

As Phillip Hall emphasized above, Heiltsuk people were accustomed to moving seasonally, so they were able to incorporate fishing and cannery work into their lives with little difficulty. Their intimate knowledge of their own traditional territories and the fisheries facilitated their entry and large scale participation in the fish-processing industry (Newell, 1993:5).<sup>6</sup>

For Heiltsuk people, one of the most important canneries that figure in their history was Namu. The first cannery in Namu Harbour was built in 1893 by Robert Draney. It was later sold to B.C. Packers. It operated for sixty-nine years until January 1962, when it was destroyed by fire (Lyons, 1969:200). It was one of the biggest canneries on the central coast.

Heiltsuk Elder, Phillip Hall remembers being told as a child how Namu cannery began and the promise by Robert Draney, to employ Heiltsuk people. Willie West, a friend of his family, told him about being in Namu camping at the time:

A boat came in there. The people didn't know how to speak English. The boat came in and dropped its anchor. Willie West, his wife and Chief Moody's wife went up the bush and hid. They were up in the bushes for so many days before they were brave enough to get out there in the canoe and start talking. The guy's name that started the cannery is Robert Draney. He put Willie West to work. And West told me that there was a notice put up on the wall in Namu. It was Draney's agreement with the people. Any Heiltsuk person who wanted to work, could go to work and never have to ask anybody. Like I say, the letter disappeared, nobody knows what happened to it (Hall, 1992 Personal Communication).

People came from all over B.C. to work in Namu. In speaking about the mix of people who worked there, former B.C. Packers Personnel Manager, Lorne Hume says:

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<sup>6</sup> The ease with which First Nations adapted to the seasonal pattern of the modern fishing and fish-processing industry masks the fact that modern industrial fishing ultimately attacked the social and cultural fabric of First Nations society first, by shifting the economic base from subsistence and trade to cash, and, later by the closure of canneries.

...we made arrangements with people from Alert Bay and we used to get some Sechelt people, Ooweekeno people, and people from Blunden Harbour, from Bella Coola and then people from the Skeena. So we had pretty well a League of Nations as it were (Hume, 1992 Personal Communication).

At Namu cannery, Heiltsuk women and men worked for wages or piece rates. They washed fish, filled cans with salmon, patched,<sup>7</sup> wiped cans, weighed cans, labelled them, made boxes, packed cans, worked in the cold storage and mended nets. Many of the women remembered helping their mothers in canneries. Irene Brown remembers helping her mother at age thirteen. She says:

The first year I start working was in Klemtu, but I wasn't on the payroll. I was just working along with my Mom. She was teaching me how to fill cans (Brown, 1992 Personal Communication).

Many Heiltsuk families worked all their lives in Namu or other central coast canneries. The late Heiltsuk Elder, Maggie Windsor who was born in Waglisla in 1903 worked in Namu for forty-four years. An interview with her in 1992 reveals that she started work in Namu at the age of ten.

I was about ten years when I start working in Namu. I put the cans in a tray, ten cents an hour. And the last time I worked in Namu I made about nine dollars and ninety five cents. I worked everywhere, washing fish, drying the cans, making cans, and patching. My daughters [Mary Hall and Dorothy Walkus] started working when they were about ten years old, putting the cans in the tray for twenty-five cents an hour. At first, it was ten cents and the wages kept coming up (Windsor, 1992 Personal Communication).

Many children grew up in Namu. The late Annie Wilson said with pride:

All my family grew up in Namu. When they were old enough to work, they all worked there. My kids Phyllis, Donald, Verna, Richard, Ronnie and Gerry, Marie and Kenny, they all grew up in Namu. They all worked in the cannery (Wilson, 1992 Personal Communication).

B.C. Packers' cannery at Namu was one of the last canneries on the central coast to close. When Namu shut down its operations, many Heiltsuk people were left without what had come to be their major source of income. With the loss of participation in the canning

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<sup>7</sup> Gladys Young Blyth, *Salmon Canneries, British Columbia North Coast*, (Lantzville: oolichan books, 1991), 45. When a can of salmon was underweight, it was automatically ejected onto the patching table then 'patched' to bring them up to the prescribed weight.

industry, 90% of their population was unemployed. The welfare costs increased enormously (Scow, 1987:7).

Their isolated location, work experience and historical involvement in the fishing industry, limited Heiltsuk people in accessing other employment opportunities. When Namu cannery closed, Heiltsuk people were no longer able to participate in the fish-processing industry. This left them with a great sense of frustration and loss. In the words of Phyllis McKay:

The company [B.C.Packers] did a lot for the people. This is something that I'll always regret is that they did away with the cannery. I really believe that when they did this, when they started closing canneries up and down the coast, I believe a lot of their self-esteem was just brought down, right down. That was my first job, when I used to work in the Namu cannery, and I always re-live my good ole [sic] cannery days (McKay, 1992 Personal Communication).

The fish-processing industry introduced Heiltsuk people to a new way of life, the cash economy. However, with the rapid growth of the industry, their wealth went elsewhere. The introduction of a cash economy brought changes that would profoundly impact the traditional economies of First Nations societies. Through all these changes, Heiltsuk and other First Nations peoples experienced a great sense of unease about the effect of the fish-processing industry on their aboriginal right to fish.

## **CRITIQUE OF EXISTING LITERATURE**

In this section, I will examine how First Nations women and men are represented in the conventional literature on the B.C. fisheries. I will also discuss how my research findings contradict some of these writings.

In her doctoral dissertation, "The Creation and Organization of Cheap Wage Labour in the British Columbia fishing industry," Alicja Muszynski uses a Marxist view of labour to describe the situation of Native women in canneries. She argues that race, age and gender were categories used to stratify the labour force within fish plants, resulting in the creation of

a cheap wage labour force which worked for wages below the subsistence level (1987:iii).<sup>8</sup> She suggests that Native women survived because they were "embedded in pre-capitalist social relations...They subsisted using a combination of wage labour and unpaid work" (1987:iii). Because Native people were not entirely dependent on wages to subsist and were not conscious of themselves as proletarians, they accepted very low wages (Muszynski, 1986:116).

While there is an undoubted kernel of truth in this, it misses the fundamental fact that work at the cannery was largely a positive experience, and also that women contrived to balance their traditional subsistence activities and their wage labour. The real damage was done by the sudden and brutal closure of the canneries.

Once again, we see a fundamental misunderstanding of the concept and value of traditional fisheries, (here described as "subsistence") both as a social activity and as a source of wealth.<sup>9</sup> The use of the term 'proletarian' to analyse the labour of Native women in canneries is also outdated.

A more recent work by Gillian Mary Stainsby examines the perceptions of 23 women who worked in canneries in Prince Rupert, Vancouver, and Steveston. Of those interviewed, 10 were Native women. Her thesis argues that "these women make up a reserve army of labour, in that they are employed on a random and capricious schedule, depending on the catch of fish" (Stainsby, 1991:iii). In discussing the experience of the Native women in fish-processing, she says, "Since fish processing is not pleasant, or well-rewarded, native women with several generations of family history in the industry are perhaps there because they have fewer options and fewer social supports than members of other racial and ethnic communities" (1991:26).

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<sup>8</sup> Here Muszynski uses the term "subsistence" in the classic European sense of survival or just scraping by. It is particularly unfortunate that the same word is also commonly used to denote traditional economies such as the Heiltsuk which were wealthy by any standards, old or new.

<sup>9</sup> For a fuller description see Hugh Brody's *Maps And Dreams* (1981). Brody's analysis of the economy of the Beaver Indians confirms the importance and value of traditional subsistence practices to First Nations' economies.

Here Stainsby seems to be projecting her own attitude to fish on First Nations women. It doesn't seem to occur to her that the women actually enjoyed the work and took a real pride in being an elite, skilled labour force. Former Personnel Manager at Namu, Lorne Hume remembers a time when they had more salmon than they knew what to do with, and how Heiltsuk women came through for them:

Mac McLean [the Manager of Namu in the 1940s] and the cannery foreman and myself went around and talked to the women as to whether they wanted to work until the fish was finished. A couple of young girls folded. They couldn't take it. Julia Humchitt [a Heiltsuk woman] said, 'Ah, those kids, they don't understand, us old ladies will show you guys how to work.' And they worked right through till seven o'clock the next morning and we cleaned up all the fish and we packed over ten thousand cases (Lorne Hume, Personal Correspondance 1992).

Stainsby describes the women she interviewed as all fitting the description of 'powerless' and 'underprivileged' but continues to say that, "it is significant that many of them would take exception to that definition" (1991:21). As the previous quote from Lorne Hume and the following description of the achievements of the Native Sisterhood demonstrate, she errs in depicting Native women as victims who have no power over their lives.

The Native Sisterhood of B.C. was formed in 1933. Brenda Campbell from the Heiltsuk Nation was its first President and held this post for twenty years. In Namu cannery, members of the Heiltsuk local of the Native Sisterhood of B.C. were very vocal and assertive. As cannery workers, Heiltsuk women formed a group called the "Plant Committee." The spokespersons for this committee were Brenda Campbell, Kitty Carpenter, and Mary Hall. The committee worked directly with the cannery managers for better housing, better working conditions and better pay (Brown, 1992 Personal Communication).

For many years women cannery workers were represented in labour negotiations by the Native Brotherhood. Although they paid membership fees, they did not have voting privileges even though one of their major roles was fundraising for the Brotherhood. The Sisterhood were very active and vocal in obtaining equal voting rights within the Native Brotherhood. They received these voting rights at one of the annual Brotherhood conventions (ibid.)

All women cannery workers from youngsters to Elders were members of the Native Sisterhood. Members of the Bella Bella Local were in constant contact with other Sisterhood Locals up and down the coast. The late Louisa Humchitt and Mrs. Bertie Humchitt gave guidance to Brenda Campbell, who became one of the most prominent leaders of the Sisterhood (ibid.). There is obviously a great deal more to cannery life than what is told in the literature, a human story with highs and lows.

If we read between the lines in early written accounts, journals and reports from canneries, we also get a different perspective on the lives of First Nations women working there (Mitchell & Franklin, 1989:49-56). As evident in the following observations of a cannery supervisor writing in 1891, Indian women were far from invisible. They did not take poor working conditions and low wages lying down:

According to the supervisor who described the Klootchmen, as they were called, as "awfully self-willed," squashing salmon, filling cans with "nothing but back and skin" and angrily throwing filled cans on the floor and shouting "you work" when he criticized them. He also described an incident when a group of twenty Indian men and twenty-five Indian cannery workers flourished their long knives at him in a pretend thrust, watching his face to see if he was frightened (Carmichael, 1891).

The feisty, knife-wielders of the Fraser River are hardly people with "no power over their lives!" Annual reports by Indian agents also show how assertive Indian women were about going to work in canneries. In 1882, the Indian agent for the Fraser River bemoaned the fact that Indian men and women went off to fish instead of cultivating reserve land.

There is no class of labourers to compete with them at the fisheries...on the Fraser River. Their women, also, who are very industrious, are profitably employed at the fisheries during the fishing season, making nets and cleaning fish for the canneries...The Indians like working in batches together, and much prefer the above kind of employment to agricultural labour (DIA, Annual Report, 1882:166).

Although much of the conventional literature on the B.C. fisheries does not give a complete or accurate picture of the role of First Nations people in the fishing and fish-processing industry, there have been a number of valiant attempts to document the experiences of First Nations people in the fish and fish-processing industry.

Rolf Knight's brief but seminal book, *Indians at Work: An Informal History of Indian Labour in British Columbia, 1858-1930* was one of the first accounts to recognize the critical role of First Nations people in the development of the modern fishing and fish-processing industry.

In *Cork Lines and Canning Lines* (1992), Geoff Meggs and Duncan Stacey use historic photos and text to tell the story of B.C.'s fishing industry. The photos present a rare glimpse of the First Nations men and women who were instrumental in the development of the fishing industry. However, the story is not told in their own words.

A more recent study of Indian fishing issues that breaks new ground is Dianne Newell's *Tangled Webs: Indians and the Law in Canada's Pacific Coast Fisheries* (1993). Her work is one of the most comprehensive written accounts to date of the involvement of Indians in the Pacific Coast fisheries, from early times to the present (1993:28). I found her work on canneries especially helpful. She illustrates the fishing and cannery experiences of First Nations women and men using the words and perceptions of the people themselves.

I believe that it is essential that scholars who contribute to Native research respect the views of First Nations people and represent their longstanding relationship with the fisheries using a strict and rigorous methodology. With few exceptions such as Percy Gladstone and Leona Sparrow, almost all theoretical accounts about fishing are written by non-Natives. Sparrow<sup>10</sup> is one of the few aboriginal anthropologists who has done some exploratory research on the work histories of Native people. Her description of her grandparents work history in canneries gives a good idea of how they viewed cannery life. If we are ever to get a better understanding of First Nations and fish, it seems clear that First Nations need to tell their own stories, in their own words and through their own perceptions of the fisheries.

In exploring the numerous written accounts of the historic and modern fishing and fish-processing industry, I felt a growing concern and unease about the way First Nations were represented. I feel particularly uneasy about writers who use Native experience to

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<sup>10</sup> See Leona Sparrow, "Work Histories of a Coast Salish Couple," (M.A. thesis, University of B.C., 1976).

exemplify a particular ideological perspective. There is good reason for concern. As the treaty negotiation process begins in B.C. an unexpected weight will be attributed to conventional literature about the fisheries.

Written evidence will play a large role in treaty negotiations. The traditional economic base of First Nations is based on fish, but First Nations history is based on oral tradition. The majority of written material about the fisheries in B.C. is by non-Native people. Because First Nations didn't write, this creates a serious imbalance.

As a First Nations person, I feel I have to find a way to restore the balance. As a First Nations anthropologist, I am acutely aware of the need for objectivity, not only out of a sense of fairness and professionalism, but also because there is a high probability that future efforts to do justice to First Nations economies will be subjected to the most rigorous analysis during treaty negotiations or, as already happened in the case of the Gitksan Wet'suwet'en, be subjected to merciless cross examination in court.

Most of the existing literature on the modern fishing and fish-processing industries treats the traditional fishing practices of First Nations as a separate issue. What this literature fails to acknowledge or even see is that it is the modern fishing and fish-processing industry which has relegated First Nations traditional fisheries to a minor or side issue.

### **Advantage of A Heiltsuk Perspective**

My determination to change the way First Nations have been represented in the literature flows from my identity. One of the most striking commonalities of the diverse First Nations of B.C. is our determination to retain our identity and culture. Thomas Berger, one of Canada's foremost exponents of the validity of Native culture and perspective, recently remarked:

Native people will not be assimilated, and their fierce wish to retain their own culture is intensifying as industry, technology and communications forge a larger and larger mass culture, extruding diversity...The Native people have

survived draconian measures for half a millennium. They may be poor, they may be oppressed, but they know who they are (Berger, 1991:161).

To date, First Nations people have been extremely frustrated with the way their history and way of life have been represented and interpreted. Virginia Dominguez points out that one of the far-reaching consequences of non-Native scholars writing the history of other peoples is that:

When we acknowledge that an idea, object, history or tradition is not ours, we distance ourselves from it. When we then proceed to use, incorporate or represent it, we arrogate the right to employ what we acknowledge as not ours...it is something we do because of our perception of it as other. The implicit hierarchical nature of otherness invites seemingly innocuous practices of representation that amount to (often unknowingly) strategies of domination through appropriation (Dominguez, 1987:132).

As a First Nations student in anthropology and museology, I continually struggled with these issues. Although change is slow, First Nations are starting to confront these issues and provide resolutions to the problems. In speaking about the challenges museums and anthropologists face with the emergence of the "Native point of view," Dr. M. Ames, the Director of MOA, writes:

As Native intellectuals regain control over their own images and their own destinies, they will also claim the right to provide the answers. It will be wise to listen carefully, even if we might not always agree, because the growing intellectual autonomy of indigenous people will have considerable impact on how anthropologists and museums deal in the future with the 'natives.' (Ames, 1992:80-87).

Dr. Nancy Marie Mitchell, a Native American anthropologist says it well.

If these majority institutions looked to their tribal counterparts for more than a token appearance, some real contributions could be made to this field. Perhaps the most major contribution I see coming from an indigenous agenda for museums is the granting of humanity to those people talked about in exhibits. Not only is it more engaging for a museum visitor to learn about an identifiable "real" person, it is also more respectable. Who will believe now that the subjects of research can offer more than just raw data for other people's theories? Their voices can be heard, if one just listens (Mitchell, 1990:16-19).

It has been suggested by anthropologist Wayne Warry that researchers concerned with Native issues should be guided in their work by an adherence to the principle of Native self-determination. He advocates a shift from independent to collaborative research for several reasons.

Research findings, cloaked in jargon, have been unintelligible to communities or have been largely irrelevant to community needs...Native leaders now advocate research that is collaborative and meaningful to their communities...Native research takes place in an increasingly politicized and chaotic policy making environment...Our responsibility is to make explicit a participatory methodology whereby our own and the Native voice are differentiated and strengthened...Collaboration ensures self-reflection and invites critical re-assessment of our methods (Warry, 1990:61-70).

As a First Nations woman and student of anthropology, I was greatly inspired by these words. They validated and re-confirmed my motivation for granting humanity to Heiltsuk people through a collaborative exhibit. It was also important to me that the research be useful, relevant to the research needs of my community and be told in more human terms, in language that was understandable both to my Nation and the general public.

As an anthropologist, I find that my Heiltsuk origin confers four advantages. First, I do not carry the baggage of non-Native anthropologists. Although some community members were initially a little reserved when I went to their homes, that rapidly disappeared and people became extraordinarily generous and forthcoming.

Most of the members of our community view anthropologists with distrust and skepticism. Heiltsuk history and culture has been poorly documented by early ethnographers in comparison to their neighbours, the much studied Kwakwak'wakw peoples (Kolstee, 1988; Black, 1989:274). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, anthropologists carried a vision of the unspoiled, pure Native culture. Bella Bella was not considered to be one of these communities. One reason for this neglect is the early involvement of the Heiltsuk with missionaries (Black, 1989:275). Early anthropologists like Franz Boas who studied the Heiltsuk concluded that "the whole culture of the Bella Bella has practically disappeared" (Boas, 1928:ix).

The Heiltsuk Band Council now screens anyone wishing to carry out research in Bella Bella. Since I was born in Bella Bella, and come from a big family who are fairly well-known and respected, it was easier for me to get formal permission from the Band Council to do research in my community. Because I am Heiltsuk, I was acutely aware of the need to show proper respect to community members. Above all, it was important to me that I do justice to my Nation in the exhibit.

Once the people understood what my research was about, and knew that I would not misuse or distort what they said to me in the interviews, our conversations became more comfortable and people were very generous with their time and knowledge. Not only did they feel freer about discussing their experiences, they grew excited about the exhibit.

Second, with my knowledge of the people, territories, and their involvement in the traditional and modern fisheries, I knew what to look for, who to talk to, and where to begin looking. I also had access to the archival material and photos in the Heiltsuk Cultural Centre.

My family which has been involved for years in the fishing and fish-processing industry told me who to talk to in the community and pointed me in the direction of people with good photo collections of Namu. As a community member, the people entrusted me with some of their treasured family photos to use in the exhibit, many which had never been seen.

Most Heiltsuk families can boast of having three to four generations which have fished and worked in Namu and other central coast canneries. The photos brought back warm memories of their fishing days, and cannery experiences. They also brought out a pride in their heritage, of who they are and their family history.

By using old photographs to look at the history of canneries like Namu, I was able to gain a better sense of how Heiltsuk women connected their social and family life to their cannery work. Looking at photos of Namu brought back a flood of memories for many of the men and women I talked to. Liz Brown remembered her sister, Selina McKay getting married at Namu. It was the biggest wedding in Namu. Other photos brought back

memories of when the management at Namu cannery took down the 'Indian' and 'White' signs from the washrooms (Brown, 1992 Personal Communication).

Third, my life experience allowed me to critique the incomplete or slanted accounts and restore the balance by allowing people to speak for themselves. Although in the past, I had often reminisced with family and friends about our cannery experiences and traditional fisheries, I was overwhelmed by the depth of knowledge and feeling which surfaced in the interviews, especially from Elders in our community. Of particular interest to me was their concern about our traditional fisheries.

The subject is not merely academic for me. Even as a city-dwelling Heiltsuk person, fish is still a big part of my life. Before I began my research, I had gone to Bella Bella on a regular basis to visit relatives and to get our annual supply of fish. My family cans fish on an annual basis. The whole process is an art in itself. It brings my family together socially as well as prepares us for the year. My mother also maintains an extensive trade network with family, friends and relatives in Bella Bella and Kitasoo.

Lastly, on a more personal note, as a member of the community I was able to participate fully in the life of my community. I attended a settlement feast that was hosted by my fathers' family. First Nations people from all over the coast attended the occasion. It was a big family reunion. This family event, combined with discovering all the material on Heiltsuk history and Namu cannery, renewed my belief in myself as a Heiltsuk person and as an anthropology student. I have always been very proud of my identity, but in going back home, my sense of identity as a Heiltsuk person was strengthened even more.

Before I went to Bella Bella, I was extremely frustrated by academic life. The university world I experienced was very abstract and distant from the world I grew up in. I felt like I never belonged or was understood. I was also torn between my own ambivalent feelings towards anthropology as it used to be, and the new "post-colonial" anthropology, where First Nations are now being given voice. My personal experience and the positive response from my community validated my intention to prepare an exhibit.

## **WHY AN EXHIBIT?**

During my studies at U.B.C. and while I was working in MOA, I found myself constantly looking for ways to explain who we are as Heiltsuk people and what matters to us. I also found it frustrating trying to explain to non-Native people how important fish is to First Nations people.

Museums have been criticized by First Nations for presenting Native history and culture as though it is static, dying, or as though it no longer exists (Ignace, 1993:168-169). One of the ways MOA responded to the criticism was to re-examine the way they represented First Nations people. Source books which use photos and texts to give museum visitors a better understanding of the lives of First Nations people in B.C. were seen as one way to help correct the stereotypical depictions of Native people. The concept of source books was in fact, first developed by MOA.

I think the first time the idea of an exhibit came to me was when I took a Museum Studies course, Anthropology 431, in my undergraduate years. Students were given a choice of mounting a group exhibit or developing a source book. I chose to do a source book on the history of the involvement of First Nations in the fishing industry in B.C. To show the continuity and longstanding relationship First Nations have with fish, I used old and contemporary photographs.

Students in the Museum Studies course were encouraged to follow strict ethical procedures in developing a source book. One of the most important piece of advice students were given was the need for more consultation with First Nations people. The Native Brotherhood of B.C. reviewed my source book to ensure that my facts were correct, and that it respected the views of First Nations people who were involved in the fishing and fish processing industries. It also went through further editorial review by Dr. M. Kew and Dr. M. Ames. Although it was a time consuming process, I could see the value of it by the finished product. It was also being read by museum visitors. After going through this learning process, I decided to do an exhibit.

The idea of doing an exhibit as a way to present the Heiltsuk perspective and to allow the people to speak for themselves was also reinforced by my frustration at the incomplete picture presented in academic literature. Yes it is true First Nations people worked in canneries for 10 cents an hour. It is also true that they worked long hours under poor working conditions. But the way we are represented ultimately belittles the cannery experiences and lives of First Nations.

It is equally true that they enjoyed working in canneries. For years First Nations women were the backbone of the fish-canning industry. Lillian Windsor, who worked in Namu for many years commented to me:

Sometimes we get together, and the ladies reminisce, and say remember this, remember that. We'd go to work at 8 a.m. in the morning and get off at 2 o'clock in the morning in the cold storage. I'd go home and wash diapers and hang them out, and then go to bed and get up again at 7:00 a.m., just a few hours sleep. But I enjoyed work in Namu (Windsor, 1992 Personal Communication).

The idea of giving 'voice' to the people was in part inspired by *Village Journey* (1985) where Thomas Berger allows the people to tell their own story in their own words. This makes the people come to life for the reader. It also gives a better understanding of the importance of 'subsistence' to the Alaskan Native people. Subsistence means to them what the fisheries means to us.

To the extent possible, the exhibit was structured to allow the men and women I interviewed to speak for themselves. These voices speak eloquently both of cannery days and of the meaning and importance of fish to our people. Through oral testimonies, photos and archival records, we begin to see just how strong-willed and tough Heiltsuk women were. In the words of Selina McKay:

It didn't take the company long to realize that in those years the hours were very long. It didn't take them very long to find out that the Indian ladies especially could work longer hours than the others. I remember one time we worked almost twenty-four hours, and about the eighteenth hour some of them, non-Indians, they were leaving and some of them were actually so tired, they were crying (Selina McKay, 1992 Personal Communication).

Listening to Heiltsuk people speak about their lives in Namu, we get a real sense of the people themselves and their close ties to the sea. These resources were at their backdoor.

Irene Brown puts it well:

My husband Maxwell and I were always involved in Namu. We used to bowl all the time. We used to also go up the lake for picnics. Summertime, we'd go to Koeye. Max [her husband] used to have a speedboat and we were out on the boat a lot. It was so handy to have, we used to go seaweed picking, jigging, clam digging and everything. We used to get lots of abalone (Brown, 1992 Personal Communication).

Although I came under considerable pressure to abandon the idea of an exhibit and present a more "classic" thesis hidebound by the strictures of academia, my first inclination to curate an exhibit was re-confirmed by the sheer volume of information which I unearthed in my community and archival research. The only way to do justice to the information and the women and men I interviewed was through an exhibit. The exhibit let me show you the people in my community and our history. It allows the people to speak for themselves. Their words and photos tell their story.

## **PREPARING THE EXHIBIT**

There were five stages to preparing the exhibit. The first step was to outline the concept. In developing the exhibit, I deliberately chose not to follow normal museum guidelines for putting an exhibit together. From my earlier work on the source book on fishing, I had developed a clear mental picture of how my exhibit would look.

I was, however, influenced to some extent by the research strategies of historian Dianne Newell, who uses ethnohistory to look at the social history of cannery sites. She points out that:

There are three lines of evidence which allow us to study aspects of the material expressions of cannery culture: relevant historic photographs, interviews with surviving cannery people, and old fire insurance plans of the sites. Each of these sources contains special details about the social, economic, technological, and spatial aspects of life at the canneries...They allow us to

deal with three critical components that are often missing in traditional sources about industry - spatial, female and racial (1991:26-27).

The exhibit uses government reports, oral testimony from Heiltsuk men and women, early ethnographies on the Northwest Coast, surviving fire insurance maps from Namu cannery, historic and contemporary photos and archival material to reveal the significant role of Heiltsuk people in the development of the modern fishing industry and the importance of the traditional fisheries to Heiltsuk people. Using this strategy to tell the story of Heiltsuk people and fish, I was also able to show the important role fish continues to play in shaping our identity.

The second stage was to do the research for the exhibit. This was accomplished over a period of two years. The first step was to get the written consent of Heiltsuk Band Council for the research and interviews. I was also given access to archival material in the Heiltsuk Cultural Centre. The staff were very supportive of the idea of an exhibition and went out of their way to help.

I went to Waglisla in June 1992, and spent one month interviewing community members. I was also fortunate to travel to Namu on my uncle's gillnetter and tour the old cannery site.

I spoke to a number of community members about the exhibit beforehand to make them more aware of my research and what it entailed. Unfortunately, time limited the number of people I could interview. Since the exhibit was focused around the Namu cannery experience, I interviewed mainly Heiltsuk people. All interviews were voluntary. Most of the interviews were held in the interviewees' homes or the community school. From November 1992 to January 1993, I interviewed several on and off-reserve Heiltsuk women and a former B.C. Packers employee who worked in Namu.

I chose to visit Bella Bella in June before the start of the fishing season in July. What I overlooked was that most of the men would be getting ready for the fishing season or busy with the traditional fisheries. As a result, I interviewed more women. In the end, the words of seventeen Heiltsuk women, four Heiltsuk men, and one long-time employee of B.C.

Packers open a window on a period of history which has not been well documented. The interviews also evoke a flood of warm memories.

The third stage of preparing the exhibit was to get the consent and approval from all the people who gave so generously of their time and knowledge to tell the story of Heiltsuk people and fish. This included the use of the quotes and photos for exhibit display.

Transcribing the interviews was one of the most time-consuming aspects of developing the exhibit. The whole process, which included transcribing and sending the finished copy to the women and men interviewed for their approval, took approximately five months to complete. In all, I ended up with some 250 pages of transcript, which will be stored in the Heiltsuk Cultural Centre. I then had to identify recurring themes and choose quotes that best captured and illustrated the points raised by the people I interviewed. I also took great pains to ensure that each person's memories were fairly represented. These themes, quotations and reminiscences are presented in the exhibit.

During this time, I was also searching various museums and archives in and beyond the lower mainland of Vancouver for photographs of Namu cannery. I ended up with so many valuable and interesting photographs that I had to go through a rigorous process of elimination to select those I would be using in the exhibit. Many of them had never been seen by community members or published. I used some of my own family photos and was also fortunate to find several rare photos from the families of two former Sisterhood Presidents. I then wrote for permission to use them for display purposes. Not surprisingly, most of the photos used in the exhibit came from my community.

The fourth stage of developing the exhibit involved editorial guidance and approval of the text to be used for *Cannery Days*. Those involved in this process included Dr. Michael Ames, the Director of MOA, Dr. Marjorie Halpin, Curator of Ethnology at MOA, David Cunningham, Designer at MOA and my two Advisors from the Department of Anthropology and Sociology, Dr. Julie Cruikshank and Dr. Michael Kew.

The selection of quotations and photographs plus writing the captions and supporting text was, I thought, the final step. Not so. The fifth and final stage was to mount the exhibit at MOA. Finding a suitable colour of matte board for the 30" x 22" frames was a task in itself, to say nothing of cutting it to size. I then found that, despite the long sorting, I still had more material than the Theatre Gallery at MOA would hold. The final sorting, text editing, mounting and hanging the Exhibit involved a great deal more work than I had anticipated. The Exhibit was hung on May 15 and officially opened on May 18, 1993. It ran until the middle of January 1994.

In this final stage of mounting the exhibit, I learned a lot of new skills from the technical staff of MOA. For example, I learned: how to design a low-cost exhibit, new computer and photography skills, the steps to follow in mounting an exhibit, and how to cost and budget exhibits. Without the resources of MOA, and the skills and knowledge of Designers, David Cunningham, Bill McLennan and Skooker Broome, I would have been hard pressed to mount the exhibit. For their help and guidance, I am grateful.

The exhibit will travel to Waglisa in January 1994, and then to other small communities on the coast, such as Oweekeno, U'Mista Cultural Centre, Klemtu, Nuxalk, Port Edward cannery, as well as urban museums such as the Richmond, Delta, and Steveston museums.

## **EXHIBIT FINDINGS**

As ours is an oral history we are most often seen through the perceptions of non-Native researchers. As a student of anthropology, I was searching for new ways to present a First Nations perspective. In its use of quotes and visual images, the exhibit provides balance to written accounts. It transmits a sense of continuity through a series of visual images from petroglyphs to modern seine boats. It counterbalances the tables and statistics of conventional academic studies with images of real people.

I also found that an exhibit is a way to reach beyond the academic community to a wider audience. Academic studies, while accessible to the general public, are not widely read. By contrast, in allowing people to speak for themselves, indeed, by putting a human face on the relationship between First Nations and fish, my exhibit speaks to a broader audience.

The central difference between my exhibit and an academic study of the same topic is that the exhibit provided me with a medium of expression that allowed me to tell about Heiltsuk people and fish in a way that brought the people to life. To read the accounts of Muszynski, McDonald and Stainsby, the lives of cannery workers sound grey and dreary. Reality was far otherwise; people had a lot of fun and enjoyed cannery work. For the people who lived and worked in Namu, it was not just a place to can fish, it had many meanings and warm memories.

A strict ethical review process reassured the community members interviewed that their information would not be cited out of context or without their permission. The fact that I am a member of the Heiltsuk Nation encouraged the generosity of community members with their time and in sharing their traditional knowledge and treasured photographs.

Although it was an afterthought, the Comment book proved to be a useful research and survey tool to capture public response and should be an integral part of the exhibit in its

travels. I anticipated and received favourable comments from First Nations people. For example, Viola Thomas from the Secwepemc Nation says:

I really like how you portrayed the racism and the care and compassion First Nations have for fish - I only wish people from the B.C. Sports fisheries and Union people could see this exhibit - I hope you will do more exhibits to challenge mainstream people's thinking and continue to ensure our stories are told from our own unique perspectives (MOA, 1993).

For First Nations people, it is important that we begin telling our own stories. Russ Jones from the Haida Nation wrote:

I'm glad that someone is documenting this interesting part of our history from our perspective. Well done (MOA, 1993).

I was agreeably surprised by the number and warmth of favourable comments from Museum visitors from B.C. and worldwide. Pania Noema from New Zealand wrote:

Thank you for allowing us to share in such a special way your history and lives. Beautifully told, great snaps of everyday people and life (MOA, 1993).

It also invited critical dialogue from museum visitors about fish. Joy and Miles Bigg from Grassington, Yorkshire U.K. wrote:

What hope is there of keeping all this traditional industry alive, in today's greedy "economics is all" climate" (MOA, 1993).

The exhibit was getting the message across. Some of the comments also show the need for more exhibits like *Cannery Days*. For example, A. Kenlyling (unknown place of residence) wrote:

Wish the Museum of Anthropology would sponsor more research oriented local histories with a point of view which has a stake in reviving a buried history (MOA, 1993).

As the exhibit travels and reaches other audiences, successive comment books will serve to capture perceptions of different sections of the community (fishing community, schools etc.).

The exhibit prompted positive responses from the Aboriginal Museum Internship Program at Victoria and the Canadian Museum of Civilization to assist in developing museum training programs that are relevant to the needs of First Nations communities. It can serve as a guide for further development of low-cost exhibits or displays that can be used by schools, community centres and cultural centres.

Although the exhibit was developed before *Turning The Page: Forging New Partnerships Between Museums And First Peoples*, (1992) the joint Task Force Report on Museums and First Peoples came out, *Cannery Days* meets several of the Task Force recommendations.<sup>11</sup>

Although it was ultimately rewarding, my own and past experience shows that an M.A. exhibit-thesis requires a great deal more time, effort and indeed expense, than a standard written M.A. thesis. This raises the question of where an exhibit-thesis should fit into the hierarchy of M.A. and Ph.D. theses. In fairness to those who come after me, consideration should be given to developing criteria for the production and evaluation of an M.A. exhibit-thesis and to identifying monetary and other resources for the incorporation of exhibits into both the M.A. and Ph.D. programmes.

It may also be worth observing that the MOA mandate,<sup>12</sup> while well intentioned, is still Eurocentric. Consideration should be given to expanding the mandate to explicitly include the idea of the ability of other cultures "to hold a mirror to our own."

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<sup>11</sup> Task Force on Museums and First Peoples, *Turning the Page: Forging New Partnerships Between Museums and First Peoples* (Ottawa: 1992) (Chair: Tom Hill and Dr. Trudy Nicks). The exhibit responds to: the need for better representation of First Nations in museum exhibits, increased involvement of Aboriginal peoples in the interpretation of their culture and history, and links First Nations heritage with relevant contemporary issues (Assembly of First Nations and the Canadian Museums Association, 1992:4).

<sup>12</sup> See *MOA Guidelines*. The mandate of MOA "has always been concerned with the study and portrayal of human achievements from around the world as a means of furthering understanding of other cultures" (1988:1-2).

## CONCLUSIONS

The exhibit, *Cannery Days - A Chapter In The Lives Of The Heiltsuk* had two major themes, the continuing importance of fish to First Nations culture and economy, and the pivotal role of Heiltsuk people in the development of the fishing and fish-processing industry on the central coast of B.C.

This thesis also has two themes. The first is an examination of the value of exhibits like *Cannery Days* in allowing First Nations people to tell their own story. A second, unexpected but important, theme which emerged as the exhibit and thesis progressed, is an examination of my ability to function as an anthropologist without losing my identity as a First Nations woman. Of necessity, this led me to explore the potential for fruitful collaboration between Native and non-Native researchers.

It is inevitable that as a First Nation person, I will be perceived as coming from a point of advocacy. This is a cross I have to bear. What it means to me and other First Nations anthropologists is that we have to be doubly vigilant to ensure that we do full justice to our area of research by presenting all the evidence in objective terms with minimal editorial comment.

The exhibit provided a forum for First Nations people and the academic community to collaborate while maintaining dignity and respect on both sides. With the pending treaty negotiations in B.C., it is crucial that First Nations find new ways to increase public understanding that fish is their wealth. My personal experience of mounting an exhibit which was well received by academics, First Nations and the museum public, leads me to believe in the value of continuing fruitful collaboration between Native and non-Native researchers.

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