# Fishing for food security

**As in North America, indigenous peoples the world over depend on fisheries not only for nutrition but also to maintain their cultures**

Five years ago, the Exxon Valdez oil spill made dramatic headlines in glossy newsmagazines and on prime time TV. Tears came easy as images of oil-covered sea creatures pricked the world's environmental conscience.

After a few weeks, however, the world got distracted by other headlines. Not so the indigenous peoples in the Gull of Alaska. For them the effect was devastatingly real. When the ship struck two reefs and ran aground in March1989, about 250,000 barrels (around 10 million gallons) of oil were spilled in Prince William Sound, Alaska.

By end April, the 3000-square mile slick had coated about 300 miles of the area's shoreline. According to Impact Assessment Inc., the oil spill affected more than half of the fishing sites customarily used by coastal villages.

In this, the UN-decreed International Year for the World's Indigenous People, it is worth recalling the Exxon Valdez episode. It reiterates how closely linked fisheries are to the livelihood and living of indigenous peoples.

Many of them get adequate nutrition only from fisheries. Some localities of North America depend crucially on shellfish, especially in the winter season when other fishing becomes impossible. In some other regions, food comes in the form of shrimp, lobster, mullet, anchovy, tuna and turtle.

Typically, in the Northwest Coast of the Pacific Rim, over half the indigenous peoples fish to supplement food and in-come from other sources.

In the Hudson Bay-Great Lakes area, nearly all rely on fishing for food during the summer months.

Clearly, therefore, being deprived of fishing opportunities would imperil indigenous peoples in either or, often, both of the following ways: widespread malnutrition or an exodus from traditional territories and cultures.

Indigenous communities dependent on marine resources abound. Their contribution to fisheries is substantial. According to FAO, small-scale artisanal fisheries account for a fourth of the total world fisheries production.

Indigenous peoples are not confined to developing countries. They make up about a third of Canada's total inland fishery and half the anadromous fisheries of the northwestern United States (US). North America has 260, 000, like the Inuit, Cree and Mikmaq.

Around 200,000 indigenous people are also found along the western Caribbean Basin from the Yucatan in Mexico through Belize, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama and the Guajira peninsula in Colombia.

Other coastal regions too are home to indigenous people: southern Chile, southern Argentina and parts of Brazil; western Pacific including Australia (especially Queensland and the Northern Territories), New Zealand, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines.

**Base for culture**

For all of them, marine resources matter in two important ways. They determine how large indigenous societies are and how they are distributed. They also provide a significant material base for cultural development.

This latter attribute is often ignored. According to Four Directions Council, an

association of indigenous peoples from Canada and the US, "among non-industrial economic systems, fishing compares favourably with agriculture as a base for the development of complex civilizations."

Take, for instance, the fisheries along the Pacific coast from the Columbia River to the Gulf of Alaska. Their productivity sustained a regional style of monumental sculpture and formal theatre called 'Northwest Coast'.

The size and prosperity of fishing societies are inextricably linked to the location and environmental stability of marine resources. On the Pacific coast of North America, for instance, an entire culture depended on one single stock of salmon species returning yearly to one single river.

Since dependence on such resources is so crucial, indigenous peoples have traditionally had to be disciplined in harvesting and developing their fisheries. The methods vary. Sometimes fishing sites are individually assigned. At other times, restrictions are placed oft when, where and what type of species may be caught.

Through kinship and trade relationships, indigenous communities have also developed their own kind of 'social security system'. Fishermen could fish with their kinsmen in distant villages. They could also trade their seasonal surpluses of fish. This ensured that no one would overfish to insure against possible future shortfalls.

Most of the fishing is done near the shore, in rivers, estuaries and inter-tidal areas. These, however, are the very areas which are sitting ducks for pollution and coastal development projects.

Further, many of the species normally harvested are migratory. They are especially vulnerable to the ill effects of industrial activity. Beluga whales caught by Inuit off Baffin Island are found to carry toxic loads from industrial mining activity along the St. Lawrence river, over 1,500 km, to the south of the island.

The greatest threat to North American indigenous fisheries comes from the pulp and paper industry. It dumps large amounts of toxic chemicals like acids and bleaching agents into lakes, streams and bays. Logging blocks the migration of spawning trout and salmon.

The other danger results from hydroelectric dams. Each year the Columbia River, among the world's largest freshwater systems, used to produce millions of pounds of salmon.

But when a complex of dams was built in the 1930s, fish production fell by four-fifths, destroying the livelihood of many upstream indigenous communities.

**Recreational fishing**

Such societies are also hit by unrestrained fishing by non-indigenous people as well as recreational fishing for sport. American, Canadian and European Community vessels fish intensively for cod, herring and capelin in Atlantic Canada.

The Pacific coast has seen the overfishing of salmon and halibut by commercial fishing vessels. Further, salmon is increasingly intercepted by the high-seas drift nets of Japanese and Taiwanese fleets.

Despite these problems, few countries put indigenous fisherfolk on par with

commercial and recreational users of the seas. This is because they think artisanal fisheries have no real economic value, compared to commercial fisheries which generate cash incomes and pay taxes. Nonetheless, historically, there have been treaties on fishing rights between colonial powers and indigenous peoples.

Over the past 40 years, growing competition for fishing resources has given these treaties greater importance. Yet they have been neither uniformly nor successfully enforced.

US courts have held that treaty fights can only be modified by Congress. On the other hand, the Supreme Court of Canada has declared fishing an 'aboriginal' right which enjoys constitutional protection, whether a treaty exists or not.

In New Zealand, the new Waitangi Tribunal has ruled that Maoris retain 'full and exclusive' fishing rights in the nation's exclusive economic zone. There are also multilateral conservation treaties which protect the harvesting rights of indigenous peoples. Examples are the 1911 international convention for the protection of Pacific fur seals and the 1985 Salmon Interception Treaty between the US and Canada.

Also, the International Whaling Commission has accepted the quotas suggested by Inupiaq whaling villages.

The 1989 ILO Convention on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries contains important provisions. "Taken together," says Four Directions Council, "these recognise a right to continuity of enjoyment of subsistence resources, including fisheriesa right to food security."

The fisheries of indigenous peoples are often characterised by 'self-regulation' or co-management'.

Such sharing of responsibility is represented by, for example, the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission and Columbia River Intertribal Fish Commission.

Inuit have formed the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission and the Alaska Eskimo Walrus Commission. Cree have the Cree Regional Authority.

Indigenous communities, however, have little knowledge of quantitative or experimental biology. They, therefore, need technical and financial support from their governments.

The Four Directions Council believes the UN could help. It could provide indigenous people support in several waysfor fisheries management, environmental monitoring and marine sciences. In the allocation of high-seas fish stocks, the UN Convention on the Law of

the Sea (UNCLOS) recognises only the principle of non-discrimination.

Four Directions Council argues that, as competition for fish intensifies, food security should also be given absolute priority in allocation decisions.

Leaving things as they arewhere the high seas is treated as a global common is fraught with peril.

The Four Directions Council offered a startlingly simple analogy in a presentation to the recent UN International Conference on Straddling Fish Stocks and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks.

It looked back to the history of the North American prairies and the long, fierce struggle between ranchers and farmers: "Ranchers did not like fencesthey liked being able to take their cattle anywhere there was grass. Until the invention of barbed wire and tough enforcement of land laws, the open-range cattle industry helped itself to whatever it pleased."

The results are alarmingly indicative. "As a result, small-scale farmers were hurt, the grasslands were badly overgrazed, cattle companies over-capitalised, and there was a great ecological and financial crash in the 1880s. High-seas fleets are the cowboys of today," concludes Four Directions Council.

It is evident that indigenous peoples the world over have much in common. What the indigenous peoples of North America know and practise could not only help other such communities elsewhere nut also provide solidarity.

They could also, in turn, learn much themselves. Only a sustained global networking among indigenous fisher folk, researchers and their supporters will ultimately create a body of useful experience and knowledge. ■

This article is based largely on a background study prepared for UNCED by Four Directions Council, North America