

# A Troller's Perspective on Individual Quotas

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This chapter presents the case for individual vessel quotas (IVQs) for Chinook and Coho from my perspective as a troll fisherman. To help you fully appreciate this perspective, I will share some family history.

## **A personal history**

In 1926, my grandparents decided to homestead on Hardwicke Island. Hardwicke Island is on British Columbia's rugged west coast, 4 miles across Johnstone Straits and 140 miles west of Vancouver. The good fish catches and the abundance of deer, good soil, and virgin lumber made Hardwick the perfect place to settle.

After moving into this logging community, my grandfather, Gustav Erikson, built a 33-foot troller. The troller was constructed to travel further afield in search of bigger catches. He built the boat by milling his own lumber and forging most of the hardware. Some of the materials, such as the engine, shaft, propeller, and nails had to be purchased with precious savings. Three years after he began work, the boat was launched, built without the help of electricity or power tools. With this fine vessel, christened "Rainbow," he fished from the Gulf of Georgia to Dixon Entrance.

Large Spring and Coho salmon were plentiful and prices rose each year. To make a viable living, the fleet depended on the

Queen Charlotte Island fishing grounds. In the fall, my grandfather would troll to catch enough Coho to can for the winter months. This way of life remained largely unchanged for years. I remember that, when I was a boy, my grandfather fished throughout the good weather months of the year; there was no closed season then.

In 1939, my parents also settled on Hardwicke Island. My father followed in his father's footsteps. He owned small fishing vessels and eventually owned a much larger vessel. In 1946, in Lund, BC, he worked alongside his family to build a 38-foot troller, the "Sea Star." My father also fished the Queen Charlotte Islands, driven by stories of big Chinook and Coho catches.

I started fishing on a 16 ½-foot troller at Stuart Island when I was 10 years of old. Fishing licenses were one dollar a year. I would fish all summer and make \$250, then go to school in the winter. My first shift as a crewman on the high seas started at age 12. I would get up in the morning, light the gas stove, and make breakfast for my dad. The day was spent catching and preparing fish. Little did I know then that my sons would follow in my footsteps.

In those days, no one living on the coast thought about fishing for sport. We either caught salmon to support ourselves financially or to eat. But times have changed.

### **The impact of sports fishing**

Initially the development of the sports fishery was concentrated in the Gulf of Georgia, particularly the north end. As this area began to get fished out, the fledgling commercial sports industry began to fish in other waters, first the west coast of Vancouver Island, then the central coast, Hakai Pass, and Rivers Inlet.

Around 15 years ago, commercial fishing dominated Parry Pass, between Graham Island and Langara. Generations of trollers had fished these grounds. By 1996, however, sports fishers had been allocated most of the Chinook harvest. Government policy, coming from distant Ottawa, had decreed that sports fishing interests should replace the trollers in harvesting Canada's Chinook resource.

If the Chinook salmon stocks return to levels seen in the mid-eighties (approximately 240,000 pieces), then the trollers who remain in the reduced fleet (which is expected to number about 50 percent of today's fleet), hope once again to harvest Chinook salmon. However, we know that the commercial sport industry

will demand more fish and that there will be future reallocation to aboriginals.

### **A place for trollers today**

Trollers believe their fishery has a legitimate and valuable place in the Canadian economy. More than 80 percent of the troll salmon catch is exported, bringing in critical foreign currency. This is why trollers have called upon the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans to institute a coast-wide intersectoral allocation, i.e., an allocation by species as a percentage of yearly total allowable catch (TAC). The present system, where the commercial and aboriginal sectors have a fixed quota for the whole fleet but the sports fishery is open-ended, is causing the destruction of the salmon resource. We support the Minister's commissioning of a third party to recommend a fair system of intersectoral allocation. We also support the inclusion of a mechanism for intersectoral transfer of fish so that one sector may buy fish from another sector in a free market transaction between willing sellers and buyers. An individual quota system is the best mechanism to achieve this market.

### **Individual vessel quotas**

Individual vessel quotas could be calculated as a percentage of the TAC by species for each troller. Initial IVQ allocation may be determined by catch history, vessel length, even division, or some combination of these options. These quotas would be used for intersectoral transfers of salmon. If a sector, such as the sports sector or a native band wished to establish or expand their salmon allocation, they would have to negotiate a price with a willing seller. Thus, the endless debate over "best use" of the salmon resource would end. Stakeholders could plan their futures based on a rational market system rather than depending on the political arena.

There are obstacles to the implementation of a quota system in the salmon fishery. Some of these obstacles are inherent in the biology of the fish, others in the biology of the predators of the fish. A list of problems and possible solutions follows.

#### *Annual variability and unpredictability of salmon runs*

It is difficult to set quotas and fish according to them when the total allowable catch cannot be determined before the season starts. Setting weekly catch limits in the early part of the season

may solve this problem. This would slow harvesting until estimates of the size of the run are firm.

*Enforcement of IQs*

Although enforcement of IQs is often a concern, experience in other west coast fisheries using ITQs indicates that quota holders do not cheat. They are afraid to cheat because their quota is valuable and sanctions are severe. Poaching comes from outside the system by those who, if caught, know they will be treated leniently.

*High-grading of product*

High-grading occurs when fishers do not retain all salmon of legal size. They "shake," i.e., discard, smaller grades, number two (marked or scarred fish), and, in the case of Chinook, white-fleshed fish, which are worth less. High-grading can be prevented with a system of "sockeye equivalents," which gives each species of salmon and catch grade within that species a relative value. Thus, the vessel's IVQ would be expressed in pounds of sockeye equivalents and every salmon caught would be subtracted from this amount, by multiplying its weight by the relative value constant that is given to its species and grade. These constants would be set so that there would be no financial incentive for a fisher to discard salmon of lower value.

*Increased management costs*

Quota fisheries on the coast of British Columbia are self-supporting. The current fleet restructuring program and the higher fish prices that would result from an IVQ system for salmon would make it possible for salmon fishers to support management, enforcement, and research.

*Reduction in employment*

A quota system may cause job losses in the salmon fishery beyond those resulting from the current program of fleet reduction. However, the jobs that remain will be more secure and better paying.

*Escalating prices for IVQs*

License and boat prices soared in the late seventies when catches and prices were high and fishers were making lots of money. Prices for IVQs may also rise if the system results in a better-quality product and fishers can make more money.

## **Conclusion**

Although the privatization of the harvestable rights to the salmon resource has many critics, experience with IQ fisheries in Canada and other countries has shown that the benefits of a quota program far outweigh the costs. These benefits include:

- better conservation and stewardship;
- better returns and secure employment;
- allocation that is no longer political;
- a unit of trade to deal with intersectoral allocations;
- an opportunity to save the small boat ice fleet (day fishing);
- an opportunity for small coastal communities to maintain their local fishing fleet;
- safer fishing;
- more control by fishers (enforcement and management);
- a mechanism for fleet reduction;
- an opportunity to lengthen the season; and
- reduction of excess capacity.

Price, over-capacity (i.e., too many boats chasing too few fish), competition from farmed fish, and dwindling salmon stocks are problems in the commercial salmon fishery. Individual vessel quotas present an opportunity to solve these problems and save the salmon fishery.