



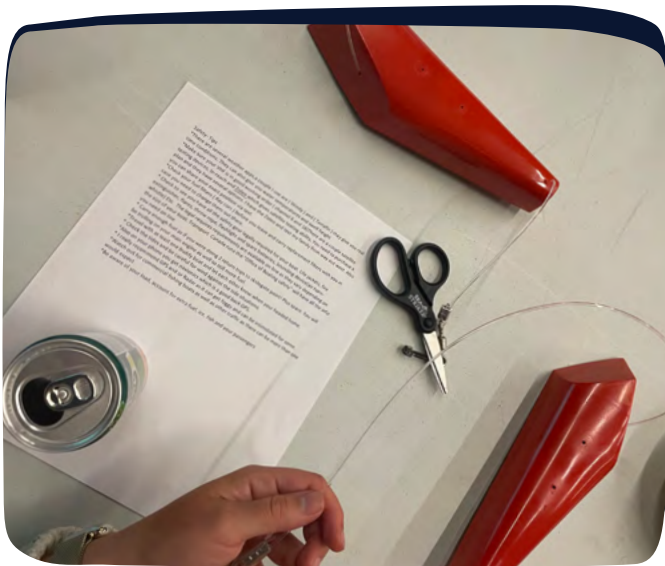
First Nations Health Authority
Health through wellness



“Everything is about how the food is shared”:
**Supporting Community Empowerment and
Food Security with Local Fisheries Workshops**

*By Billy Yovanovich, Michelle McDonald, Marcela Faralhi, Gerald Singh,
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Deep within Haida ancestral teaching is the notion that all food made with love will be tasty and nutritious for those who receive it. They have long relied on local marine species as a food source, but these traditional foods also hold cultural significance, relating to social, economic, and spiritual practices. Environmental changes can alter the marine ecosystem and affect food access. In recent years, Albacore tuna (*Thunnus alalunga*) has moved closer to the coast as a result of warmer currents driven by climate change. A commercial off-shore tuna fishery has been present in the region for decades, but Haida hasn't participated in these activities. Now, tuna is becoming more available and accessible to the Skidegate community, a Haida Nation located on Haida Gwaii. In response, the Skidegate Chief Councilor William (Billy) Yovanovich and Michelle McDonald (Missy), from the Skidegate Band Council, initiated workshops, beginning in 2021, designed to support and encourage participation in the local tuna subsistence fishery.



"This fishery works better with everybody fishing together [...] So you really feel an urgency of sharing what I've learned over the years so others can carry on these traditions and experiences and then keep it going."

- Billy



What do the workshops encompass?

Driven by Haida values of reciprocity, empowering each other, and improving community well-being, the tuna workshops function as a means of strengthening the community's collective capacity to secure and share local foods. Grounded in Haida teaching methods such as mentorship and hands-on experience, these initiatives and many others carried out in the community create opportunities for the values of reciprocity towards others and the environment. Through mentoring, knowledge holders teach respectful ways of fishing, harvesting, gathering and sharing food with others in the community.

"We are empowering and teaching them and providing access. I always say, when you get too much, share them with people that don't have access"

- Michelle McDonald (Skidegate Band Council)

The workshops teaches participants how to fish for and process (e.g. clean, skin, and fillet the fish) frozen tuna provided by Skidegate fishers, through interactive knowledge sharing and hands-on demonstrations. These activities culminate in tasting opportunities for dishes in the kitchen with Missy, such as tuna Poke - an Indigenous Hawaiian dish with cubed raw marinated tuna, which exemplifies one of the many active forms of cultural exchange between Haida and Hawaiians, connected across the vast Pacific Ocean.





“The only thing I always say is that when you do gathering of food workshops or working on food, you do everything with a really good feeling in your heart and love because bad feelings go through the food and through knowledge.”

**- Michelle McDonald
(Skidegate Band Council)**

The local workshops also share technical practices about tuna fishing, including how to assess wind, weather, and other environmental conditions to determine when, where, and how to fish safely and effectively. In fact, safe fishing practices and safe consumption of tuna are crucial aspects of these workshops. Raising awareness on subjects such as the instability and unpredictability of the weather and fishing safety measures can mitigate some of the risks in fishing for tuna. In order to do that, Billy emphasizes the importance of going out in groups and encouraging communication between fishers.

“I’ve noticed people checking each other, [...] we are all very good about communicating when we’re out there and make sure everybody comes back in.”

- Billy

Intergenerational knowledge transfer, a critical facet of Haida cultural pedagogy, is also integrated into the workshops. For example, Elders show the youth how to tie knots and demonstrate other fishing skills. These spaces are opportunities for community members to build positive experiences and memories around food, connecting with culture, language and community. Overall, the tuna workshops demonstrate how Indigenous foods are dynamic and continually changing and adapting within their relationships with the lands and waters.

"I know that they'll carry these memories and knowledge going forward. It feels like that's part of our role in our lives as individuals: to share the information and knowledge we've acquired over the years."

- Billy

The knowledge sharing that occurs through the workshops also supports increased community access to the fishery, as participants gain the training and skills to harvest their own tuna. Developing this capacity within the community encourages the Band Council to continue holding more workshops, something they are truly proud of.

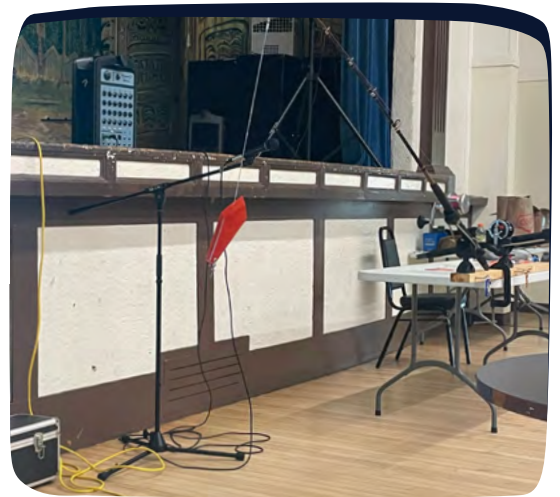
"It's been good for the soul to feel like people are gaining some good knowledge and having a really good time learning something new and sharing food with others. Has been quite rewarding that way."

- Billy



What's behind the preparation of the workshops?

Alongside all of the successes and benefits, there have been points that requires a great deal of coordination in facilitating these activities from the part of Missy and Billy. For example, tuna fishing can be expensive, and the high costs can be a barrier to community members engaging in the fishery. Writing proposals, raising funds to gather all the materials (e.g., frozen tuna for demonstrations and fishing gear), planning and coordinating events on dates that can be attended by the most people; all these things require a lot of effort, and they must prioritize the events and invest their time and energy.



The concern and care that goes into holding these events requires the help of sponsors and organizers willing to guarantee access to everyone. Funding, grants, and donations are a fundamental part of this. The success of these initiatives, therefore, reflects the team's capacity, the presence of partners and collaborators, the relationships in the community, and the cultural mandate of ensuring a strong independent community. Not all communities benefit from the combination of good access to local fish and dedicated resources (time, funding, and expertise) to hold these kinds of events.

At the time of this writing, five tuna workshops have been held in the community since 2021, and an average of 60 participants have attended each one, with many of them participating in more than one and coming back to share their experiences. Annually, two workshops are conducted in the Skidegate community, and the tuna fishing season emerges between the months of August and December. Community leaders report that investing in frequent and diversified learning opportunities has been rewarding.

"I always think back to one of our Elders speaking at a language conference. You know what he said? 'There's more time behind me than in front of me'. And when he said that, I thought: [...] time is so valuable and to get now doing something like this that so many people love and enjoy and to share the food. I know so many people have been out there fishing and I have been very good with sharing that with so many others."

- Billy

With increased fishery access and growing awareness of tuna as a protein source, a Tuna Derby was launched in Skidegate for the first time last year. In addition, beyond the tuna workshops, other workshops spearheaded by Missy and other partners are ongoing in the community and are related to Haida food independence, which creates accessibility and knowledge-sharing opportunities. These initiatives includes smoked salmon, black-cod and deer pate workshops; hunting programs (harvesting knowledge sharing); Halibut fishing, seaweed workshops, among others.

"I think we'll in the future be able to tell more about the impacts and the benefits that are coming out of this."

- Billy



Moving forward

The community plans to share the knowledge around tuna fishing with the nearby community of Old Masset and other Nations beyond Haida Gwaii that could also benefit.

“It’s really in this growing phase. I’ve seen it increase over the last couple of years and I really credit these workshops to getting this information out to people because they come. [...] I’m hoping we can still keep going on with them and maybe spread this information throughout.”

– Billy

Food is a central pillar to Haida values and history. Through relationships, opportunities and good experiences, the tuna workshops can inspire the adoption of adaptation initiatives like this in other communities. Sharing the story of those workshops can help to support a deeper understanding and appreciation of mentorship around food, the outcomes that have flowed from them, as well as their role in strengthening community resilience on issues of food security and independence.

“In Haida Gwaii, we have a law called ‘everything connects to everything else’. And food is that way [...] it just keeps on spidering out until it keeps on connecting, and I think it’s a beautiful thing.”

– Michelle McDonald (Skidegate Band Council)

We hope that this story properly acknowledges the important work done within Skidegate and can further inspire other community-led adaptation work.