2017 Gitksan Fisheries Options

With the upcoming season’s early prediction of a low sockeye return, the GWA is considering options for fishing this season. As previously discussed at the community meeting, the forecast for 2017 Skeena sockeye returns to Canada is 500,000 after Alaskan harvests. Recognizing this shortage of sockeye, the Gitksan will have higher demand on chinook (spring) salmon, coho salmon and steelhead.

The GWA has been participating in discussions with all Skeena First Nations to look at the scientific information available to develop recommendations to our respective nations and DFO. This group is called the Skeena First Nations Technical Committee (SFNTC). To ensure sufficient numbers of wild sockeye return to spawning grounds, the SFNTC recommends:

1) We raise the bar for minimum escapement targets from 400,000 to 600,000 sockeye, which serves as a marker that will trigger our Skeena food fishery openings.
2) That there be no Skeena sockeye targeted fisheries to start the season

Late in the 3rd week of July we will be able to use information from the Tyee Test Fishery and the Babine Fence to determine the number of sockeye returning to the Skeena River. At this point we would be able to make an informed decision on whether or not we can fish for sockeye and if so, how many we could catch.

We must remind ourselves that these recommendations are based on science and consideration of the future. For the Gitksan, we need to consider our options if we follow the suggested approach to the season and reduce potential sockeye by-catch by focusing efforts on harvesting alternate species.

Chinook Option: Increasing Chinook harvest would require the Gitksan fishers to use spring mesh (7” or 8”) to start the season. Gill net catch data shows that this would decrease our sockeye by-catches considerably.

Sockeye Options: If the Skeena sockeye return is too low to permit fishing, one suggestion we have heard would be to look at other rivers such as the Nass River for sockeye and our options available there.

Coho Options: As coho are similar in size and timing to sockeye, the use of gillnets in July and August is not advisable. We would have to look at means of harvesting selectively (beach seines, dipnets, rod and reel) to avoid potential impacts to sockeye during these months. Gill nets may be an option in Sept. and Oct. once the majority of sockeye have passed.

Steelhead Options: as with coho, steelhead have similar run timing to sockeye and their harvest would also not use gill nets during sockeye high season. Winter months may have the Gitksan out fishing with rod and reel to harvest steelhead for fresh fish in the winter.
Gathering inputs from community members at our meeting on February 1, 2017, we recognize Gitksan concerns over competing interest of fisheries other than our priority Section 35(1) food fishery. To this, we have confronted DFO stating that our Gitksan food needs be met to the greatest extent possible, prior to the needs of other interest groups. We recommended further, that recreational and commercial catch regulations be adjusted to account for an increased need of Chinook, coho and steelhead by First Nations to offset low sockeye returns.

In accordance with making these recommendations to DFO, it is crucial for us to receive feedback from the Gitksan community regarding our actual expected demand for other species and preferred methods of harvest.

Please provide feedback to the following questions by email (twale@gitksanwatershed.com) or phone (250-842-2213 Ext. 26).

Questions for the Gitksan Community:

1) Skeena monitoring and compliance of recreational fisheries is a major identified concern. How do we ensure that recreational fishers are abiding by closures while our food fishery is closed?
2) If the Skeena sockeye fishery is closed for the upcoming season, what is your expected need for each of the other species (chinook, coho, steelhead)?
3) Do you have suggestions to catch the alternate species, considering that small mesh gillnets (less that 7”) may be prohibited to avoid sockeye by-catch?
4) Any comments regarding the fishing options listed above, to meet food fish needs within our territorial boundaries?