

An excerpt from

# Taxing the Fish

**Sport fishing reels in money, but too much swims away say coastal local governments.**

"It's like going to the Calgary Stampede and expecting to take home a side of beef," says former commercial fisherman John Disney of Masset.

He, like many who once made a good living on the seas, feel the elite sport fishing industry in British Columbia is taking wild salmon away from coastal communities and giving it to those wealthy enough to fly in for a chance to play a feisty tyee.

And it is not just local fishermen hooked on this line of concern. Local governments are worried about getting some kind of payback for the use of local resources too.

After years of discussion, the Skeena-Queen Charlotte Regional District, has opted to implement a two per cent tax on some of the lodges on the Queen Charlotte Islands. But after sending the by-law to the province for approval they hit a serious snag. The province says 50 per cent of lodge owners must agree to the tax before it can be passed.

Much of the sport fishing lodge controversy swirls around the fish-filled waters of the northwest coast of Haida Gwaii. There are seven land-based lodges on this rugged coast, but many of the deluxe accommodations are on floating lodges, some nothing more than ships that anchor while the fishing is good, then move on.

## Recreational fishing booming

Around 18 fishing lodges operate on Haida Gwaii, but the number fluctuates year to year. Although the land-based lodges pay leases and taxes, the regional district has not been successful at assessing and taxing many of the floating lodges and none of the lodges will agree to pay the new two per cent tax.



*Chinook: pricey prize*

Some operations pay nothing more to set up in these wilderness areas than a business license, a few fishing licenses for staff and a liquor license for the guests. Leases are required, but not often acquired.

## Tax: 'It's a crumb'

West Coast Fishing Club owner Rick Grange takes exception to the generalization that all the lodges on Haida Gwaii are not giving anything back to the community. He owns two land-based lodges and one floating lodge in the Langara Island area and another farther down the west coast.

"There are good lodges and bad lodges," says Grange, who also now owns a house and lives on the islands.

He knows and is unhappy about the lodges in the area that don't pay for leases, don't employ locals, take the fish and leave. The most infuriating for him is that his customers sometimes book into these other places by mistake, due to the myriad of similarly named outfits.

## Lodge employs 130

Grange, who after buying 38 acres of deeded property zoned for a resort and a marina, opened his first lodge on Langara Island in 1991.

Last year he employed 130 people, more than half of them from the islands. He says he also tries to buy as much as he can locally and use locals to build or do renovations on his property in the winter. He was the first lodge owner to consistently use the Masset airport and he also has all of his clients' fish packaged and processed locally.

### ***Taxing the Fish, page 2***

"We're not in here to make a few dollars for a couple of years, we're looking at this as a long term business, long term commitment."

But Grange says his foremost concern is to put more fish back into the ocean than his clients take out.

He collects five dollars from his guests for each fish they kill and matches it, which he then gives to an organization he set up called Queen Charlotte Islands Salmon Unlimited.

Grange recruited his neighbours at Langara Island Lodge to participate in the program as well, and together they have raised around \$600,000 in the last six years. This goes into local salmon enhancement programs on the north island, including managing a hatchery, repairing fish ladders and restoring access to creeks that cross the highway.

### **Owners question fairness of tax**

Grange also promotes catch and release. He has set up a unique fish bank system, in which he buys salmon from local commercial fishermen, and keeps these at the processing plant in Masset for clients who agree to release any fish they catch.

"If it's a bleeder, they take the fish and mark it down on their ticket and it goes back into the pool for others who decide to go catch and release," he says aware of the concerns regarding mortality statistics on catch and release.

With all he does, Grange doesn't think the regional district's tax is the answer.

For his part, Grange would rather see governments put more effort into ensuring all lodges are properly leased, taxed and regulated.

"There has to be a level playing field and a code of conduct," he says.

*Heather Ramsay, a journalist in Queen Charlotte City, is a frequent contributor to The Tyee.*