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## **Story of a Shellfish Farmers Co-operative**

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# Story of a Shellfish Farmers Co-operative

Until 1997, residents on an island near Vancouver Island grew shellfish for an industrial concern. When the company merged with another company and relocated, it hired non-islanders to raise its shellfish. This meant over 100 family incomes disappeared in an area with a total population of only 1000 people. Gone were management, sales, technical, and labour jobs. All kinds of small businesses, such as welders, also suffered. Some of the independent farmers who depended on the company's infrastructure also had to sell their farms.

One response to this problem was to set up a community based shellfish co-operative. This particular (unnamed) Shellfish Farmers Co-op was registered a few years ago. As it developed, it acquired deep water, beach, and an upland tenure with zoning for grow-out, nursery, and hatchery for oysters, mussels, and scallops.

Shellfish co-operatives can have a significant positive economic and social influence on coastal communities without a negative environmental impact. Firstly, they can address the concerns that neighbours have about development by keeping control and access to local resources in local hands. They can also help their neighbourhoods by providing employment, particularly for women; flexible, local work rather than camp work that is supportive of family life. Women, including First Nations women, in fact, have always been involved in the industry, especially in the processing end of the business. Thus it is not surprising that, in the 70's and 80's, women started applying for tenures in order to run their own farms.

Co-ops also facilitate the sharing of marine resource: for example, Shellfish Growers Co-operative has at least 20 families utilizing one bay, meaning that the other 19 bays can be left wild or for other uses. They also fit well into the community in the sense that many skills learned in logging and in fishing can be easily transferred to the shellfish industry.

## *Important definitions*

*Shellfish* are bivalves that include clams, oysters, scallops, and mussels. A *shellfish tenure* is a piece of Crown property that a person or organization holds for a given period of time to conduct some form of shellfish farming. The federal, provincial, and regional districts are involved in applications for shellfish tenures.

There are at least four kinds of tenures, although a specific project may embrace more than one kind.

1. A beach tenure is the area between the high and low tide.
2. An off bottom shellfish tenure is the part of the ocean that is not intertidal and not the subtidal bottom. In this case your farm is floating.
3. With subtidal bottom culture your farm is always underwater on the ocean floor.
4. An upland tenure is Crown land above the high tide. This type of tenure is often included in remote sites as a place for the farmer and possible crew to live.

### *Recent development in shellfish farming*

In the 1970's and 80's several factors combined to encourage a number of families and smaller companies in remote areas to apply for tenures. Three of the most obvious factors were as follows.

1. Hatchery technology was improved.
2. The coastal resource industries were restructured, meaning that there were fewer employment opportunities for the local population in the wild fisheries, logging, and finfish farming.
3. Shellfish are quite sensitive to pollution in the marine environment because they filter feed plankton, meaning that isolated and less populated areas become more attractive for the industry, even though shipping is more expensive.

### *Issues in the shellfish business*

Recently, however, the resource based coastal communities have experienced both a decline in the resource, and they have lost access to the remaining resources. In general, control of the fisheries and particularly the shellfish resource has gone from native families to the Crown, to non-native families, to local companies, and finally to companies with offshore head offices. This migration of ownership has created considerable conflict within communities and has meant that the application process now includes a public meeting, and a \$4000 non-refundable application fee. Communities are not only concerned about noise and ambience, they are also concerned about whom applicants might sell their farms to.

Shellfish Farmers Co-op developed within the evolving framework of the shellfish industries. It encouraged tourism and environmental groups to come to their public meeting in support of their application to ensure that the resources it developed would reflect the interests of the community; keep them affordable and open to local people. It also developed a memorandum of understanding with the native band, Klahoose. The entire application process took about three years, and final approval came at the end of 2000.

The co-operative, nevertheless, has encountered problems. First, most of the people involved in the agencies and the community lacked experience with, knowledge of, and respect for, co-operatives. Second, they lacked experience in working as a group, and in dealing with substantial sums of money. Third, they became dependent upon grant money, which affected the resourcefulness, self-reliance, and co-operative spirit of the community: for example, Shellfish Farmers Co-op tried to develop a processing plant but members were diverted by efforts to start a plant in another neighbouring community, meaning that they could invest less of their own money. They then voted against any effort the CISG co-operative made at starting a plant. When the neighbouring group failed to develop their plant, the co-op was seriously restricted in its development. Third, some community members resist newcomers even though they need their support and involvement. Fourth, some individuals tried to use the co-operative to obtain community resources (shellfish tenures) in order to privatize them...perhaps the biggest problem the co-op has confronted.

*Now how do you deal with this?*

In a more perfect world, the members and the community would be committed to the co-operative. They would have the expertise or they would have access to it to make the co-op succeed. They would write a constitution and develop policies that would safe guard the co-operative. They would have the resolve to resist what can be at times quite intense efforts to undermine the co-operative. Governments would develop policies that would make taking over a shellfish co-operative tenure unattractive.

They would also have access to research that would focus not only on the history of co-operative organisations but also on how they are used by various stakeholders. Many people, even the women who depend so largely on the co-ops, become overwhelmed by the challenges of keeping them functioning. They need help from researchers and government officials. They need to know about how policies and rules can be developed to prevent the privatisation of co-op assets; they need to know how they can be enforced and sustained as circumstance change. They need to have research that will help them understand how, for example, land trust and covenants can be adapted to help preserve the integrity of the co-operatives they develop.

Co-operatives are living organizations. People involved in them need to revise and update constantly the policies on which they are based, and they must be constantly vigilant in defending the integrity of the organisations they create. The value of doing so is obvious: viable shellfish co-operatives will provide economic, social, and environmental benefits for people living along the coast and contribute significantly to a healthy and sustainable economy in British Columbia.

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