



OKANAGAN NATION ALLIANCE: OKANAGAN AQUATIC ENTERPRISES LLP

CFE PROFILE

OVERVIEW

Visiting the South Okanagan, you might never expect a vibrant fishery providing fresh salmon lake-to-plate in less than 24 hours. But just outside of Oliver, BC on Osoyoos Lake, the Okanagan Aquatic Enterprises LLP (OAE) Commercial Fishing Enterprise (CFE) of the Okanagan Nation Alliance (ONA) is thriving. ONA and OAE have played an integral role in revitalizing a once-collapsed fishery and providing jobs and skills training to local First Nations and members from other Nations throughout British Columbia.

Salmon have always been a main staple of the Okanagan (Syilx) people, who traditionally occupied an area that extended over approximately 69,000km². But the Columbia River sockeye stocks (including the Okanagan sockeye) neared extinction because of loss of habitat and increased pressure from overharvesting. In 2011, after nearly 75 years, the stock had significantly recovered thanks to a coordinated effort by ONA and other supporting partners.

PICFI SUPPORT

The Okanagan Nation Alliance has always sought best practices in fisheries, so there was an early interest by the Nation to ensure that they could augment harvest once Okanagan sockeye stocks recovered. As a result, OAE began as a pilot project in 2008 after a response to a call for proposals.

The Pacific Integrated Commercial Fisheries Initiative (PICFI) program has been an important part of the development of a sustainable commercial fishery by helping with revitalization of the fishery; operational support; coordination between Nations; marketing,

branding and communication; skills training and job development; and economic growth.

Initial funding (2008-2011) to the CFE was largely related to operations — developing grassroots fishers operating independently into the successful commercial and large-scale seining and weir/trapping operators they are today. Initial investment focused on understanding the strength of stocks to ensure sustainable fishing practices. This included the purchase of appropriate gear types and training and skills development to meet all responsible fisheries codes.

Fishing in the South Okanagan, part of the Northern Sonora desert, also presents unique operational challenges. For example, OAE identified the need for supply chain and cold storage. “PICFI really delivered by making sure we had cold-chain in a semi-arid environment,” says Okanagan Nation Alliance fisheries biologist Richard Bussanich.

In 2011, with an improved fishery, OAE shifted focus from operational needs to marketing, branding, and consumer education.

OAE joined the umbrella brand of RiverSelect, a group of like-minded First Nation fisheries — and branded their product ‘Okanagan Select’. OAE is able to draw on this affiliation with RiverSelect to gain access to both increased supply and employment demand from other participating Nations.

The brand also represents a river- and lake-to-plate story that emphasizes a culinary experience for environmentally- and socially-conscious consumers.

“Once people embrace our story they’re more willing to pay premium prices,” Bussanich says. “Effective

marketing and branding is critical to success and PICFI dollars have been and will continue to entrench our brand in this market.”

SUPPORTING CULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT

OAE demonstrates fisheries stewardship. Conservation, and sustainability are a large part of the RiverSelect and Okanagan Select brands. Promoting sustainability alongside Canada’s Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO), the Provincial government, and other organizations, Bussanich tips his hat to the support received. “We’ve found champions at DFO and the Province who are committed to building relationships and capacity in First Nations communities in a meaningful way,” he says.

Thanks to government support, OAE is able to participate in and share its message in large-scale public awareness events. OAE has told its story internationally with Slow Food International, sharing that this fishery not only has a high quality product, but also supersedes many of the requirements around responsible fisheries, bycatch, and the environment. OAE also participates in the Pacific Salmon Foundation’s Celebration of Salmon Art and Conservation.

Locally, OAE experienced some initial resistance from ONA community members. “It was an emotional process because while we were trying to recover the fish stock we were simultaneously engaging new harvest practices on a stock that was not fully recovered,” comments Bussanich. Understanding the need for effective communications, it was imperative to demonstrate to community members, not just consumers, that best practices were being adhered to and that OAE was fishing in a respectful and responsible way.

OAE also played a role in forming a community outreach and participation initiative called the Okanagan Salmon

Community Initiative (OSCI). This grassroots movement is a community support fishery of non-First Nations that utilizes Okanagan fishing practices and contributes its catch to the local community.

DEVELOPING ECONOMY, JOBS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Developing a successful business model, training community members and contributing to the local economy are important goals of both ONA and OAE.

There was an initial emphasis on training and certification of local fishermen. Since 2008, the CFE has trained over 50 ONA community members and more than 35 visiting members from other Nations. This training includes vessel operation, first aid, relevant operator’s tickets, marketing/branding and HR. During the fishing season (two to three months), they employ nine people through the seining operation, 3.5 people that support marketing, sales and communications, 2.5 working directly with the RiverSelect group and a further 80 fishers through community support fisheries.

The South Okanagan, typically known for fruit and wine, represents a culinary market that includes over a million annual tourists and over 300,000 local residents. Through successful harvesting and effective marketing, OAE already has around \$150k in local sales and shows no sign of slowing down.

THE FUTURE

OAE plans to continue to grow, provide more opportunities for community members and develop a larger market share.

Future goals include having a meaningful ecosystem-based fishery of more than one fishery. The organization hopes to add carp, whitefish and other resident species to add more balance to the local fishery.