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On board: Navigating the choppy waters of B.C.'s herring fishery

Black Press Media climbs aboard commercial fishboat to explore decades-long battle over Salish Sea roe harvest



[Olivier Laurin](#)

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1 / 14 Matt Leakey shovels herring into baskets at the bottom of the skiff during this year's commercial roe fishery on March 6, 2025. | (Olivier Laurin / Black Press Media)



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In March 2025, Black Press Media spent several days with a commercial herring roe fishing crew. This article explores the reality of the fishery, which has become a controversial topic in recent decades, sparking debates between the province's fishermen, conservation groups, and First Nations over its necessity.

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First served in feudal Japan, herring roe, known as kazunoko, gradually became an integral part of Osechi, the traditional Japanese New Year's feast.

Among the numerous dishes served in elegant multi-tiered wooden boxes, the salted and dried fish eggs symbolize good fortune, prosperity, and fertility, with etymological roots meaning 'child of numbers.'

This ceremonial delicacy, costing upwards of \$200 per kilogram, varies in quality, with the most sought-after roe sourced from Canada's Pacific coast, known for its superior quality compared to its Atlantic counterpart.

While these small, unassuming golden egg sacs are candidly enjoyed on holidays, few realize that 10 months earlier, more than 7,000 kilometres away, these were harvested in a contentious fishery, where blood, guts, and seminal fluids spilled as a decades-long ideological battle over its necessity endures.

Behind the scenes



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Every year in late February, herring fishermen from across the province migrate to ports scattered along Vancouver Island's east coast, awaiting the start of the roe fishery.

After a near 60-hour sailing from Prince Rupert, Robert Hauknes and his brother Erik anchored at the Comox Valley marina.

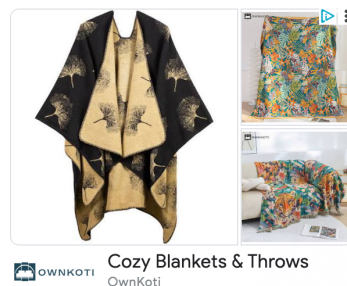
Aboard their vessel, the *Mystic Era*, the third-generation fishermen, along with their three deckhands, patiently listen for Fisheries and Oceans Canada's (DFO) daily updates on the status of the herring spawn.

After several days on standby, the ministry announced the official opening for the gill net fleet on March 5, shortly after noon. Within minutes, the crew raised the anchor as Robert rushed to the cockpit, swiftly steering the boat out of the harbour.



Robert Hauknes, along with his brother Erik, is the owner-operator of the Mystic Era, a 70-foot-long salmon troller purpose-built for the herring fishery. (Olivier Laurin / Black Press Media)

Unpredictable each year, herring spawn in eelgrass beds along the shallow coastline, somewhere between the Comox Valley to north of Nanaimo. This year, the crew set out for Denman Island's east coast, following reports of an eight-mile spawn.



Upon arriving, a symphony of life and death unfolded as nature swelled at the onset of this ephemeral mass reproduction. In these milky jade waters, bleached by herring semen, sea lions, seals, seagulls, and eagles gorged themselves on the silvery fish.

As dozens of boats began dotting the coastline, Hauknes and his crew prepared to launch two fishing skiffs, while the *Mystic Era*, the mothership, remained in deeper waters, ready to store their catch in icy water.

Dressed in their commercial fishing gear, Erik and Matt Leakey boarded the smaller gill net skiff, built to hold up to eight tons of herring, while John Schafhauser and Finn de la Nuez took the larger vessel, with twice the capacity.

Unlike seine fishing, which uses a massive surrounding net to enclose its catch, gill net fishing involves snaring fish by their gills. Hauknes favours the latter, as the net's 55-mm

mesh specifically targets spawning fish, optimizing the egg catch, while seining captures herring of all ages.



Gill net fishing involves catching fish by their gills, as they become entangled in the mesh. The size of the mesh is designed so that it captures fish of a certain size, typically adults or those of spawning age, while allowing smaller, younger fish to pass through. (Olivier Laurin / Black Press Media)

As the two crews neared the shore, they navigated through a maze of competing boats to find a space where to set their three 450-foot nets. A few minutes later, the fishing begins.

Heading to the closest net, marked by a brightly coloured buoy, one of the two men hooked it with a gaff and began pulling it in. With the power roller at the helm and a large winch, known as a drum, slowly coiling the net at the back, the first fish emerged from the water. As the herring approached the end of the boat, the aptly named beater – a fast-revolving aluminum bar – violently shook the net from side to side to dislodge any entangled fish.



The power roller is a black cylinder at the bow of the ship, helping fishermen pull in the gill net and begin harvesting the fish. (Olivier Laurin / Black Press Media)

Under a constant shower of scales, organs, blood, eggs, and greyish-pink pulp, deckhands shovelled tons of fish into baskets at the bottom of the boat, nimbly moving back and forth on slippery planks while carefully avoiding the skull-crushing beater and its deafening sound.





Finn de la Nuez, 19, takes a brief moment to catch his breath, sitting on the skiff's edge, before returning to work. (Olivier Laurin / Black Press Media)

Depending on the abundance of herring, it generally takes about two hours to fill the small skiff, while the larger one takes twice as long.

As the two boats returned to the mother ship to unload their catch, the cycle continued until the Mystic Era reached its packing capacity of 55 tons.



After a long night of work, Finn de la Nuez (left) passes the scale to John Schafhauser as they empty their skiff's load into the Mystic Era. (Olivier Laurin / Black Press Media)

Hauknes would then deliver the cargo to a Vancouver fish processing plant before returning to the fishing grounds to complete its total quota of 160 tons.

Calling gill net fishing 'hard work' would be an understatement, not only because of the foul conditions but also due to the unending shifts, which sometimes stretch beyond 36 hours without sleep.



Erik Hauknes and Matt Leakey head out in the early hours of the morning, shortly after unloading the herring onto the mother ship. (Olivier Laurin / Black Press Media)

The only moment of respite for the crew comes when they unload the skiff, snatching a few bites before heading back out.

Describing the roe fishery as a race against the clock, Hauknes explained that herring only spawn for a few days, creating a short window for fishing. On top of that, the season can be abruptly closed by DFO once the province reaches its total allowable catch – just shy of 13,000 tons this year – whether one has reached its quota or not.

The moneymaker in this business, Hauknes explained, is the roe, which generally accounts for 13 to 20 per cent of the total catch weight. The remainder, including female carcasses and the males, is repurposed into pet food, fertilizer, fish feed, and other products.



The roe fishery targets the female herring skeins – the sacs that hold the eggs – which are considered a delicacy in Japan once cured and salted. (Olivier Laurin / Black Press Media)

Once a lucrative business, the roe fishery was considered a true gold rush, recalled John Schafhauser, 71, as he ate a portion of lasagna between outings.

Having worked for over four decades on the Mystic Era, the seasoned fisherman recounted how, in the early '70s, he could make up to \$30,000, while the average pickup truck cost only \$3,000.

The venture was so profitable that after just one roe season, Sverre Hauknes, Robert and Erik's father, paid off the newly built 70-foot salmon troller, Mystic Era, in full.

Nowadays, however, the fishery only generates a slim fraction of what they once did, added Schafhauser on his way out.

A vocal opposition

This year, DFO set the [harvest rate at 14 per cent](#) based on a forecasted biomass of 91,051 tons, allowing fishermen to catch just under 13,000 tons of herring in the Strait of Georgia.

Over the last few years, conservationists, environmental groups, and coastal First Nations have called for a provincewide, [indefinite moratorium](#) on herring fisheries, arguing that DFO's harvest rates are "unsustainable" and blaming the federal agency for [systematically mismanaging](#) B.C.'s stocks, causing the fish's decline.

Pacific Wild, along with other environmental groups, believes a complete stoppage could help restore herring populations in south Island waters, where they've vanished after being "fished to oblivion," identifying fishermen as the primary cause for their disappearance.

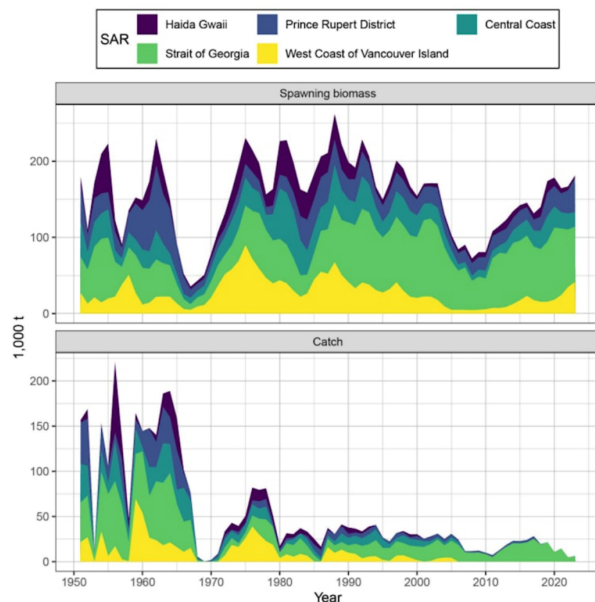
The conservancy warns that "overfishing could lead to an [irreversible collapse](#)" of the province's stocks. By netting the fish as they prepare to spawn, commercial fisheries prevent the fertilization of billions of eggs, thus threatening the species' future.

In turn, this would have a devastating ripple effect on the marine ecosystem, impacting animals such as salmon, humpback whales, seabirds, and seals, which depend on herring for their dietary needs.

With commercial fisheries generating consistently less and less revenue over the past decades, critics argue that herring are now worth more in the water than out of it.

Other side of the coin

This year, DFO noted that, although some areas in the province like Haida Gwaii are still struggling with low biomasses, areas like Prince Rupert, and Vancouver Island's West Coast have witnessed steady growth in their herring stocks over time. The Strait of Georgia's stock has been determined to be healthy.



The top graphic shows DFO's estimated Pacific herring biomass over time by region, while the lower graphic illustrates the total catch of Pacific herring by region. The data spans from 1951 to 2023. (DFO)

Described as "a small and widely abundant fish," ranging from Alaska to Mexico, the conservation status of Pacific herring [remains to be assessed](#) in Canada.

South of the border, despite efforts by conservation groups to have the U.S. government list the fin fish as threatened or endangered, it was [not considered eligible](#) for listing, as it was not found to be at risk.

While the Salish Sea is home to resident populations, herring are [predominantly migratory](#), and exhibit diverse spawning behaviours influenced by numerous environmental factors such as increasing predation and water temperature, as well as the disappearance of suitable spawning grounds, among other things.

As a result, this could explain the loss of spawns south of Nanaimo, Hauknes theorized.

"You've got to look at the size of the population that we have on the Island now," he said. "Victoria, until just recently, was dumping raw sewage into the water. I'm sure fish don't want to lay their eggs on poop or road runoffs.

"It's not just one thing that's causing the decline of fish."

Believing DFO's approach to be "sustainable and well-managed," backed by rigorous science, Hauknes considers the harvest rate of these past years to be "conservative."

"There's no systemic mismanagement in herring," he said. "All parties, including First Nations, commercial fishermen, and environmental NGOs, collaborate at advisory level with DFO and ultimately the minister makes a decision based on their comments.

"It's a bit disingenuous of environmental organizations saying that it's being mismanaged. Just because they don't like the outcome, doesn't mean that the science is bad."

Therefore, Hauknes argues that an indefinite moratorium would be unreasonable, leading to harmful consequences overlooked by those advocating for its necessity.

In a 2023 interview with Black Press Media, We Wai Kai elected Chief and long-time herring fisherman Ronnie Chickite noted that roughly 50 per cent of the commercial herring fishery licences in the province are Indigenous-owned.

A moratorium, he stressed, would deal a substantial economic blow to coastal First Nations relying on these fisheries.

Hauknes added that a stoppage of the fisheries could sound the death knell of an albeit declining industry that [contributed \\$5.1 million](#) to B.C.'s economy in 2023 and \$110 million

over the past decade.

Without herring, fish processing plants could disappear, spin-off industries could collapse, and generations of commercial fishing families in coastal rural communities could wake up without work.

"You have to look at the seafood sector as a whole," said Hauknes. "Herring by itself is not enough of an industry to keep everything running. Salmon is not enough by itself. You have to be diversified enough to weather the storms... and it's the same with the fish company.

"Financially, it would be devastating to lose herring."

While Hauknes argues that herring fisheries do not currently pose a threat to this keystone species, he acknowledged the harmful impacts of overfishing, which resulted in the herring collapse in the '60s.

Since then, the fishing industry has attempted to shed its negative reputation. Today, herring fisheries are heavily controlled and monitored by DFO and independent observers, explained Hauknes.

Even if one could manage to make it through this seemingly airtight process, the risk of getting caught greatly outweighs the possibility of rapid financial gains, he added. Being sued, having all belongings seized, and losing the ability to fish would cause irreparable damage to any fisherman.

In the end, Hauknes stressed that overfishing would paradoxically threaten a fisherman's livelihood by jeopardizing its own future.

"It's in our best interest to look after the herring stock because, as a fisherman, you want to have a job next year and I'm hoping my family – whether it's my nephew, niece or my sons – potentially get into fishing as well.

"You want to have a future for the next generation."

- With files from the Comox Valley Record

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About the Author: Olivier Laurin

I'm a bilingual multimedia journalist from Montréal who began my journalistic journey on Vancouver Island in 2023.

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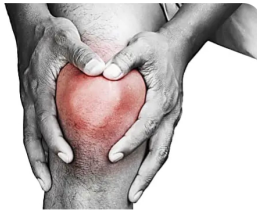
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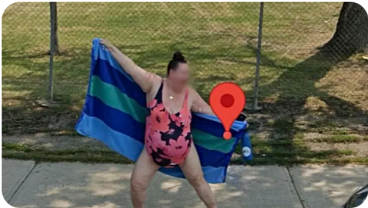


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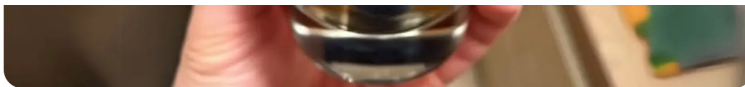


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