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Haida Fisheries Program



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HAIDA GWAII NORTHERN ABALONE COMMUNITY ACTION PLAN

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INTRODUCTION

British Columbia's northern abalone population declined dramatically in the 1970s and 1980s, and all abalone fisheries were subsequently closed in 1990 due to conservation concerns. Large commercial fishery catches and suspected high levels of illegal fishing are thought to be the major causes of decline. In 1999, northern abalone was listed as a threatened species by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC).

Community concerns for abalone led to formation of the Haida Gwaii Abalone Stewards (HGAbS), a partnership of community groups, government agencies and academic organizations, spearheaded by the Haida Fisheries Program of the Council of the Haida Nation. Haida Fisheries Program, Skidegate Band Council, Old Massett Village Council, Laskeek Bay Conservation Society, World Wildlife Fund Canada, Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve and Haida Heritage Site, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, Environment Canada and the Simon Fraser University Centre for Wildlife Ecology are current partners in the HGAbS.

COMMUNITY ACTION

This *Community Action Plan* is updated from the September 2003 Action Plan developed by HGAbS following two Haida Gwaii community workshops held in 2001. The purposes of the workshops were to share information and provide a forum to discuss community concerns about abalone and potential rebuilding strategies. The workshops included presentations on abalone biology and population status, abalone management in BC and California, and local dive research activities, followed by discussions and summary of key issues and strategies.

The Haida Gwaii Abalone Stewards coordinate implementation of the *Community Action Plan*. Activities in the plan include abalone rebuilding, monitoring and enforcement, community outreach and education, and dialogue with community members. Funding for northern abalone stewardship and research on Haida Gwaii has been provided by the Government of Canada Habitat Stewardship Program for Species at Risk since 2000. The Action Plan is complementary to the *Recovery Strategy for the Northern Abalone in Canada*, developed under the *Species at Risk Act*.

GOAL & OBJECTIVES

The goal of the *Community Action Plan* is to restore the Haida Gwaii abalone population to a self-sustaining level that can support fishing for food.

Objectives are to:

- Promote abalone stewardship throughout Haida Gwaii by building local partnerships, increasing community awareness about abalone, and focusing efforts on priority locations;
- Test potential abalone rebuilding strategies and population monitoring methods that could be applied locally; and
- Inspire community action by supporting an Abalone Coast Watch Program and delivering outreach and education to the Islands' communities.

Despite a complete closure on abalone fishing in BC since 1990, the abalone population around Haida Gwaii has not increased. In fact, ongoing surveys since the closure indicate continuing abalone population decline along much of the BC coast. No one knows for sure why the abalone population has not increased, but there are a number of likely causes.

Fishing of abalone for sale is known to occur. A 2007 North Coast conviction involving Haida Gwaii residents and a number of fisheries seizures of abalone in other coastal areas indicate that the problem is widespread. Many abalone are taken, indiscriminate of size. The BC coastline is extensive and it is impossible to monitor all activities occurring at all times. So despite the fisheries closure, abalone fishing for sale continues to have significant impacts and it is likely that very few abalone poachers are caught.

Ecological factors affect the natural rebuilding of Haida Gwaii abalone. For example, localized depletion of abalone below a critical level may mean that they are unable to reproduce successfully. Other factors that may limit abalone recovery include competition for space or food with other animals that need similar habitats (such as red sea urchins), effects of predation, and environmental or habitat changes. The role and relative influence of each factor or combination of factors is not known. Sea otters, if and when they return to the Islands, will change the balance of the present kelp forest ecosystem, and also affect abalone habitat and abundance.

Some Haida food fishing for abalone is openly acknowledged on Haida Gwaii. Some recreational fishing by other Islanders and visitors is also likely. While individual Haida food and recreational fishing are believed to be relatively small, even small catches have impacts and cumulative effects on the abalone population. Community awareness about the depressed state of abalone, and community willingness to take action to restore abalone abundance, is vital to rebuilding efforts.

There are many outstanding questions. How many abalone need to be in an area to maintain a viable population? How might conservation limits for abalone be different for Haida food and traditional fishing compared to other fisheries due to the constitutional priority of aboriginal rights fisheries? How would the return of sea otters affect abalone rebuilding?

New directions are clearly needed to meet the challenge of rebuilding Haida Gwaii abalone. After almost two decades, the federal fisheries conservation closure has not been effective in itself at rebuilding the northern abalone population. Many issues remain to be addressed. Enforcement resources alone are not adequate to monitor human activities over the vast and remote coastline, and we have much to learn about the ecological factors affecting natural rebuilding of abalone.

CONTINUING DECLINE

FISHING FOR SALE

ECOLOGICAL FACTORS

FISHING FOR FOOD

UNANSWERED
QUESTIONS

NEW DIRECTIONS

REBUILDING

The *Haida Gwaii Northern Abalone Community Action Plan* aims to collaboratively rebuild Haida Gwaii abalone through community stewardship and continuing applied research and monitoring activities. Key elements of the action plan are:

- Focused rebuilding efforts on priority places such as Abalone Stewardship Areas identified through community consultations;
- Development and maintenance of an Abalone Coast Watch Program to monitor the coastline and help curtail illegal abalone fishing;
- Active engagement of the Islands' communities, organizations and individuals, in abalone stewardship through various avenues;
- Applied research and monitoring of Haida Gwaii abalone and their habitat; and
- Facilitation of community dialogue and reporting on action plan progress.

ABALONE STEWARDSHIP AREAS

The overall abalone rebuilding strategy, initially focused on the Abalone Stewardship Areas, has broadened to benefit abalone around all of Haida Gwaii. The stewardship areas continue to provide opportunities for natural rebuilding and research to further our understanding of abalone ecology. Regular communications about research and monitoring results will encourage the Islands' communities to share collective responsibility for maintaining and rebuilding Haida Gwaii abalone. Stewardship areas are also places where the results of increased surveillance can be monitored.

Two stewardship areas are currently defined: (1) North Graham Island from Wiah Point to Langara Island; and (2) Juan Perez Sound including Hot Springs Island and Windy Bay (see map on page 5). A smaller research area within Juan Perez Sound is closed to red sea urchin fishing, facilitating the study of natural ecological interactions within abalone habitat.

Communities must agree to a set of guidelines for activities within stewardship areas and ensure that guidelines are followed for everyone's benefit. If our efforts are successful in these areas then the approach could be applied to other parts of the Islands.

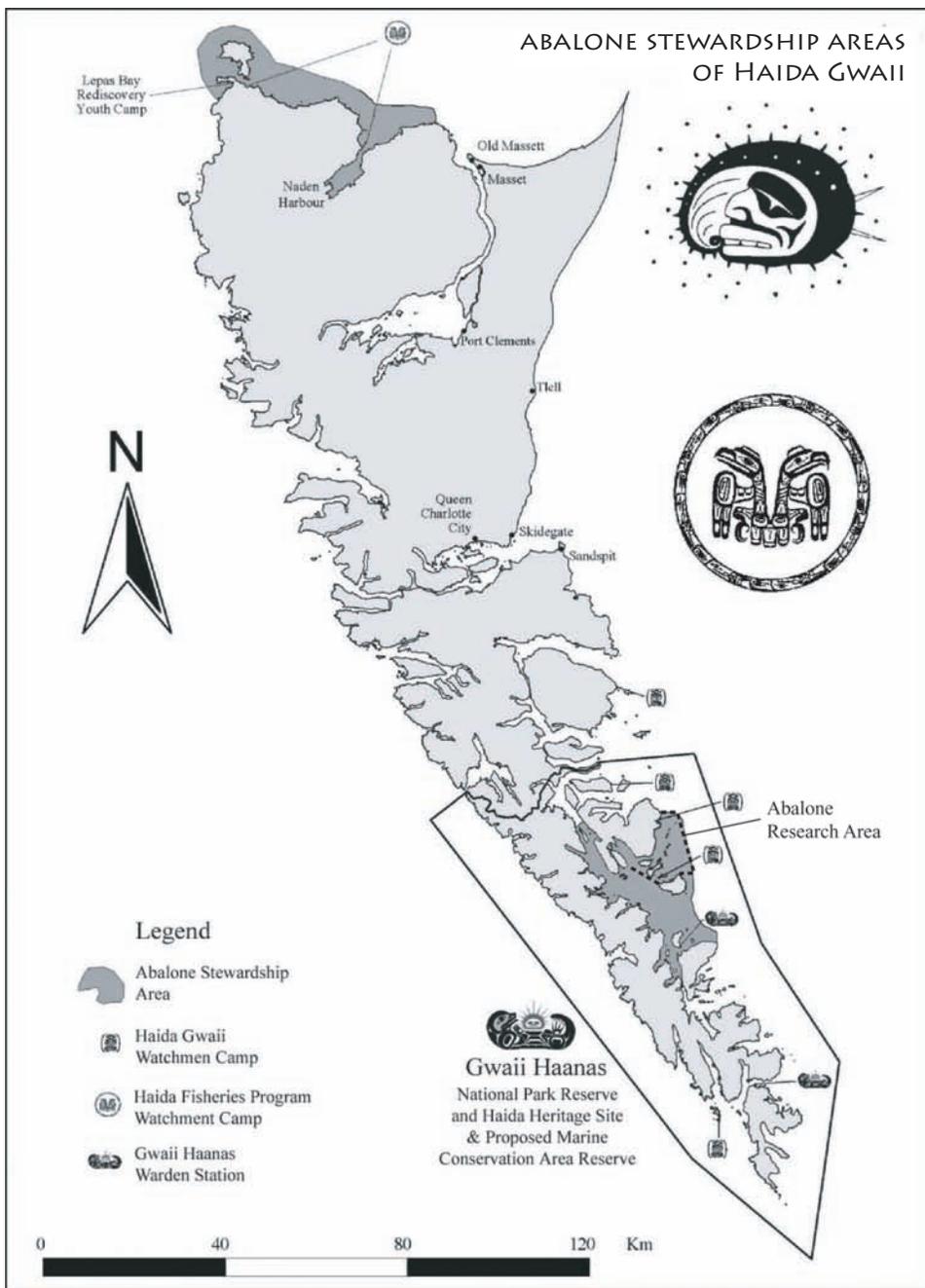
RESEARCH & MONITORING

Research and monitoring activities by the Haida Fisheries Program and Fisheries and Oceans Canada in and around Abalone Stewardship Areas include:

- Monitoring of abalone population and habitat conditions over time;
- Tagging and monitoring of individual abalone to determine growth rates and estimate survival and movement;
- Placement and monitoring of collector structures for juvenile abalone abundance and growth; and
- Testing and monitoring of alternative rebuilding strategies to determine their potential effectiveness.

The Haida Gwaii Abalone Coast Watch monitoring network is another key component of the *Community Action Plan*. This cooperative approach to monitoring and enforcement engages people and communities in active stewardship of the Islands' marine areas. A Coast Watch occurrence reporting form has been widely circulated on the Islands by community partners for reporting suspicious activities. The form includes toll-free reporting information as well as guidelines for key information to record.

Since its inception, the Abalone Coast Watch Program has expanded to over 50 registered participants, including Haida Fisheries Guardians and Watchmen, Haida Gwaii Watchmen, Islanders, commercial and sport fishers, tour operators, and Gwaii Haanas staff. This volunteer-based network augments the government agency resources that are currently available to monitor the coastline.



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Strategies to engage Haida Gwaii communities in abalone stewardship activities include:

- Delivery of an abalone stewardship curriculum and other educational activities in the schools;
- Presentations by local and guest speakers about abalone ecology and conservation;
- Discussion forums around food fishing for abalone and the need for stewardship action; and
- Dialogue with community and interest groups, such as tourism operators, commercial fishers and sport fishing charter operators, to share information and build cooperation in abalone rebuilding and monitoring efforts.

COMMUNITY DIALOGUE

Continuing dialogue and stewardship action by people on Haida Gwaii is fundamental to restoring and ensuring the well-being of northern abalone around the Islands. The Haida Gwaii Abalone Stewards welcome your perspectives and encourage you to contact us. Visit our website for more information: <http://www.marinematters.org/programs/abalone>.

PRIORITY ACTIONS

ABALONE STEWARDSHIP AREAS

- Maintain existing Abalone Stewardship Areas with increased community surveillance to facilitate natural rebuilding.
- Maintain existing commercial dive fisheries closure in Juan Perez Sound to ensure research efforts are not compromised and pursue establishment of additional areas as needed.
- Develop and/or provide input to management plans and processes that may affect Stewardship Areas.
- Designate additional Abalone Stewardship Areas around Haida Gwaii as needed over the long term.

RESEARCH & MONITORING

Baseline Monitoring

- Collect ecological baseline information on Haida Gwaii abalone and habitat.
- Monitor abalone population changes in stewardship areas.
- Monitor juvenile abalone abundance and recruitment.

Rebuilding

- Conduct, monitor and report on results of experimental broodstock aggregation as a potential abalone rebuilding method.
- Investigate other potential rebuilding methods (eg, red sea urchin removals, rearing enclosures for juvenile abalone).
- Provide updates on other coastal projects that are developing and testing technology to release hatchery-grown juvenile abalone into the wild (Haida Gwaii abalone work is currently focused on maintaining and rebuilding the wild abalone population, not on enhancement).

COAST WATCH PROGRAM

Monitoring

- Support and expand the community-based Abalone Coast Watch monitoring network.
- Actively involve CHN Fishery Guardians and Watchmen and Haida Gwaii Watchmen in the network.
- Actively recruit community members and organizations (eg, youth, fisherpeople, Rediscovery Programs, ENGOs, fishing and tourism operators) in the Coast Watch network.
- Encourage people who are out on the water to monitor for and report suspicious marine activities to the DFO toll-free tips line or the Haida Fisheries Program.
- Investigate the potential to establish real-time on-board video monitoring of the commercial dive fleet similar to the crab fishery.
- Investigate opportunities for commercial dive fishers to gather data about abalone.
- Pursue additional funding for priority program elements that are not currently funded.

Enforcement

- Support strict fines and penalties for abalone poaching (eg, confiscating diving gear and boats, loss of commercial licenses).
- Develop and support additional deterrents to abalone poaching (eg, publish names of offending individuals within the community, encourage policing based on respect).
- Encourage pooling of resources between CHN, DFO and Gwaii Haanas.
- Investigate potential sources and seek to secure funding for enforcement to complement monitoring.
- Investigate mechanisms to improve the ability of Haida Fisheries Guardians and Watchmen to provide enforcement support.
- Provide regular updates on market surveillance activities (eg, DFO, TRAFFIC) that assist in tracking and gauging the level of abalone poaching.
- Support the DFO toll-free tips line for the public to report suspicious activities.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Outreach & Education

- Encourage community participation in abalone stewardship through various activities and media (eg, community workshops, promotional materials).
- Conduct public outreach and education to promote respectful awareness of the issues surrounding abalone through various media (eg, community events, presentations, videos, newsletters).
- Sponsor abalone stewardship education in the schools and encourage children and parents to share information and take action.

Guidelines for Fishing

- Establish baseline conservation objectives under which Haida food fishing of abalone can take place.
- Establish baseline conservation objectives under which recreational food fishing of abalone by Islanders can take place.
- Define respectful food fishing guidelines and protocol, including a permitting system.
- Establish mandatory catch reporting from food fishing activities (eg, fishing location, number and size of animals fished).
- Foster community-based enforcement of fishing guidelines based on mutual respect for others and for abalone.

COMMUNITY DIALOGUE

- Encourage community discussion of the abalone issues and potential solutions and actions.
- Facilitate community workshops to report on and discuss Haida Gwaii abalone stewardship.

HAIDA GWAII ABALONE STEWARDS

contacts as of March 2008

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REPORTS

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