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Fish Traps on the British Columbia Coast

by John MacFarlane 2017



The Fish Trap at Sooke BC with the tug *J.W.P.* and the tender *Olive M* berthed alongside. (Photo from the Doug MacFarlane collection.)

Huge fish traps modelled on the principal of the relatively modest First Nations traps were established on Vancouver Island and the mainland. This was a cheaper and harvesting approach than sending boats and crews to sea with equipment and operating costs. They were based on exclusive licences operated with small crews and producing large profit returns. The Bell-Irving family also established a trap at Point Roberts. By 1896 there were 19 traps on the US side of Boundary Bay and two on the Canadian side. The catching ability of the traps exceeded the ability to process the fish.

The traps at Sooke were constructed by the Sooke Harbour Fishing and Packing Co. about 1918 at Otter Point. The halibut schooner *Harriet E.* was the tender and carried the fish from the traps to Victoria. This company maintained four traps at Beecher Bay, Otter Point, Point-No-Point and Boulder Point.

Concern about conservation of salmon stocks was a theme that arose early in the life of the organized fishing industry. The efficiency in harvesting was increasing, and habitat was decreasing. Fishermen's organizations persistently asked for fish traps to be closed and for regulation of seine gear. This was analyzed by a Royal Commission in 1940 but the elimination of traps was rejected. The USA banned traps in 1935.

There was a fish trap at Sooke operated by Sooke Harbour Fishing & Packing Co. My cousin and Sooke resident Douglas MacFarlane worked on the pile driving at the trap. Once that work was completed he got a job as Second Watchman and then as Head Watchman, a position he held for 5 years.

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