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NATIONAL FISHERIES CONFERENCE
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UNION OF BRITISH COLUMBIA INDIAN CHIEFS  
NATIONAL INDIAN BROTHERHOOD  
KEYNOTE ADDRESS

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May 20, 1980  
Vancouver, B.C. CANADA

Now, as in the time before history was written, the salmon will play a vital role in determining the fate of the Indian Peoples of the Pacific Coast. Survival of the salmon and the salmon people is critically dependent upon the willingness and initiative of Indian Governments to become actively involved in fisheries management. Bands and Tribes cannot afford to neglect their rights and responsibilities to manage the resources which form the foundations of native cultures and economies.

Our histories have been built upon a salmon resource that consists of thousands of distinct races of fish which return to the rivers along the coast. Survival for these races of salmon depends upon strong local control to ensure that suitable environmental conditions are found in the streams where the fish spawn. To protect the salmon and preserve the basis for their heritage, Indian Governments must assert their rights to manage their resources.

If Tribes choose not to exercise their authority, their decisions will be made for them by others. The fate of the salmon has been and is now being decided by political processes of other governments.

Jurisdiction over resources like salmon is overlapping. At the local level, control may be exerted by individual Bands; at the regional level by Provinces, at the national level by the Federal Government, and at the international level by some Multi-National Body. Under this system of overlapping jurisdictions, a government's authority can be preempted by its failure to act.

In the political and economic structure of societies that surround our peoples, the ability of Indian Peoples to control the resources upon which we depend can easily be usurped. This is especially true if each Band fails to assert its rights to protect its own interests. We must control the forces that surround our peoples, our lands, and resources.

Our rights, as separate peoples, are bound up with many other interests that are engaged in an intense struggle to control resources. Although fish, water, timber, minerals and land make up the natural wealth of Indian Peoples, these same valuable resources represent an opportunity for economic interests to

profit from their exploitation.

The fact that Indians have not used their capacity to control tremendous quantities of resources has not escaped the notice of non-Indian politicians and entrepreneurs. By not asserting control in ways understood by the non-Indians, our trees, our water, fish and land have been taken from us. It is no accident that politicians have sought to weaken Indian control and diminish the Indian resource base. The assertion of Indian control threatens to undermine the relationships that serve non-Indian interests.

If our Peoples are to survive in the long term, alternative means must be found for resolving conflict besides seeking relief through prolonged and heated litigation that enriches attorneys while polarizing the public. The most promising way we now have to protect our interests is to strengthen our governments. We must encourage our governments to actively assert our rights in the non-Indian world. Our Peoples must work closely together to increase our control over our resources and solidify tribal opinion.

Our governments have failed in the past to effectively advocate Indian positions and organize efforts to marshal support in the broader political arena. Within the broader system of economics and government that tries to determine the use of our resources, Indian Peoples have usually found themselves on the outside looking in. They have remained on the defensive trying to hold on to what they have left by fending off the aggressive actions initiated by various governmental and economic interests.

This pattern has been readily apparent in the fishing controversy which has raged in the United States, for the past several decades. So many different parties are involved in making decisions which affect the salmon that many tribes have expended their limited resources in confusion and frustration. It has often been easy to think that we have been the helpless victims of some grand, anti-Indian conspiracy. But, the fact of the matter is that we have been engaged in a war for survival against an abstraction -- the economic and political forces at work within society. There is no well-defined enemy we can seek to defeat in battle.

How, then, can we fight? In our struggle for survival, there will be no hard and fast rules we can call upon to universally protect our interests. To preserve our rights to control our resources, we must use our sophistication to recognize that we have the capability to exercise an important degree of influence over our own destiny if we can begin to function as committed peoples. We can develop the power to create public policy that will favor our interests with the support of our people and the establishment of strong external alliances.

If, as Peoples, we fail to exert our authorities and promote Indian Government influence in the broader political system, our interests will surely fall by the wayside. Tribes cannot afford to allow decisions to be made by political processes which function in the vacuum left by their lack of active participation and

influence.

Our Peoples will certainly remain in an extremely vulnerable position so long as we permit other governments to preempt decisions which should properly be ours to make. To preserve our rights to self-government, Indian Peoples must make decisions and take initiatives. Only we can promote the principles and policies which preserve our resources, values and way of life. Our Peoples have no acceptable alternative but to actively and aggressively promote our own social, economic and political interests within the political system that surrounds us.

It will not be a simple task to have a strong government. If our governments attempt to assert their powers without sufficient strength, careful planning and understanding of the risks, we will end up losing our struggle for self-government, our resources, and our way of life. Since we have not fully exercised our rights in the past, each assertion of Indian authority will surely be met with opposition. Our aggressive actions will threaten established economic interests, upsetting political processes which have long governed the general society. We will infringe upon the jurisdictional territory claimed by other governmental entities. As Band and Tribal leaders realize that they must pursue issues which are more remote and complex than providing for the immediate needs of their communities (for improved housing, education, health or social programs), we must also be prepared to contend with a lack of understanding among our Peoples about the expanded role that Indian Governments must play to preserve our place as Peoples. Unless our Peoples support the actions of Indian Governments, our governments will not long survive the threats which emerge daily from smoke-filled board rooms of corporations, the living rooms of our neighbors, the halls of Parliament or the executive offices of government, and the non-Indian Courts. But, despite the potential problems ahead, we must still assert our authority to protect our rights, otherwise our decisions will be made for us by others.

How can we best protect ourselves against making fatal mistakes as we improve the function of our governments? We can begin by recognizing that we are not alone. We can learn from each other; we can communicate with each other; we can support one another. We can develop common strategies to further common interests. Since the potential threats to our Peoples are so numerous and diverse, no single tribe will be able to survive without the strength of others. As the salmon travel in schools for protection and companionship, so can our Peoples undertake a common journey against strong political currents to preserve the rights of the generations yet unborn. As tributary streams join together to form a mighty river, so can the efforts of our Peoples blend together to create a formidable force to preserve the interests of all our Peoples.

Our heritage teaches that the salmon have the power to renew life and to teach us many things. We may indeed find a way to strengthen our Peoples by learning how to function as governments through examining the role we can play in managing the salmon resource.



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