

A Mighty Little Fish of Many Names Heralds Spring

by Shannon Donahue

Crisp morning sunlight

brings the first wave of spring to Southeast Alaska after quiet, introspective, winter. Meltwater replenishes creeks, willow buds swell on branches. Lutak Inlet's surface is still, smooth like polished emerald. A closer look reveals areas of inky darkness, where thousands of small fish school. With a sudden shift, they catch the sunlight. A quicksilver flash illuminates the inlet, fish surface, water boiling with movement. The gargantuan mouth of a humpback whale opens wide skyward, scooping hundreds of slender, oily fish. The eulachon have arrived, bringing the first pulse of spring life to Lynn Canal.

The eulachon (*Thaleichthys pacificus*) is a small, mighty smelt with many names. In Lingít, they are saak. The Tsimshian people use the Sm'álgayax word, 'wáh. Eulachon, hooligan, and oolichan derive from the Chinookan language family. Candlefish refers to their oily richness — with a 20% oil content, dried eulachon can actually be lit like a candle.

"We call them salvation fish because of the time of year they return when food stores are getting low," Chilkoot Tribal member Ted Hart says. "We call hooligan oil liquid gold. One spoonful has enough nutrients for an elder for an entire day. It's vital to have them return."

Eulachon have sustained Indigenous economies from California to the Bering Sea for countless generations. Rendered eulachon oil has a rich history at the heart of the coastal economy, a valuable trade commodity among Indigenous peoples. Today, however, the integrated

market economy fails to value this vital fish, despite all it sustains ecologically and culturally.

While local people celebrate the eulachon harvest each spring, the absence of a commercial fishery means there's little incentive — or funding — for research and monitoring. Populations in the Lower 48 and British Columbia have declined or gone extinct due to rampant development, loss of spawning habitat, overfishing, and changes in the ocean environment. An air of mystery surrounds these anadromous fish — where do they go after they leave Southeast Alaska? Some survive to spawn again. If conditions in their natal stream aren't just right when they return, sometimes they'll head to other streams. How do they "decide" where to spawn?

After the southern population declined, Chilkoot Indian Association took the initiative to begin a research and monitoring program. Together with Takshanuk Watershed Council, Skagway Traditional Council, and Oregon State University, a long-term research program has been established for Lynn Canal. Ketchikan Indian Community will also begin monitoring the Unuk run this spring. These data will help inform conservation measures to ensure the eulachon's survival into the future.



What we do know is that eulachon need clean rivers and streams to spawn, and healthy oceans to mature. Local knowledge recalls years when the fish didn't come,

after the construction of the

Haines Highway, and again after airport construction on the Chilkat River. Some question whether piledriving on Lutak Inlet caused the Chilkoot run to spawn elsewhere in 2015. Hart tells me there may have been other factors at play that year, like river level, but, "I can imagine how loud that would be for them underwater, definitely not very inviting for them. Salmon have that huge will and desire, and they must go spawn where they're born. The eulachon, saak, aren't necessarily like that. They're pretty sensitive."

That highlights the need for region-wide habitat conservation efforts, to ensure they have suitable places to spawn.

SEACC's work to conserve the Tongass National Forest and waters of Southeast Alaska helps to ensure the survival of eulachon populations for future generations. To support, visit seacc.org/protect-chilkat and seacc.org/raca.

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