Fraser River Salmon Fishery

- Once vital to the economy, culture and identity of BC First Nations
  - The Stalo (Salish) called themselves “the river people”.
- The Fraser once offered the best salmon fishery in the world
- Damaged and disrupted by outsiders
- Matthew Evenden’s 2004 paper in JHG
Northwestern Europe

- Once a Hunter-Gatherer economy
- Plough agriculture arrives 4700 YBP
- Industrial revolution arrives 200 YBP
- Transition takes 4500 years+
Southwestern BC

- 1820s: Dominant Economy was Hunting & Gathering
- 1880s: Dominant Economy was Industrial
- Transition took 60 years or less
Hunting & Gathering to Industrial

- In NW Europe took 150 generations
- In SW BC took 2 generations
Hell’s Gate

• Fraser River the most productive salmon fishery in the world
  – Vital to the aboriginal economy, food supply, traditions

• Hell’s Gate a canyon on the Fraser vital to salmon spawning runs
  – Fishery severely damaged by landslides 1912-1914
Salmon Fishery

- Individual families own the eddies where the fish are caught
- Salmon wind-dried on racks
**Temxéytl’ • Winter**
- Spirit dance gatherings and other activities related to spirit power take place throughout territory
- Height of winter ceremonies
- Sturgeon fishing

**Temhilálxw • Autumn**
- Berry picking continues
- Movement to cranberry and swamp potato sites
- Main time for hunting (trips last two to three weeks)
- Waterfowl hunted
- Hazelnuts and wild crabapples gathered
- Travel for main potlatch ceremonies

**Temqw’iles • Spring**
- Spring salmon arrive; First Salmon ceremonies
- Travel to eulachon fishing camps
- Gathering of green shoots, nettles, bulbs

**Temkw’ó:kw’es • Summer**
- Low-elevation berry picking
- Main populations of salmon arrive
- Large numbers of people relocate to dry-rack fishery in Fraser Canyon
- Movement to high-elevation berry patches
- Hunting begins
- Some potlatch ceremonies
Sockeye Salmon

- Major spawning runs from sea to inland streams every 4 years
- 1913 should have been a big sockeye run
- After landslides
  - 1917 run was 20% of 1913
  - 1921 run was 1/30th of 1913
- The fishery has yet to recover
Fig. 7. Fraser River Sockeye catches on the ‘Big Year’ cycle, 1901–1933. See note 78, for actual figures and sources.
Commercial vs. Aboriginal Catch of Fraser River Sockeye

In the twentieth century, the Aboriginal catch and the size of the salmon run have both dropped off dramatically. Modern-day commercial fisheries harvest most of the total runs.
Hell’s Gate

- Some of the best aboriginal fishing spots on the Fraser
- Tradition of wind-drying of salmon on racks
  - aided by the loss of salmon body fat
Fat as a Percentage of Body Mass in Migrating Sockeye Salmon

- **Spawning Grounds**
  - Male: 3.9%
  - Female: 4.0%

- **Soda Creek**
  - Male: 8.4%
  - Female: 8.6%

- **11.2%**
  - Male: 11.2%
  - Female: 12.3%

- **13.8%**
  - Male: 13.8%
  - Female: 13.4%

- **14.6%**
  - Male: 14.6%
  - Female: 15.2%

**Kilometres**

0 30

**Miles**

0 30
Fraser Canyon Transformed

- Canyon used as a road route in 1858 Cariboo Gold Rush
- Used as a rail route by CPR in 1880s
- CNR construction in 1910s causes landslides which permanently damage the fishery
Cariboo Rd 1860s
CPR construction, Fraser canyon 1880s
Yale BC 1868
Fraser Salmon Fishery

- Small-scale Native fishing being overwhelmed by the scale of non-native fishery
- US salmon fishing gets 60% of the catch
- Non-native fishing in Fraser delta gets most of the rest
- But landslides at Hell’s Gate threaten everyone
1905 salmon fleet
• Steveston BC 1930s
After the Landslides

- BC and Feds try to stop Natives from their traditional fishing activities
  - May harm the fishery
- Little move to curb non-native fishery
  - Which aboriginal people notice, and point out.
- Government perception that the resources are wasted on the Indians?
Discussion

• First Peoples’ negotiating position seems sensible, honest.
  – Government officials, business interests seem short sighted, partisan
  – Aboriginal knowledge of the land is effective

• Critical importance of access to land and resources for First Peoples