

# Introduction to the Special Section on Marine Cultivation among Indigenous Peoples of the Northwest Coast

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This special section features recent ethnoecological studies of key fish and shellfish species used by tribes and First Nations of the Northwest Coast of North America. The papers present ethnographic studies of the region's largely overlooked indigenous mariculture practices, and seek to reframe them as a form of *cultivation* rather than simple “conservation” or “resource management.” The introductory essay by Thornton, Deur, and Kitka outlines major debates concerning indigenous conservation. Using salmon as a prototypical case, the authors review a wide range of material, social, and spiritual techniques involved in their cultivation, including forms of habitat enhancement and translocation not previously documented. With this example, this essay outlines why a cultivation perspective is both more appropriate in the case of salmon and other marine species, and is less prone to narrow ethnocentric interpretations in the case of Northwest Coast peoples. The authors define cultivation as *any conscious effort to create specific conditions for advantageous engagement or relations with another being*; as such, cultivation includes a range of processes that often enhance resource output, even if their proximate goals may accentuate comparatively immaterial objectives such as demonstrating interspecific respect between human communities and communities of prey species. On the Northwest Coast, marine “beings” cultivated in this manner are typically high value fish and invertebrates, such as salmon,

halibut, herring, eulachon, and various clams and other shellfish. The mechanisms and motivations for cultivation are similar to those traditionally applied to other types of resources, such as staple plant foods—a theme documented along this coast in recent related literatures.

This essay is followed by two case studies on indigenous cultivation of less emphasized species: herring (Thornton) among the Tlingit and Haida and shellfish (Deur *et al.*) among the Kwakwaka'wakw. As with salmon, indigenous cultivation of herring and shellfish involved a wide range of practical knowledge and techniques that helped not only to increase their productivity and abundance but also to make these species more accessible, resilient, and predictable. In both cases, the ethnographic investigations, combined with information from the archaeological record, suggest that these techniques are of significant antiquity, extending back well before the historical era. They also suggest strong parallels to salmon and other keystone resources in their emphasis not merely on “conservative” motives relating to enhancing and sustaining resource output, but on a broader range of cultivation principles and modalities. Collectively the papers argue that humans, as cultivators of keystone species, may have become keystone species themselves in terms of their contribution to ecosystem functioning and stability. The success of indigenous cultivation complexes in maintaining and enhancing salmon, herring, and shellfish populations over the *longue durée* further point to their relevance and potential applications to contemporary management questions. These cases provide insights for fisheries and ecosystem services management and restoration efforts that typically lack a strong historical ecological and ethno-stewardship perspective. They also provide insights for contemporary indigenous communities seeking to maintain not only the integrity of dietary staples and cultural keystone species, but also the vitality of foundational cultural practices associated with their sustainment.

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