

Dear editor:

I was pleased to learn that the Sitka Assembly will consider a resolution to support the Sitka Tribe of Alaska's effort to protect the subsistence herring egg harvest. The passing of this resolution by the city will represent an act of alliance with the Sitka Tribe of Alaska, a government that is responsible for the "health, safety and culture" of more than 4,400 citizens. STA has been working to ensure that tribal citizens have access to subsistence herring eggs for decades, and their concern is justifiable: in 5 of the last 7 years the subsistence herring egg needs have not been met. The resolution that's before the Assembly tonight is in alignment with the priority and rights to subsistence expressed both in the Alaska Constitution and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007).

I look to the Sitka Tribe of Alaska for leadership on the conservation of herring, an issue that affects the subsistence needs of tribal citizens and the health of the marine ecosystems that our entire region depends on. I recently read Tom Thornton's Herring Synthesis, an incredibly well-researched report on Southeast Alaska's herring stocks. Included in the report are testimonies given in 1993 by neighbors from my home village on Prince of Wales Island. They speak of herring spawning on tideflats and in the mouths of creeks near Point Baker, and of schools of herring so dense that in just a few minutes buckets could be filled with enough bait for the entire troll season. In the 70s, it all changed, with locals left to blame a transient seine fishery. My much loved neighbor Darlene Larson, longtime postmistress and commercial fisherman, shared her herring story for Thornton's study: *"When I was a little girl in Point Baker huge, abundant fields of herring were taken as a fact of life. Secure and accepting, we assumed by their sheer numbers and importance that they would always be around, but, alas, the infinite became finite in less than half a lifetime. So hard to describe now black bodies of biomass as far as the eye could see filled the green sunlit waters around us. We are left with silent waters and a rich interactive eco-system wiped out."*

I was a toddler when Darlene wrote these words - without them and the other testimonies from Point Baker ol'timers - I wouldn't even know about the once abundant herring spawn in my home village. For me, this is a reminder of how quickly ecosystems can change, and that without the observations of previous generations we can easily forget former abundance.

Within ADF&Gs models the Sitka Sound herring stock appears healthy, but Traditional Ecological Knowledge tells us that it's depleted and currently being managed under a shifted baseline. In an era of global warming and ocean acidification, when the sharp decline of king salmon is largely attributed to marine survival, we must accept that the future of marine ecosystems is uncertain. One of the most obvious ways to bulwark the resilience of these systems is to be highly precautionary in our management of forage fish stocks. As a commercial fisherman I'm concerned not just for herring, but for all the species that depend on them.

I'm thankful that the Sitka Tribe of Alaska has remained vigilant on this issue. It would be commendable for the Assembly to vote tonight in support of STA's efforts to safeguard the subsistence needs of its tribal citizens. I believe that the STA's careful stewardship will ultimately benefit all of us who depend on healthy marine ecosystems. I hope that those who feel the same will attend the assembly meeting tonight to voice their support of this resolution.

Elsa Sebastian, Sitka