

“Salmon on the Rough Edge of Canada and Beyond”



Salmon
People

This series of [10-short stories](#) has been written to honour the salmon, the beautiful rivers that they exist in and some of these memorable people who have worked tirelessly over the past decades on the task of conserving and restoring these iconic species.



The author, Matt Foy, as a biologist with the Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO), Salmonid Enhancement Program(SEP) for 35 years (now retired), has tried to capture small glimpses into their world and the world of salmon.

Guardians of the Night

By Matt Foy

If you are a salmon angler on the BC West Coast, when someone mentions catching a “Tyee”, it gets your attention. Chinook salmon have the largest average weight of all the species of salmon in BC so are much sought after by anglers looking for a trophy. A “Tyee” is a Chinook salmon of over 30 pounds, which is an uncommon catch for any angler.

In only a few places in the world, salmon over 60 pounds and even over 80 pounds can be caught. One of these places is Rivers Inlet, just north of Vancouver Island, in the central coast of BC. This coastal fjord penetrates 40 km deep into the Coast Mountains. The Waanukv (Wannock) River flows a few short km’s out of the 50-km long Owikeno Lake into the ocean at the head of the inlet.

Perhaps the largest bodied Chinook in BC, possibly the world, return to spawn in the Waanukv River in the late fall. Fish of 80 pounds or over are not unheard of with an 80-pounder caught in the Rivers Inlet as recently as 2008. It was recorded that a commercial troller caught a 109-pound Chinook salmon just off Egg Island in 1937. Egg Island lies just to the south of the entrance to Rivers Inlet, and this salmon was likely bound for the spawning grounds of the Waanukv River.

By the 1980’s there were concerns about declining returns of Chinook salmon to River’s Inlet. Starting in 1983, DFO Salmonid Enhancement Program (SEP) in partnership with the Wuikinuxv Nation began an enhancement program for this important population of Chinook salmon. This allowed for the added benefit of being able to distinctly mark and tag the hatchery produced juveniles. Marine recovery of coded-wire tagged hatchery

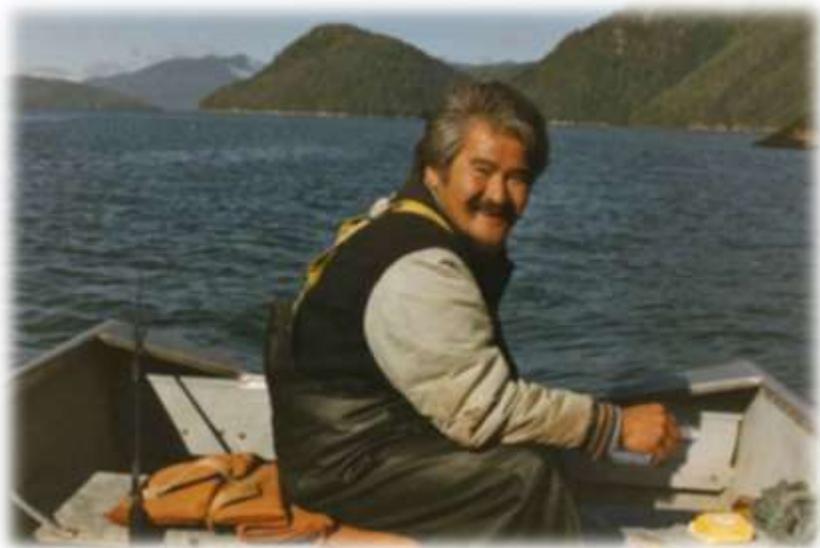
produced fish provided critical fishery management information about Waanukv River Chinook salmon harvest in Canada and US fisheries. This information was critical for the long term sustainable management of this unique Chinook population.

Members of the Wuikinuxv (Oweekeno) community played important roles in making this program a success. Without dedicated local people who had intimate knowledge of the Waanukv River and its salmon populations, the story might have been quite different.

The following recollections provide a small glimpse into the early part of what is known today as the Wuikinuxv Salmon Enhancement program. This is a tribute to a person that left life- long impressions on all those who worked with him on this task.

Percy

Percy had already been experimenting for a couple of seasons on enhancement techniques suitable for use in this remote location. He had been developing his innovative lake incubation system. Newly fertilized salmon eggs were placed into thin trays, which were then suspended under a float house, into the gentle flow at the outlet of Owikeno Lake.



Percy Walkus - Rivers Inlet heading home.

The continuous flow of well filtered, oxygenated, water had resulted in good survival of the incubating salmon eggs, during his tests. No pumps, no pipes, no electricity, just driven by the rain that Owikeno received in abundance. This was Percy's genius.

As a respected member of the Wuikinuxv community, Percy was asked to work with the DFO on getting the Chinook salmon enhancement up and going in the early 1980's. So, a partnership was struck. The Wuikinuxv Salmon Enhancement was now a critical player in conserving and enhancing this unique race of salmon.

I met Percy Walkus for the first time after flying into the community to participate in a Chinook egg take on the Waanukv River. I was the SEP support biologist assigned to this new project and this was my first trip to meet the crew. Percy was not a big man, but he had a quiet presence that demanded your attention.

Charlie



Charlie was Percy's, second in command. Charlie was Percy's polar opposite in many ways and his identical twin in one very important way. Charlie was a really big man, while Percy was not. Percy was short, compact and moved like a gymnast. When Charlie moved you sort of stepped aside and let him pass. Percy would ride a boat like a jockey on a thoroughbred horse.

Charlie Johnson with "Big" Waanukv River hatchery Chinook salmon

When Charlie settled into the back seat of the small aluminum river boats, the stern would sink down almost to the rear gunwale and the bow would rise out of the water like a spy hopping Orca whale.

Charlie Johnson was broad shouldered, big hearted and with a powerful body. He could smile while hoisting a 65 lb. Chinook. He made it look easy. When Charlie laughed, which he did often, it would rise up from deep inside and erupt with a rich throaty chuckle, as smooth as butter.

Where he and Percy were like twins, was in their passionate commitment to the river and the project to conserve the Waanukv River Chinook salmon. Where Percy was the natural born leader, Charlie was that loyal lieutenant with the personal commitment to keep the enterprise powering ahead.

An Honest Day's Work

In anticipation of my visit, Chinook salmon had already been netted over a number of days from the "Spring Hole" in the river. Percy knew the tail out of this pool was the main spawning area for Chinook. This pool takes its name from the Chinook salmon that spawns here. Spring salmon is one of the traditional English words used for Chinook salmon in BC. In certain rivers such as the Fraser River, Chinook salmon enter the lower river as early as March bound for upriver spawning grounds.



Rivers Inlet looking up the Waanukv River toward Owikeno Lake (Oweekeno Community on left)

The Waanukv River is a wide, powerful stream draining a large coastal watershed. For the size of the river it has very limited spawning grounds for salmon. Because it comes out of a large lake, there is limited replenishment of spawning gravels washed downstream in winter floods.

Gravel in the river is very scarce and large in size. It may be for this reason the Chinook of this river are so large bodied. It takes a very large female salmon indeed, to dig a large hole, and make her redd, in gravel that is big as your head. Suitable spawning gravel only persists in a few special locations in the river. The "Spring Hole" was one such place.

The egg take day started with a short boat ride from the village. I had come into the village the previous day with Bob Brown DFO senior technician. Our plan was to work with the crew the next day to ascertain how adult capture and holding and egg takes were carried out in order to more fully understand the program and provide helpful advice if possible. We met up that morning at the village dock on the river. Two small open aluminum boats were going to transport our party of six, up and across the river and over to the far bank. Both were definitely working boats and well loved, particularly the one I was about to step into.

Sometime in its past hard life it had cracked the gunwale along one side. There was an ominous six-inch split that seemed to be indicating a desire of making an acquaintance with the keel down at the bottom of the boat. As was the case in most remote locations

on the BC Central Coast, there was no Canadian Tire or any such hardware stores, to help sort out these types of problems.

Simple ingenuity, with the materials at hand, was used to make the repair. A piece of wooden 2x4 had been used to bridge the split in the gunwale. The aluminum gunwale had been drilled and the 2x4 had been attached with some heavy wire. I remember thinking at the time that I hoped we did not hit any big waves as the boat might fold up like an accordion.

We headed off and arrived safely at the far shore and pulled the boats up on the beach just beside the net pens. The salmon captured over the previous days, were being held in these pens as they ripened in preparation for spawning. A temporary field egg take station was first set up on the bank, before the day's main work. Percy kept everyone organized with small gestures or a quiet word. It was a typical late October day at Wuikinuxv. The clouds swirled among the tree tops with a continuous heavy rain. Everyone was dressed in full body rain gear.

The male and female salmon were being held in separate net pens by the river bank, in preparation for the egg take. The first step in the egg take process was to dip net female salmon out of the pen and run your hand down their belly. If eggs came out of their vent, they were ready to spawn. All morning Percy sorted through the female salmon. The ones that were ready were quickly killed and sent up the bank.

“Charlie’s coming and he’s got a big one” I heard Bob yell. Looking down toward the river I saw Charlie slowly coming up the gangplank from the river net pens. Leaning forward in his black rubber raincoat, slung over his back was the biggest salmon I had ever seen at an egg take. This black and mahogany coloured Tye looked to be close to 75 pounds. This matriarch of the Waanukv gave six liters of eggs and reminded me I was at no ordinary river and these were no ordinary Chinook.

After all the ripe females had been hung on a rack and prepared for spawning, it was time to take the eggs. By the end of the morning all the eggs had been collected and placed in large buckets with lids.

After a standing lunch break, it was back at it. Sitting around in the rain, you got too cold, so everyone just stuffed something into their mouth and then kept going. It was now time to collect the male salmon milt (sperm). Again, all the male salmon were netted and checked to see which of



them were ready and were expressing milt. If they were ready they were killed quickly for use in the egg take.



Waanukv River Chinook salmon ready for egg-take

Percy and the crew would bring each male salmon up from the net pens after they were killed. A loop of rope was cinched around the tail of each salmon. The heavy load was then slung over the back and walked up the narrow gang plank that led from the net pen in the river up to the egg take station on the river bank.

Percy put his head down and powered up the plank with a salmon in tow, all afternoon. Some of the big males were so long they hung down to the ground behind him. Some of them would give a final heroic flap as he brought them up the gangplank. A forty-pound salmon could shake Percy like a leaf, but it always seemed to bring a big smile to his face and a cheer from the crew when he kept his balance on that precarious path.

The day was going fast, as the milt was collected from the last male salmon. The milt from each male had been carefully placed into individual plastic bags and sealed. These bags were then placed into a small cooler to keep them protected from the light and the rain. At the end of this process, when all the eggs and milt had been collected, it was time to run up the river to the lake incubation shack, at the outlet of Owikeno Lake.

As we headed upstream, it became apparent we had to navigate a short but unsettling set of rapids. There were big standing waves stretching almost from bank to bank. Percy led the small flotilla to the far, village side, of the river. We threaded our way

upstream somewhere between the large boulders on our left and the cresting waves on our right. There was not much room to make a mistake. It was an exhilarating ride in that big, powerful river which was running in full force from the fall rains.

And then there was that sound I could not seem to ignore, creak-creak-creak-creak-creak-crack. That “2x4” was now tapping on my knee like it wanted to tell me something. One did feel very, very small, in those little tin boats. Up ahead, Percy’s boat climbed over the last swell at the top of the rapids, with our boat in hot pursuit.

Once past the rapids, time slowed down, I took a breath, and it was smooth sailing up to the salmon egg incubation float house up at the lake outlet. Out of the darkening afternoon light, **tight formations of fast flying merganser ducks came out of nowhere and veered around us**. Within a span of a heartbeat they appeared and then disappeared, as they flew past just above the surface of the river but just below the veil of mist that lay above our heads, heading to places unknown.

As we motored up to the dock on that little floating shack it became clear it was anchored just off a high moss-covered cliff. This granite mass leaned out toward the little building and now presented a shattered cascade of falling water brought by the all-day storm, threatening to wash that little structure away. Looking up the grey and jade green cliff, it soon faded into vague dark impressions of trees clinging to the mountain face which itself rose up into the sky before being consumed by the low hanging clouds... it was so wild and remote and beautiful. Percy had chosen well.

As we all disembarked from the boats and gathered our precious cargo, a gas Coleman lantern, pulled out from somewhere inside the shack, was lighted to help us see in the dark windowless interior. The crew worked with quiet purpose to fertilize the eggs. The eggs were then carefully placed into Percy’s innovative fish egg trays. After loading the trays, they were gently lowered into the waiting arms of the Waanukv River, which flowed under our feet, as she left the Owikeno Lake.

We were so consumed by this task to get the eggs safely tucked in, we all lost track of time. Finally, mission accomplished, everything had gone smoothly and all the eggs had been safely placed into the trays and submerged in the river.

A great crew, on an ugly day and nothing had gone amiss, I was impressed. I stepped outside to get some fresh air as the crew did their final cleanup before heading home.

My Precious



Black, so black it was disorienting. All I could think of is that comment about being in a dark closet. I had never experienced such an absence of light. No lights, no sky, no feet, no river. Thinking about how we were all going to get home, I had that sinking feeling, literally.

I had felt uncomfortable all day, with the life jacket situation. I had not brought one with me on the Wuikinuxv trip, and in the excitement that morning, had forgot to check if there was an extra life jacket in the boat. There wasn't, not good.

I wandered back into the light and sort of stood in the shack as the crew finished up. I took a look Bob's way but he had not yet headed back outside, so he was not aware of the "Black Hole of Owikeno" situation we now found ourselves in. I didn't want to spoil his surprise.

I had some uncomfortable thoughts floating about in my head. Not coming to any conclusions, I just stood there as the Bob and the crew filed outside, with Percy bringing up the rear. One of the guys quickly came back in and dug around and pulled out another Coleman lantern and lit it. He then grabbed the previously lighted lantern and went to leave the room. **"Time to go"** he said.

I peered out through the door as everyone was loading up the boat to head down river. I was considering the now real fact we were about to go down a deep, wide, bloody cold river, in the pitch black, with some monster waves that lay in wait, just downstream. My moment of truth had arrived, along with the voices.

My logical brain started to talk to me. "If we sink, you will sink, do something". What? "Okay, you are wearing rubber waders. If you could keep some air in them, if we sink, you will float, sort of." "Take off your belt quick!" said my logical brain. "His pants will fall down" said my emotional brain. "Who the hell cares" said the other.

I quickly took off my belt from my pants and tightly cinched it around the outside of my waders. The belt was high up near my armpits making my waders somewhat watertight below. "Good", I heard from somewhere.

After doing this I took one last look around the darkened shack. In that split second, I caught a glimpse of something glistening in the light coming back through the door from the lanterns outside. **Like Gollum's, One Ring, in J.R.R. Tolkien's, Lord of the Rings, I had found my "Precious".**

There was the small cooler used to transport the male salmon milt today. Without a further thought, I scooped it up. I locked the lid tight and gave it a hug and headed back out outside to meet my fate.

We all loaded up in silence. I was not sure if this was a good sign. Percy directed one of the crew in each boat to lean forward and hold the gas lanterns out in front of the bow of the boat, so the operator of the motor at the back would not be blinded. Percy's boat led the way and we followed a few meters behind. Except for the lights, it was as black as dirt around our little glowing security bubble.

Percy motored out across the river and brought the motor to a slow idle. We floated down with the current for a time that seemed like hours. It was probably five minutes. Nothing was said. Percy stood at the back of the first boat hanging on to the outboard motor handle, looking ahead.

He was listening. We were all listening. We could hear them coming. Rain, dark, and the sound of a slowly rising purr up ahead, seemed so surreal. We were being pulled by the current closer to the crest of the rapids and those boat eating waves.

Were we close to the bank and those boulders? I could not tell. Were we heading straight for those large breaking waves in the mid-channel? I could not tell. All I remember is sitting very still in the boat. I listened to the now roaring sound filling my head and clutched my salvation flotation device, the cooler.

When we broke over the first swell of the rapid, time seemed to slow down. We speeded up and dropped down into the trough behind. As we started to rise up, the second swell broke over the bow of our boat and immediately extinguished our lantern.

A strange calmness settled on me at this point as I now focused on Percy's light up ahead. The third swell was the biggest yet and Percy's light was no more. I was back in that closet. **As we rode up, up on the face of the wave, in the absolute dark, I hugged my "Precious" and got ready to swim.**

The night was young and I was just happy to be alive.

After coming around the bend in the river, I had this overwhelming sense of euphoria. I could see the twinkling lights of the village coming into view. We had not sunk. What had been one of the most memorable days of my life was soon to become even more special. Percy had invited us to dinner.

I had been scheduled to meet up that evening with two member of the SEP Wuikinuxv project team who had planned to fly in that afternoon while I had been up the river with the crew. Colin Masson, the SEP Project Coordinator and Doug Lofthouse, the SEP

project advisor, were both coming in to go over the years work plan with Percy and myself.

Colin had not made it on to the flight. He had been called away at the last minute, which was a shame as he hoped to make it in for this meeting while we were all together in one spot. Wuikinuxv was not an easy place to have a planning meeting so you took advantage of whatever opportunities that came along. Colin knew it was his loss as he and Percy could go on for hours into the night with stimulating discussions covering a wide range of topics.

Percy was this force of nature with a deep well of creative ideas that never seemed to run dry. Colin was always one of those guys that liked to think big and come up with new solutions to old problems. Percy was normally pretty quiet but when he and Colin got together, it was always a pleasure to see these two guys debating some interesting idea.

Back and forth, back and forth these skilled raconteurs would take their ideas and soar high up into the sky trying to push each other to a new place. The rest of us earth bound mortals just watched and enjoyed the show. Colin and Percy were truly birds of a feather that simply enjoyed each other's company while they flew above the clouds.

Doug had made the trip and had flown into Rivers Inlet that after noon on the infamous Grumman Goose "Flying Boat" aircraft. Sitting in the front seat, beside the pilot, he had the pleasure of landing at the mouth of the Waanukv River, in a gray swirl, with clouds to the deck and rain beating on the windshield. This experience was not for the faint of heart.

Landing at high speed on the water, in the "Goose", felt like being in an aluminum car top boat on steroids. Doug got to watch as the pilot veered left and right past logs and other junk that blurred past the aircraft as it touched down. As the aircraft first touched the water it would still be going around 150 km an hour. The debris field, pushed out into the inlet from the rain-swollen Waanukv River, definitely captured your attention.

He looked a little frazzled when he met us in early evening, which we could definitely relate to. We all needed something to settle our stomachs. Off we went to Percy's house.

Later in Percy's house, he had fired up the wood stove and began preparing the food for his guests. **He was going to make us what he called his "Mulligan"**. It was composed of big chunks of newly caught salmon, mixed in with quartered onions and potatoes with some other magic ingredients. Soon the stew was bubbling on the stove and the small room was full of damp crew and his guests from away. The talk drifted to the egg take events, as if the day had been no different than any other typical day on the river.

As Percy served the stew, he explained that this was the best remedy he knew for the chills that can come after working all day during a typical Wuikinuxv fall blow. When the last of the stew had been licked from the pot, everyone was warm as a bug in a rug in

the now nuclear hot room. Our host, chef and leader down the river rapids, announced he had kept the best surprise for last.

Percy got up from his chair, with a misty halo around his head. This had something to do with his now steaming long grey Stanfield wool undershirt, which was his standard uniform on these rainy work days.

He leaned over to reach back behind the wood stove and emerged with his familiar wide grin and a large battered pickle jar. With a rusty white lid, that evidently had been a veteran of many a season, he wanted to show us something special. Blinded by the naked light bulb above his head, it was somewhat unclear, what was contained in the jar. It looked to be a form of cheese or something like that.

When he spun open the lid a distinct aroma began permeating the room. The guys from the fish crew knew this was going to be a very special night indeed. The “stink eggs” were coming out.

Having heard of them but never actually having the pleasure, I knew stink eggs, were raw salmon eggs placed in a jar, kept in a warm spot, to percolate for a time. This created what would be classed as a “regional delicacy”. **The night was young and I was just happy to be alive.**

“There’s no gravel!”

The next morning, I think Percy sensed the night ride had left a mark on my psyche. He read that right. Cheerful as always, he asked if I would like to go with him up the river in the boat while the rest of the crew went over their fish culture procedures with Doug and Bob. We would be in day light this time and he would show me the river he loved and knew so well.



On the way upstream the first place we stopped was at a shallow area along the bank just above the village but below the rapids. This 100-meter-long stretch of river bed was paved with moderate sized boulders. The smaller boulders were around the size of a large pumpkin, while the bigger ones, could have won the big pumpkin prize at the fall fair. Each of the boulders had a luxuriant head of green hair. This was river moss, indicating they had not moved in a very, very, long time.

Percy pointed to this area and said **“This is where the chum salmon spawn.”**

I did not know what to say. I did not know Percy very well at the time and did not want to offend him. "Percy, they might be spawning close to here, but not exactly here. There's no gravel to lay their eggs in."

"No, they spawn, here." he said and then he just laughed and we carried on upstream.

As I got to know Percy better over the following months, I came to understand that Percy said only what he knew. What he knew about the Waanukv River, you'd be wise to listen to. I came back to the boulder beach next spring and looked-for evidence of these mythical chum salmon that could move boulders.

The river was much lower in the spring than when I had been there with Percy in the fall. I could see most of the boulders were now sticking out of the water but all were still wet at their base. On closer inspection I could see small seeps of groundwater all along the river bank. Little boils of sand erupted underwater between the boulders everywhere that I looked. This whole area was rich in upwelling groundwater, presumably coming from a mountain side aquifer, just uphill from the beach.

Chum salmon love to spawn in upwelling groundwater; it's what they do from the Heilongjiang River in China to the Columbia River in the USA and everywhere in between. Picking one of the smaller boulders, I leaned over and rolled it off to the side a little bit. Sure enough, under the boulder were clouds of newly hatched chum salmon alevins swimming about frantically to get out of the light. I rolled the boulder back into its little depression.

The way I figure, the chum salmon just float over the boulders in this little bay during the high water of fall. They pair up and drop their eggs and sperm onto the tops of the boulders. The river current washes their newly fertilized eggs down and underneath those river rocks.

I'd read about this. I had never seen it myself; it is a rare occurrence in nature. This was the first gift Percy gave me that day, which I have never forgotten.

The ride up the river carried on past the unforgettable rapids of the night before. He pointed out small flowing channels among the boulders along the bank. **"The people created these narrow passages in the old times. They moved the large rocks, so as to have a clear passage for their canoes"** he said. These ancient "canoe drags" provided an easy path past the rapids to their village of Kitit, which lay just upstream. This was the second gift Percy gave me that day, which I have never forgotten.

We approached the head of the river just below where it exited the lake on its journey to the inlet. There was a shallow bay, off to the left. In this bay there was a small brush covered island. Percy pointed at the island and indicated this was the site of the ancient village known as Kitit. He said in its day it would have been covered in Longhouses from one end to the other.

Percy then pointed down in the water, just off to the side of the boat. “Those guarded the village at night. They were placed there to protect the village while people slept.” What he had shown to me were boulders placed in certain patterns, just underwater, around the shallow flats on the downstream side of the island.

Percy said “In the times before, other people would sometimes come to raid the village in their large ocean-going canoes. If they came up the river during the day, they could be seen and the village would have time to prepare. If they came during the night, they might come up the river unseen.”

“If they successfully passed above the rapids in their ocean canoes, in their final rush to the village, they could not see these boulders which waited for them just below the surface of the water. They would ground their canoes on them which gave the people some time to prepare.” This was the last gift Percy gave me that day, which I have never forgotten.

The Power of Percy

Looking back all those years ago I realize the honour I was given to know Percy and Charlie. I fondly remember the few short years I had the pleasure of working with them on this project to help the Chinook salmon of the wild and beautiful Waanukv River.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ngFchE05bQY>

I also won't forget that Percy had five other souls in his trust, that dark night, going down the rapids. I am forever grateful we all made it home to our families because of him. That night he truly was our “Guardian of the Night.”

Percy carried on in the following years on his quest to improve the lot of salmon in the Waanukv River and Owikeno Lake watershed. Over many of those years, Percy worked closely with SEP Community Advisor Sandie MacLaurin. She shared some of her insightful observations on the character of the man.

“Percy was really a visionary - thinking of new and better ways to do things and so capable and intelligent. He was well known for his "good morning" greeting day or night and his habit of being hard to wake in the morning but ability to go till dark and beyond when he was on task. Percy also loved to collaborate - and always tried to get people together to see how different groups could work together for the benefit of all (forestry, commercial and sport fisheries, DFO, Province etc.). “

He taught important life lessons to all those that had the pleasure to work with him. The **“Power of Percy”** was real and is dearly missed. To all his relations, I send my heart- felt gratitude and respect.

The Wuikinuxv and the broader Rivers Inlet community, with assistance and support from the Pacific Salmon Foundation and many others, continue to remain active today, in the program to enhance the Waanukv River Chinook salmon.

PERCY WALKUS

Hereditary leader of the Wuikinuxv First Nation, Percy Walkus was deeply involved in fisheries and forestry, and was committed to conserve and restore past abundance of fish populations. Always willing to go the extra mile, Percy's leadership and dedication to traditional ethics of stewardship made a difference in the community.

It is an honour to recognize Percy's legacy with the Percy Walkus Salmon Enhancement Facility, officially opened on August 31, 2016 in Rivers Inlet, British Columbia.



The new Percy Walkus Hatchery located in the Wuikinuxv Village at the head of Rivers Inlet, was officially opened on August 31, 2016. It is dedicated to the memory of this passionate advocate for salmon in the Waanukv River.