

# Community Supported Fisheries as Inherently Adaptive

A conversation with Sonia Strobel, Skipper Otto, Canada



*Figure 1. Sonia Strobel and family. © Skipper Otto.*

Sonia is co-founder and CEO of Skipper Otto, a Community Supported Fishery based on Coast Salish territory in Vancouver, BC. Sonia has worked in a variety of community-based organizations, non-profits, and as a high school teacher for many years. She is on advisory committees with the Fisheries for Communities Coalition, the Local Catch Network, and Slow Fish Canada. She is president of the Friends of Granville Island Society, a fellow with the Royal Canadian Geographical Society, and a business mentor with The Forum. She is a creative problem solver, an enthusiastic innovator, and a champion of social and environmental justice. Sonia has been a member of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs since the early 1990's and brought her knowledge of CSAs to the family fishery, first conceiving of the idea for one of the first Community Support Fishery (CSF) in the world in 2008. We sat down with Sonia for a candid conversation about the challenges of accessing local seafood in Canada and how the Community Supported Fishery model can help address many of the struggles that fishing communities and seafood consumers face.

## Why is it so Hard to Access Canadian Seafood in Canada?

Yes, it's true that most of the seafood Canadians eat is imported. In fact, about 80% of what we get in our grocery stores and restaurants is imported. And at the same time, 90% of the seafood that is harvested in Canada is exported! To understand why this happens, it's important to recognize that the system was set up this way: as a colonial tool designed to extract resources for the enrichment of the "empire," not to feed people living in communities on this land. And so to this day, we're living with a system that was not designed to feed Canadians. The industrial-scale extractive seafood system where Canadians get most of their seafood is rife with social and environmental problems: slavery and other human rights abuses are rampant in industrial seafood harvesting around the world; and around half of the seafood that we buy in Canadian grocery stores and restaurants is mislabelled. So even when a person tries to buy local or wild seafood options, they might not be getting

what they expected. In Canada, we harvest some of the best managed seafood from some of the cleanest waters in the world, and yet for the most part, we can't access it in our grocery stores or restaurants. Very tragically, many First Nations's traditional food systems were destroyed by colonialism and today, they can't access their traditional food sources because of the current system. When local people are not able to access fish in their communities, there are massive social, economic, and environmental justice implications. The value of fish is not always in dollars. It's not always in GDP. The value of fish is in a way of life. And when we lose that way of life, we lose more than just dollars. We need to be doing a better job of addressing these issues. One solution in response to these challenges is community supported fisheries.

## What is a Community Supported Fishery?

A Community Supported Fishery (CSF) is a network that connects harvesters directly to end consumers, usually through a subscription model. There are many versions of community supported fisheries throughout North America and around the world. One example is Skipper Otto. Members join Skipper Otto at the start of the fishing season and agree to eat whatever the ecosystem provides to harvesting families that year. Our share size calculator helps members figure out how much seafood they might eat over the course of the year, and they invest that amount at the start of the season. Then all throughout the year members can log into the members-only online store, pick and choose from the available catch – including well-known favourites like sockeye salmon and halibut as well as lesser-known items like lingcod and hake – and see real-time who's catching what, where, when, and how. The cost is deducted from their pre-purchased credit, and they choose a pickup location near them (Figure 2). We have over 90 pickup locations in big cities and in small towns across Canada, from Victoria to Ottawa, and from Fort St. John to Windsor (Figure 3). Every piece of fish comes with a label on it, telling members all the information that they should really be getting from every seafood label in Canada: the scientific name of the species, who caught it, when, where, and how, and a little biography of the harvester (Figure 4)

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This really helps to connect each member very personally to one of our 40 fishing families.

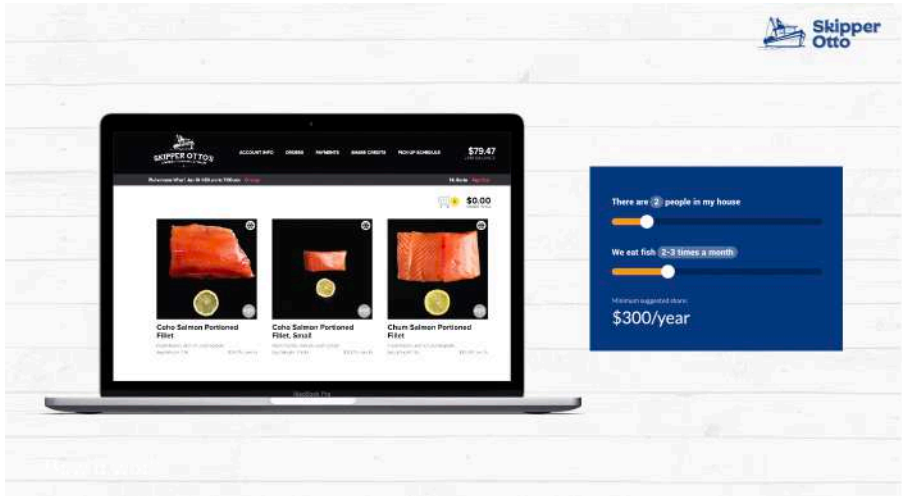


Figure 2. Portal dashboard. © Skipper Otto.



Figure 3. Pickup locations. © Skipper Otto.



Figure 4. Example of product labels. © Skipper Otto.

## How Long has Skipper Otto’s Been Around?

It all started with Otto Strobel, my father-in-law, who started fishing for salmon in BC in the 1960s. His son, my husband Shaun, started fishing when he was seven. When I married into the family over 20 years ago, I was surprised to see what a difficult go it was for fishing families who took on all the risk at the start of the year, going deep into lines of credit to set up their boats and their gear with no guarantee around their access, what they’d catch or what they’d be paid. When our first son Oliver was born in 2008, the idea for the Community Supported Fishery was born because I feared that this fishing way of life would disappear from our family. I needed to think of a solution. I didn’t plan to have a business. I was a high school teacher. I was busy. But it just seemed like something that needed to be done and that nobody else was doing. And so, off we went. Now, 14 years later, we’ve grown: we support 40 fishing families, all families that we know and work with personally (Figure 5). And today those 40 families are supported by just over 8,300 members across Canada who pre-purchase their catch, guaranteeing them a fair price for whatever is abundant and sustainable that

year.



*Figure 5. Fishing families. © Skipper Otto.*

## How do CSFs Enable Small-Scale Fisheries to Respond to Uncertainty and Adapt to Change?

This is really what we do at Skipper Otto. Fishing is an inherently uncertain business and the CSF model helps take out some of that uncertainty for harvesters and for members. Our theory of change states that a resilient, adaptable, just, and equitable seafood system results from the unique contributions of members from many separate communities. The way communities interact with one another is what brings about change. One way that this is evident is in the different relationship that our members have to their seafood and their harvesters. When our members pre-purchase a share in the catch before the fishing season starts, our families can head out fishing knowing that they have a guaranteed fair market for the catch no matter what that is because members agree to eat with the ecosystem. And so, for

example, last year in British Columbia, the Minister of Fisheries announced the closure of some 60% of salmon openings while harvesters were already on their way to the fishing grounds. This kind of uncertainty around access is common and devastating for harvesters. But, we can help fishing families adapt to sudden policy changes by guaranteeing a fair market for whatever they can catch in any given year.

## What are Some Examples of how CSFs Have Shaped Fisheries and Policy?

In British Columbia, we harvest more hake than any other fish on the coast, but most Canadians have never tried it. Why? Because we export all of it! Hake doesn't even come to shore. It is caught by factory trawlers, frozen at sea, and then exported. But we found one independent family still harvesting it and together we've been creating markets for hake. Canadians are interested in what is abundant. On the policy level, governments will say, well, Canadians don't want to eat hake. We don't need to put in place policies to allow for local markets. But we're able to illustrate that there are local markets for what is abundant. In this way, we can bring about change. Another good example is around different species that will show up in our waters due to climate change. Squid have been showing up in British Columbian waters, but we currently don't have a commercial fishery for them. We need nimble policies that will allow us to harvest what is abundant in any given year, what's arriving in our waters as the climate shifts. And Skipper Otto members say "we will eat what comes." This is how the support of CSF members can help make fisheries more adaptable to change.

## Can CSFs Really be a Driver of Change?

Policy engagement and advocacy are important features of community supported fisheries. As we approach 10,000 members, there are a lot of people in Canada who now know harvesters personally, and care about

policies that will affect them. This means we can engage the public in policy advocacy and decision making - when they know the harvesters and care about these things. With members joining for a whole year, and often year-after-year, they become a captive audience that we can educate over the course of their membership. A good example was the spot prawn fishery crisis in 2021. With no consultation, no notice, and no compensation, the DFO reinterpreted the fisheries general regulation to effectively make illegal the 50-year-old practice of tailing and tubbing spot prawns at sea. This practice allowed harvesters to sell their catch directly into domestic markets for the best price possible. The result would have been a drastic reduction in the price they could receive for their catch and in domestic access to spot prawns for consumers. There was no reason given for this decision: there was no logic, there was no science. We reached out to our members at the time and said, "What do you think of this?" Once we heard back, we created a petition and invited them to sign it. We gathered together with harvester organizations, local governments, and Indigenous governments who also wanted to engage on this topic. We got something like 4,000 signatures overnight on the petition! Our members wrote letters and made phone calls to their MPs all across the country. I got phone calls from MPs in Manitoba and Ontario wondering how their constituents knew so much about the spot prawn fishery! The House of Commons Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans dedicated five hours to investigate the issue which resulted in the overturning of that reinterpretation. It took time. But, we were persistent, and our members really got engaged. This is one of the important features of community supported fisheries: active engagement with the democratic process. I heard from so many of our members and from our harvesters who said, because of this incident, they have renewed faith in the democratic process. This example showed them that it is possible to have their voices heard and for justice to prevail, which is so important in the current political climate. This example highlights that we have the power to be adaptable if we work together.



## What about CSFs and Their Adaptability to Supply Chain Shocks?

The COVID 19 pandemic provided a really clear example of how CSFs are able to adapt to supply chain shocks. Before COVID-19 even arrived in Canada, the Lunar New Year banquet season in Asia was shut down due to the spreading disease. And that's really the biggest market for BC Dungeness crab. And so overnight, the market for Dungeness crab disappeared, not because of anything anyone here had done, but because of things well beyond anyone's control. And if we export most of what we catch, then we are so vulnerable to all kinds of international shocks well beyond our control from things like pandemics, global currency exchange rates, and product abundance from other regions. In 2020, we were all shocked by empty shelves in grocery stores. Folks began to realize how dependent we are on global supply chains that can be influenced by shipping crises, pandemics, and climate change. But in the Community Supported Fishery model, when harvesters are selling their catch directly to consumers in domestic markets, they're not at the mercy of things like currency exchange rates and fluctuations in global supply and pandemics and international demand for products that might not be sustainable. When the catch is already bought and paid for, no matter what it is, we help small scale fisheries to be more adaptive, more responsive to change.

## So What's Next for Skipper Otto?

In the past few years, we realized that to truly build just and equitable seafood systems, we needed to proliferate the CSF model. We made the decision to focus our attention on this work in the years ahead rather than on the growth of Skipper Otto. We received a BC Agritech grant to build a software platform that codifies and systematizes many of the operations of our successful CSF and that will allow other fishing communities to relatively easily set up similar programs. Working with the Local Catch Network, we are offering advisory services to other start-up CSFs to help them scale up to become stable, sustaining businesses. So we're excited to help grow the Community

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Supported Fishery movement throughout North America and around the world.