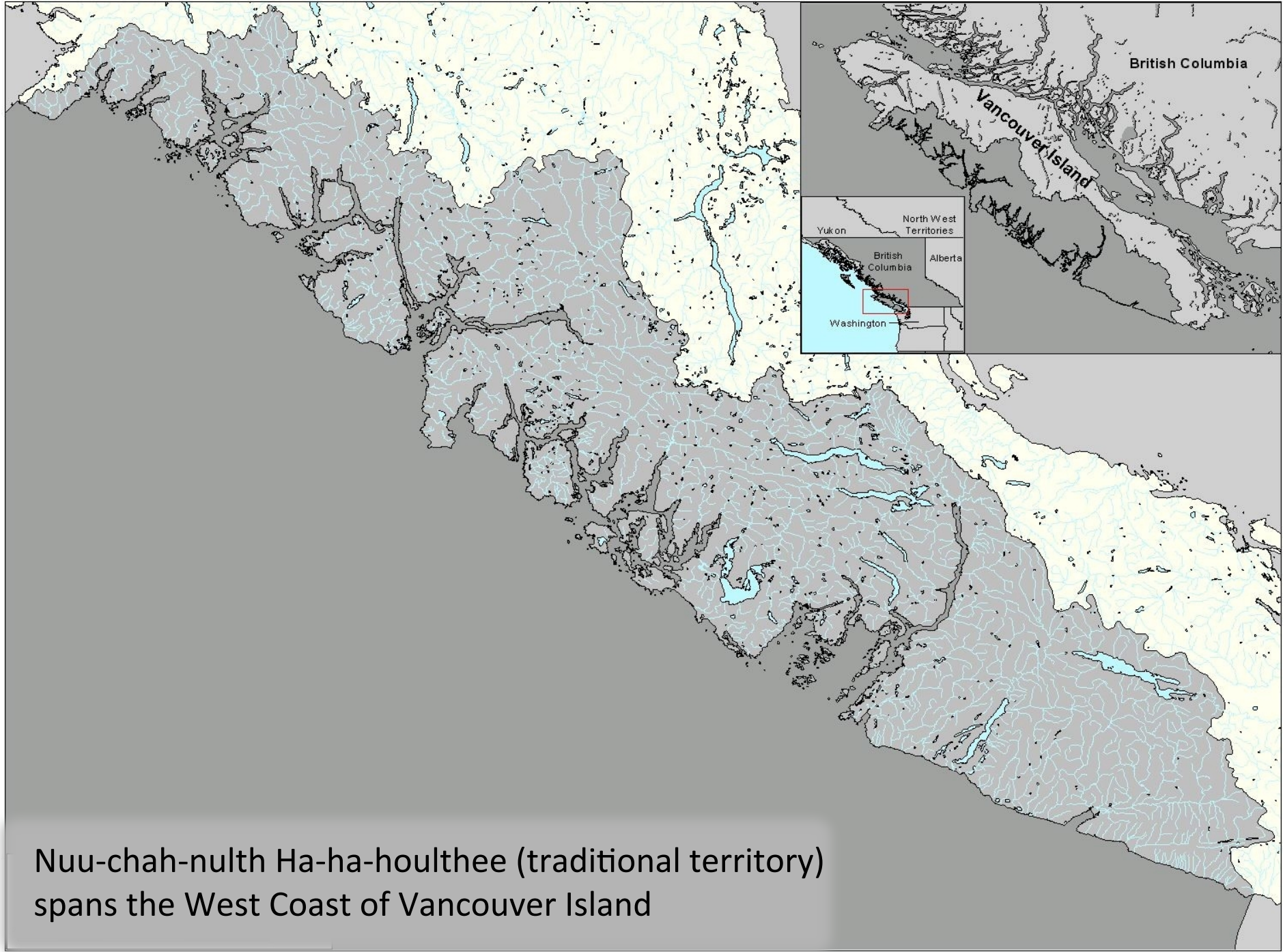




í^wak'ł (Sea Otter) and Nuu-chah-nulth-aht



Nuu-chah-nulth Ha-ha-houlthee (traditional territory)
spans the West Coast of Vancouver Island

“People have to understand how valuable the sea otter is to our people. We have great histories. We have been with them for years and years, thousands of years. Big chiefs use sea otters to recognize a great chief amongst our people... The Sea otter can bring back all the histories of people before.”

—Tsah-seets (Stanley Sam),
Ahousaht Elder



Nuu-chah-nulth-aht have always had a relationship with kʷakʷ (sea otter) but the last 200 years saw that relationship broken by contact, trade, relocation, and other disruptions.

Today Nuu-chah-nulth are attempting to re-establish our relationship with sea otters.



“The sea otter skins were valuables of a sort anciently esteemed so highly that only persons of high rank wore cloaks made of them.”

- Drucker, 1951, 114

Traditional Relationship

- The history of sea otters and humans in BC goes back at least 6,000 years.
- Sea otter remains have been found in middens throughout Nuu-chah-nulth territory, including Hesquiat Harbour, Alberni Inlet, Ts’ishaa village on Benson Island, and the Makah village of Ozette in Washington State.
- Prior to the maritime fur trade of the 18th and 19th centuries, sea otters ranged from northern Japan to central Baja California.



- Ethnographic records of the historic use of sea otters by Nuu-chah-nulth shows how they were used as ceremonial and burial regalia by chiefs and high-ranking people as well as for dowries, potlatch gifts, and gifts to esteemed guests. Capes made from sea otter pelts have the same importance as royal crowns.
- These records also show a long standing management relationship between Nuu-chah-nulth and sea otters.

Changing Times

- Following the arrival of European explorers at Nootka Sound in the 1770s, an intense fur trade began that undermined the established economy of Nuu-chah-nulth Nations.
- Nuu-chah-nulth hunters could now sell directly to European traders, who did not always respect the authority of ḥáwiiḥ.
- The fur trade nearly eliminated sea otters from west coast of North America.
- In 1788, Spain closed their garrison at Nootka because there were no longer enough sea otters to keep it open.





- Over the next 170 years, European and other immigrant populations in coastal BC increased. Industrial fishing also exploded, taxing the fisheries resources communities depended upon.
- As a result, Nuu-chah-nulth people became more and more dependent on shellfish in our territories.
- NTC biologists have evidence (from a midden at Yuquot) showing an abrupt change in diet at about 1790 that coincided with extirpation of sea otter. They believe that the Nuu-chah-nulth diet changed from mostly sea mussels and snails to clams that were suddenly more available (L. Clarke and A. Clarke, 1980)
- Although clams were always present in the Yuquot midden, their presence increased after sea otters were extirpated from the WCVI.

Relocation and Rebuilding

- Between 1969 and 1972, 140 sea otters from Amchitka and Prince William Sound, Alaska, were transplanted to Checleset Bay on the west coast of Vancouver Island without consultation. About 89 of those seas otters survived to become the nucleus of the BC population.
- These sea otters rapidly repopulated their former range and quickly began impacting shellfish populations which had now become a larger part of the Nuu-chah-nulth diet.
- Recent population estimates from Linda Nichol, DFO sea otter biologist at the Pacific Biological Station in Nanaimo, indicate approximately 5,000 sea otters off the WCVI and another 1,000 off the Central Coast of B.C.





- Over the last decade, Nuuchah-nulth Nations have contributed to the sea otter recovery effort by:
 - Conducting small boat counts and aerial flights to find storm refugia, and; training communities for oil spill response
 - Educating children and communities about traditional relationship with sea otters
 - Participating on the Sea Otter Recovery Team
- In 2007, COSEWIC downgraded sea otters from “endangered” to “of special concern.”

Challenges



- Many Nuu-chah-nulth people have mixed feelings about sea otter recovery.
- More education is required about the beneficial ecological changes that accompany sea otters as they become established in new territories, such as:
- Potential for increased old-growth kelp forests and the resulting carbon flow and habitat and cover for herring, rockfish, salmon, invertebrates like snails, and other populations.
 - How do we educate people about the other species not consumed for several generations?



- Nuu-chah-nulth Nations (through Uu-a-thluk and the NTC) forged a partnership with DFO to draft a sea otter management plan for a ceremonial harvest. The resulting approach brings together science, traditional knowledge and many years of hard work.
- The plan would see a small sea otter harvest to gather pelts for ceremonial purposes.
- Challenges with media frenzy and lack of information around traditional relationship and aims of management plan. (This is not a “cull.”)
- More training required for tagging, tattooing, and biosampling.

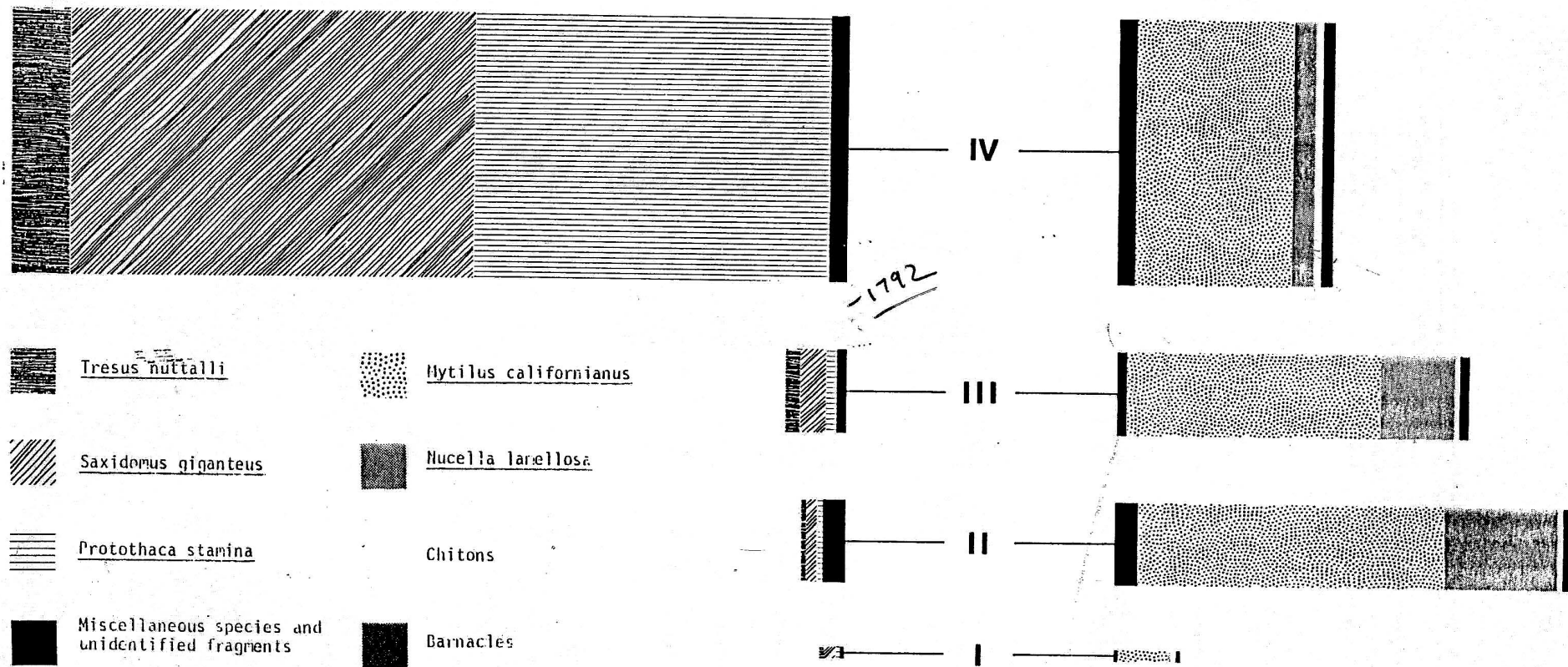


Fig. 4. Relative abundance by shell weights of infaunal and epifaunal species collected from each stratigraphic zone. Bar areas are proportional to shell weights. See Table 3.

(L. Clarke and A. Clarke, 1980)

Yuquot Molluscan Zooarchaeological Analysis 1966



Conclusion

- Today Nuu-chah-nulth still aim to re-establish sacred relationship between sea otters, ḥáwiiḥ, and communities.
- Nations will manage the sea otter population to provide ecosystem benefits.
- Likely the harvest will be initially focused to protect one or two key shellfish beds proximal to our main villages as in the past.
- Harvest levels may increase in the future as the population reaches equilibrium density along the coast and provide valuable fur economy as in Alaska.

THE END

