Top fishermen hurry for herring

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SITKA, ALASKA - The waters off the coast of the old Russian capital suddenly explode with activity, both man-made and wild.

Fifty-one boats carrying many of the Northwest's star fishermen maneuver the crowded waterway on this rainy afternoon, jockeying, shoving and bluffing their way into position during the countdown to the 15-minute fishing frenzy. Tenders, skiffs and other vessels carrying net operators, processors, Japanese technicians and Coast Guard and state enforcement officials stand by.

"Spotter" planes buzz overhead, directing boat captains by radio to giant schools of herring. Humpback whales, seals, sea lions, eagles, sea gulls and ducks join the feast.

Hundreds of spectators wrapped in rain gear line the beaches, peering through binoculars, muttering amateur commentary and nibbling on the tiny yellow balls of fresh roe they pull out of the surf.

The convergence of so many species, some hunting for nourishment, some for profit, is brought on each year by the spawning of millions of herring here. The fish, valuable for the eggs inside the females, are shipped to Japan, where they are extravagantly packaged and served as a traditional New Year's food.

The spawning season is announced in late March each year by the milky water along the coast of Sitka, a city of 9,000 that sits on Baranof Island, midway up the southeastern Alaska panhandle. As the sperm floats in the water, the females, whose eggs have adhesive surfaces, swim over rock or kelp and place their eggs in precise rows to be fertilized.

The "sac roe" herring fishery, one of about 20 along the North American coast from San Francisco to Northwest Alaska that feed the high-end Japanese market, has the tone and intensity of a high-stakes sports match.

With the limited number of permits costing about $250,000 - less than in years past - participants include the most skilled fishermen in Alaska and Washington state, most armed with close to $1 million apiece in boats, permits, sonar, equipment and nets.

A state quota system severely limits the time spent fishing; this year, officials allowed four 15-minute periods stretched over several days. So each time the fishery was declared open, boats had exactly 15 minutes to cast nets and capture as many herring as possible.

For the most successful - the "highliners," as they're known in fishing circles - the rewards are large: about $250,000 in sales from the hour of fishing. (In the mid-1990s, when the price of herring roe was higher, fishermen could earn more than $500,000.) More than 12,000 tons of herring were caught in the hour, yielding the fishermen about $6 million collectively. The competition is intense.

"The guys that fish this fishery are like the quarterbacks of a football team," said John Sevier, general manager of Sitka Sound Seafoods, a Japanese-owned processor. "They're very entrepreneurial. If you put 52 quarterbacks on a football field, who's going to win?"

Still, the business is considered one of the riskiest in the fishing trade.

"There's lots of money on the table," said Ron Porter of Ketchikan, who has been participating in the fishery for about 30 years, about 25 as captain.

"When you figure you have got 15 minutes to do everything you have to do, you have no time to make mistakes. You turn left, you catch them; you turn right you miss them. It's a crapshoot."

"It's a worldwide market, and part of the challenge is to figure out what's going to come in from Canada and Norway," Sevier said. "It's like a roulette wheel. You don't know where the market is going to land. Sometimes the Japanese get stung. Sometimes the fishermen get stung."

And with the downturn in the Japanese economy and changes in lifestyle, the herring roe business is shifting. Demand for the product, called kazunoko - which tradition says promotes fertility - is fading with younger generations.

For decades, herring have been frozen whole in Alaska and shipped to processors on the island of Hokkaido in northern Japan, where the sacs of roe are removed and put into salting tanks. The end products - salty, crunchy little balls that give a popping sensation in the mouth - are neatly laid out in a finely packaged box.

"It's sort of like buying the perfect fruit basket that costs five times as much as normal fruit," said Gunnar Knapp, professor of economics at the University of Alaska in Anchorage, who studies fish markets.

Now, the industry is trying to adapt the roe to less-expensive products that can be sold in stores as everyday food or in sushi bars.

Meanwhile, the Native American Tlingit tribe, which has harvested herring roe for thousands of years by laying hemlock branches to catch the eggs released just off the islands here, say the commercial fishery is interfering with its subsistence fishing.

The Sitka Tribe of Alaska, the local tribal government, said this year's fishery was held in its traditional harvest area and left few eggs to collect. It has asked the state to move the fishery farther away from the islands of the Sitka Sound, arguing that large commercial boats are better able to access those waters than the native fishermen in their 16-foot skiffs.

Herring roe, served on kelp, is served at all important Tlingit ceremonies and events.

"It's the soul food of the Tlingit culture," said Gary Olson, a councilman with the Sitkas. "There's lots of fish out there. The problem is they caught all the fish in our customary and traditional fishing area, right in our front yard."

The tribe has also complained that the fishery's quotas are too high and threaten to deplete the herring stock. Now, the fishery may harvest an amount equal to about 20 percent of the herring that spawned; the tribe eventually plans to ask the state to reduce that to 10 percent, Olson said.

But Bill Davidson, management biologist with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, said the fishery is conservatively managed to keep herring stocks high.

"The stock is in good, healthy condition, at a very high level," he said. "The herring seem to be thriving. This year's quota [10,600 tons] was the third-highest on record."

Wherever the market takes the roe, the derby is an all-star event for fishermen, one that marks the start of the herring roe season in Alaska and is accessible to spectators, who gather as they might to watch a holiday parade.

"Even more important than the money with these guys is their status as fishermen," said Eric Jordan, a commercial fisherman in Sitka, observing the frenzy from the beach this year. "They've done well in other fisheries, so they can afford to compete in this one. They'd make more money cooperating but the urge to compete is too great."

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