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Treaties changing history, one fishing hole at a time

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Archie Charles has been fishing in the Fraser Canyon since the 1920s. As a boy, he journeyed 50 kilometres from Seabird Island up the Fraser River in a cedar dugout canoe. Last year, the 87-year-old grand chief of the Sto:lo travelled by car to his family's fishing camp. The old dip nets have been upgraded, but every July he still wind-dries his catch on the riverbank. Unsettled land claims never stopped him, but as the Yale First Nation prepares to initial a treaty, the future of his favourite fishing hole is in doubt.

Later next week, federal Indian Affairs Minister Chuck Strahl, his B.C. counterpart George Abbott, and Chief Robert Hope of the Yale First Nation are expected to sign a final agreement that, when ratified, will grant the Yale land title, self-government and expanded fishing rights in the canyon.

For Mr. Hope, it is a chance for his community of 145 people to achieve economic self-sufficiency. Mr. Strahl, who has been involved in these treaty talks in his own riding since his days as an opposition MP, can claim a personal victory. And Mr. Abbott is delighted to have an upbeat announcement on the eve of the 2010 Winter Olympics.

But for Mr. Charles, a respected native elder, veteran of the Second World War, and a member of the Order of Canada, it means having to ask permission of the Yale to fish where he has always fished, where he has taught his grandchildren to fish, and where his father fished before him. The Sto:lo Tribal Council is preparing to defend the band's fishing rights against the Yale - which, at the very least, will result in a legal challenge that will continue to sow uncertainty.

More broadly, though, the settlement is an important breakthrough for the costly, moribund treaty process that has yielded little progress.

It is also significant because it signals that the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, which has been blamed for holding up a number of B.C. treaty agreements, is ready to show more flexibility. The department was meeting this week with the Sliammon, a coastal band located near Powell River, to talk about salmon allocations.

"We are encouraged by the renewed vigour that the DFO have brought to those tables," Mr. Abbott said this week. He's hopeful that several new treaties are within reach this year: "It may put some new enthusiasm behind a treaty process that has had too little of that."

But the proposed Yale treaty also promises to bring the frustrating issue of overlapping aboriginal claims to the forefront. The Sto:lo say these are their traditional fishing grounds and no one native band can take that away.

"Chief Hope is trying to change history, that's really offside. He knows we have fished there for generations,"