

THE  PROJECT

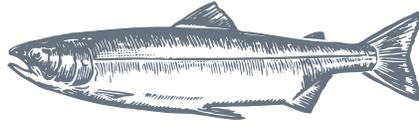
WHAT ALASKANS ARE
THINKING ABOUT SALMON

*ALASKAN CONNECTIONS TO
THE WILD SALMON RESOURCE*

May 30, 2013



THE



PROJECT

ALASKAN CONNECTIONS TO THE WILD SALMON RESOURCE

Report of Opinion Research Sponsored by The Salmon Project

This document presents a summary of the three public opinion studies described below.

I. Background

During the first five months of 2013, DHM Research designed and carried out public opinion research for The Salmon Project related to wild salmon issues in Alaska. The research explored how Alaskans perceive the vital role wild salmon play in the state's social, cultural, economic and ecological life. It examined the nature and depth of residents' connections to the wild salmon resource. And it gauged public support for a non partisan, non politicized effort to engage Alaskans from diverse geographic, cultural, economic and political backgrounds in raising awareness about wild salmon, strengthening connections to the resource, and ultimately ensuring its healthy future in the state.

The research consisted of three studies employing a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods, and attempted to meet the challenge of Alaska's geographic size and cultural diversity. The research design took a qualitative-quantitative approach, using qualitative focus groups and in-depth interviews to guide development of the quantitative survey instrument.

It is important to note that the results of this public opinion research provide respondents' perceptions related to the wild salmon resource, rather than facts about the resource's status.

1. **Focus groups.** DHM Research conducted 11 focus groups in eight parts of the state (Anchorage, Mat-Su, Kenai/Soldotna, Fairbanks, Cordova, Ketchikan, Dillingham and Bethel).
2. **Opinion leader interviews.** DHM Research conducted 35 in-depth interviews with leaders from business, civic, academic, Alaska Native and conservation organizations. Together with the focus groups, this qualitative research identified key issues and themes, and contributed to the development of the scientific telephone and Internet survey, and provided a foundation for strategic observations and recommendations to The Salmon Project.

3. **Quantitative survey.** DHM Research fielded a scientific telephone and online survey of 2,068 Alaskans from five regions (Prince William/Southeast (PW,SE), Cook Inlet, Southwest (SW), Rivers/Interior and North). The purpose of the survey was to validate the qualitative research and provide a baseline view of Alaskans' perceptions of the wild salmon resource, and their willingness to support a statewide effort to raise awareness and strengthen connections to it. The survey set regional quotas based on 2010 census data by gender, age, ethnicity and income to ensure representative sampling within regions, and weighted regions proportionately for statewide results. For sub-area analyses only within the Cook Inlet and PW/SE regions, the survey included urban/rural stratification to prevent the population centers of Anchorage and Juneau from dominating responses.

II. Values and Connections

How do wild salmon and the benefits associated with this resource figure among Alaskan values? How connected do Alaskans feel to wild salmon, and in what ways? And how concerned are they about its future?

The survey included several open-ended questions where respondents could provide unprompted responses to questions. When residents considered what they most value about living in Alaska, thoughts clustered in four areas: (i) natural beauty, the outdoors, and outdoor activities such as hunting and fishing; (ii) personal freedom, lack of government interference, small populations, and a quiet, slower pace of life; (iii) family, community, culture and tradition; and (iv) jobs and economic opportunities. Natural beauty, mentioned by 19%, and freedom/less government interference, mentioned by 12%, were the top two values.

Verbatim comments from focus group and survey participants painted a portrait of a vast, rugged and beautiful natural world that residents could enjoy with freedom and independence. People appreciated the lack of intrusion from crowds or authority, and the kind of camaraderie that arises among people knit together by culture and long tradition, appreciation of the outdoors and, for many, a physically demanding way of life.

Wild salmon "is fundamentally important to us," said a Fairbanks focus group participant expressing a representative point of view. Also typical was the remark by an interviewee that, "Wild salmon are vastly important to the state of Alaska for their economic value, cultural value, and environmental value. They are the Alaskan 'brand' if you will." The survey validated these opinions.

Figure 1
Importance of Wild Salmon

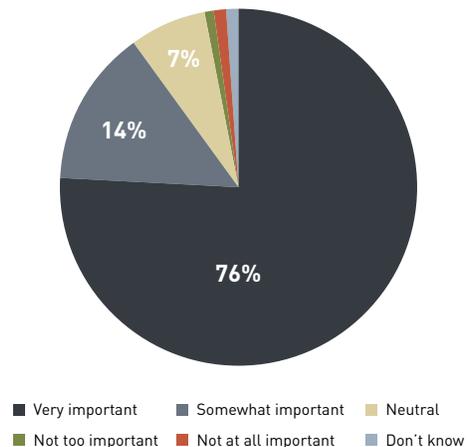
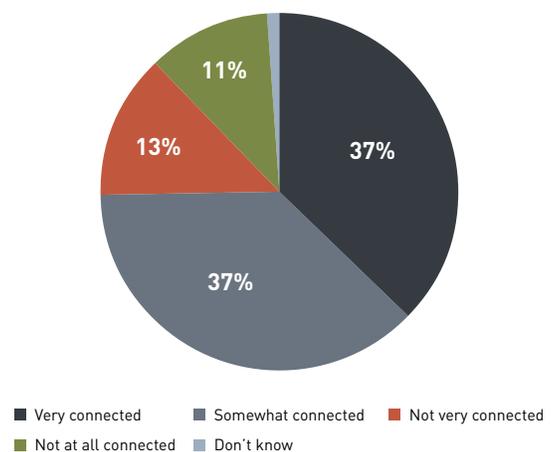


Figure 2
Connections to Wild Salmon



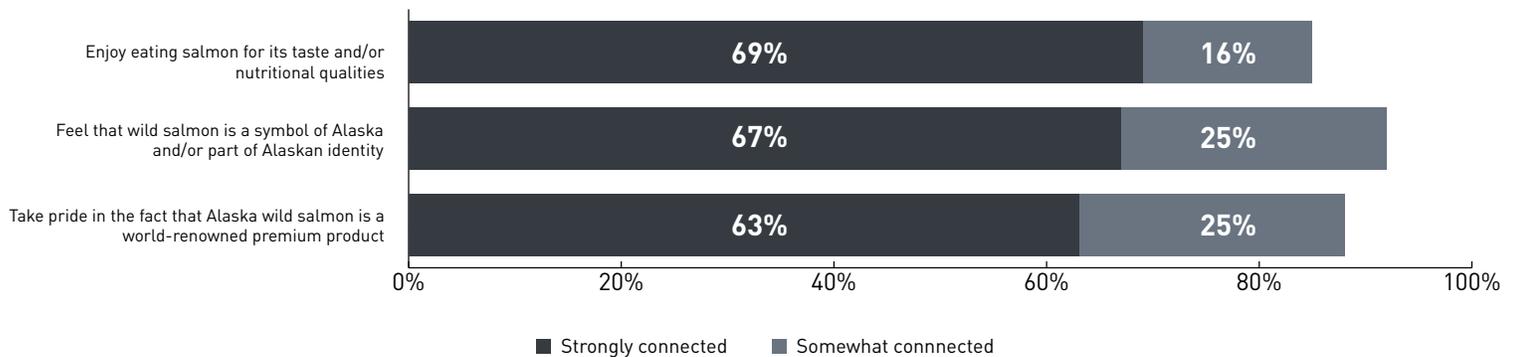
Nine in 10 Alaskans viewed their connection to wild salmon as important, and three-quarters as very important (Figure 1).

Three-quarters of the statewide population said they felt connected to wild salmon; of those, half felt strongly connected and half felt somewhat connected (Figure 2). In the fishing centers of SW and PW/SE, totals approached nine in 10, with half the entire population claiming a strong connection.

Alaskans gave many reasons for their sense of connection. In the survey, three stood out as especially strong and widely shared (Figure 3): (i) Nearly seven in 10 respondents felt “strongly connected” to wild salmon through eating and enjoyment of its taste and/or nutritional qualities; (ii) More than nine in 10 said that wild salmon represented an important symbol of Alaska or part of Alaskan identity (two-thirds feel “strongly connected” in this way); and (iii) Nearly nine in 10 took pride in Alaska wild salmon as a world-renowned premium product.

Two-thirds or more of the sample reported connections to wild salmon in five other ways as well (at least 42% of respondents reporting a “strong connection” for each); these five ways included visiting habitat, recreational fishing, pride in the state constitution and sustainable management programs, and participation in cultural practices or traditions.

Figure 3
Top Three Forms of Connection to Wild Salmon

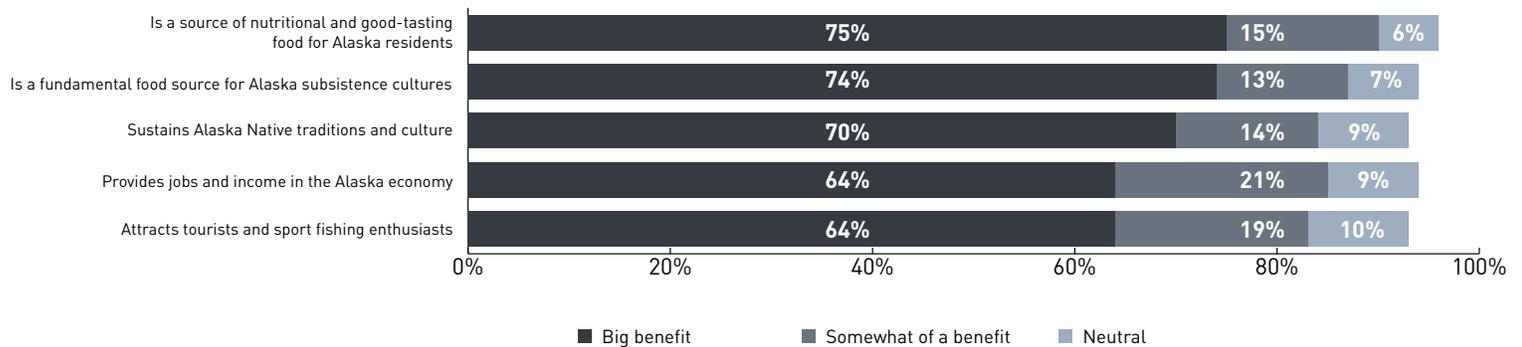


The sense of wild salmon as an Alaskan brand and source of pride also was strongly evident in group discussions and interviews. In these more personal settings, themes of family, friends, community, culture and tradition rose more prominently to the surface. Participants shared stories and anecdotes suggesting passionate ties to the resource that often spanned ethnicity. “Part of the benefit (of fishing for wild salmon) is going down there with my friends and my wife, people that like to do that hard work, because it brings out the best in people sometimes,” said a Fairbanks resident. Another described learning to fish “through the village, not that I grew up in the village, but to learn how to build a smokehouse, that’s the way they’ve done it for eons, to learn how to cut the fish right, it’s an art. ... And so culturally, there’s a huge connection.”

An Anchorage resident recognized wild salmon as “part of Native culture, I know, but you might say it’s part of general Alaskan culture, too.” A comment by another Anchorage resident who was one of the few not sharing a sense of connection made a similar point in reverse: “The (suggestion that) everyone has a personal connection to (wild salmon) - I’ll be honest, I don’t. Maybe that makes me a not-true Alaskan, I don’t know.”

Survey respondents also showed they valued the cultural and traditional aspects of wild salmon in a series of questions about the resource’s benefits, where food, subsistence culture, and Native traditions featured most prominently. Economic benefits also stood out (Figure 4).

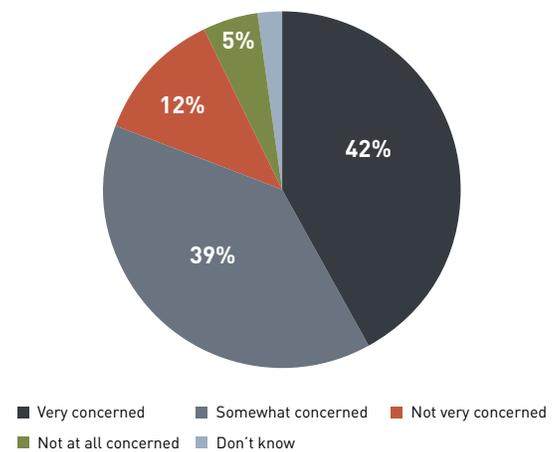
Figure 4
Top Five Benefits of Wild Salmon Resource



III. Concerns and Threats

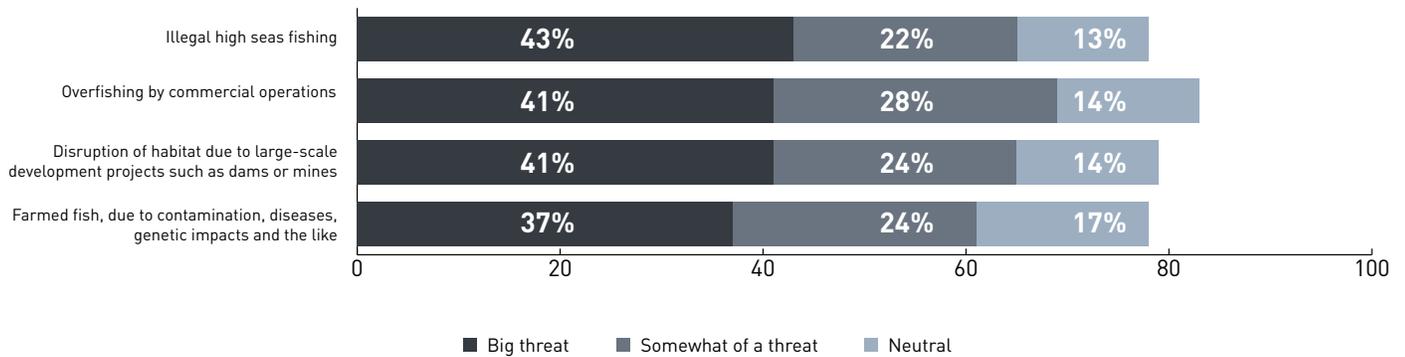
In qualitative sessions, views about the future of the wild salmon resource varied. There were deep fears due to declining king runs, cultural disruption, changes in ocean environment, large-scale development, and lack of confidence in our scientific knowledge and management practices. There was also a sober recognition of the many challenges wild salmon face, tempered by cautious optimism based on the resilience of the species and society’s ability to manage for healthy returns, and even outright confidence in the Alaska Department of Fish and Game and existing management programs. Variation in strength of concern emerged in the survey as well, where eight in 10 residents said they were concerned about the future of the resource; of those, half were very and half were somewhat concerned (Figure 5).

Figure 5
Concern About Wild Salmon



Survey respondents identified the top four threats as illegal high seas fishing, overfishing by commercial operations, disruption of habitat due to large-scale development projects such as dams or mines, and farmed fish due to contamination, diseases, genetic impacts and the like (Figure 6). Four in 10 saw these activities as big threats. Another two to three in 10 viewed them as somewhat of a threat, with a top combined result of seven in 10 who perceive threats from overfishing by commercial operations.

Figure 6
Top Four Big Threats



Fifty percent or more of the population also regarded the following as big or moderate threats: invasive species (combined 58%), changes in ocean environment due to global warming (53%), environmental and fishing practices of neighboring states (52%), bycatch (51%), and disruption of habitat due to building and road construction or neighborhood development (50%).

Focus group and interview participants gave color to many of these concerns. The role of money and politics in decision-making was a dominant theme. “Greed comes into play in a lot of this,” said a Mat-Su resident. “There’s a lot of politics around salmon,” observed an interviewee, “but we can’t allow politics to determine what our fisheries might look like in 20 or 30 years.” Many participants, especially in the interviews, also spoke to the sheer inadequacy of our scientific understanding of how salmon populations behave, especially in the ocean. “We really don’t know what’s wrong,” said one. “There’s a huge void in our knowledge of wild salmon based on how much time they spend in the ocean and what’s going on with the climate,” said another. “What’s concerning is that nobody really knows why the salmon stock fluctuates.” We heard these and similar concerns repeatedly.

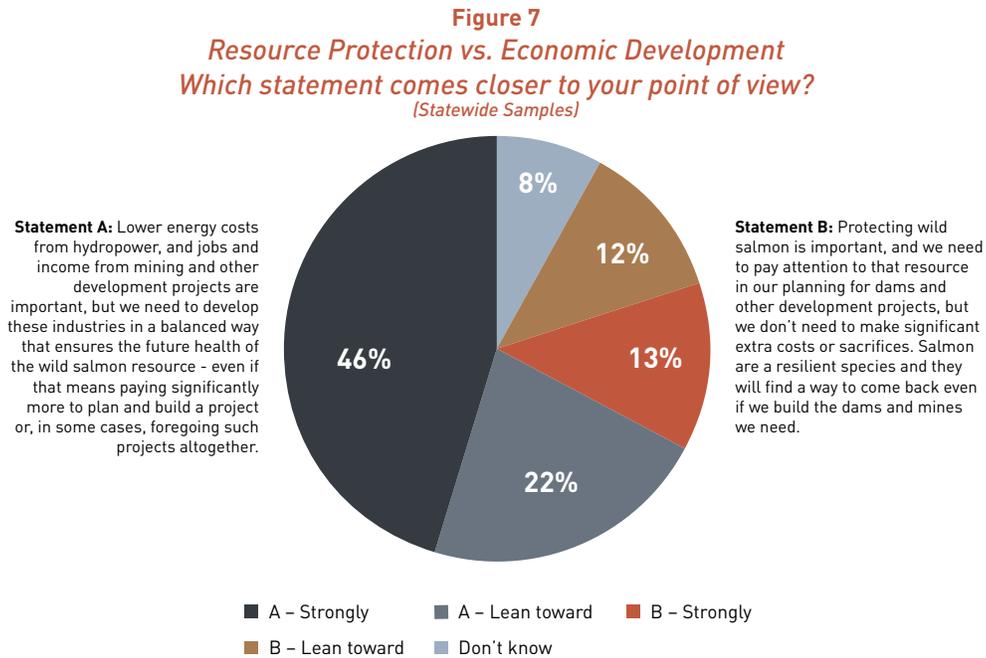
IV. Resource Protection and Development – Desire for Balance

Alaskans recognize and respect the competing values involved, and they want to find a workable balance between the development and use of resources on the one hand, and protection and sustainability of salmon on the other. This point of view came through strongly in each aspect of the research. Interview participants in particular spoke about the high cost of energy in rural Alaska and the need to both increase and diversify the state’s revenue base. Few if any expected the state to give up dependency on resource extraction anytime soon, but they wanted Alaska to balance resource use with responsible environmental practices.

Focus group participants typically felt the same way, “I believe that there can be a balance,” said an Anchorage resident. “There has to be a way to respectfully and responsibly use our resources and market them to the rest of the world, without destroying things.” Another remarked, “Having worked out in Bristol Bay for a number of years, I go back and forth on the benefits of safeguarding the salmon stock versus giving these people a number of generations of good employment and infrastructure development. I hope that we can find a balance.”

The survey tested these attitudes with two competing statements related to treatment of the wild salmon resource. Both statements recognized the value of protecting wild salmon and the benefits to jobs, income and energy costs brought by large-scale economic development such

as hydropower and mining. But Statement A (Figure 7), privileges balanced development that “ensures the future health of the wild salmon resource - even if that means paying significantly more to plan and build a project or, in some cases, foregoing such projects altogether,” while Statement B privileges development. Respondents opted firmly for Statement A.



Despite predictable differences based on environmental and political views, support for Statement A was healthy among Republicans and economic conservatives. Strong A response progressed downward along the scale of liberalism by party (Democrats 60% > Political Others 48% > Republicans 37%) and by economic views (liberals 64% > moderates 47% > conservatives 35%). But even so, strong A response was nearly twice that of strong B in conservative groups (37% vs. 19% among Republicans and 35% vs. 18% among economic conservatives).

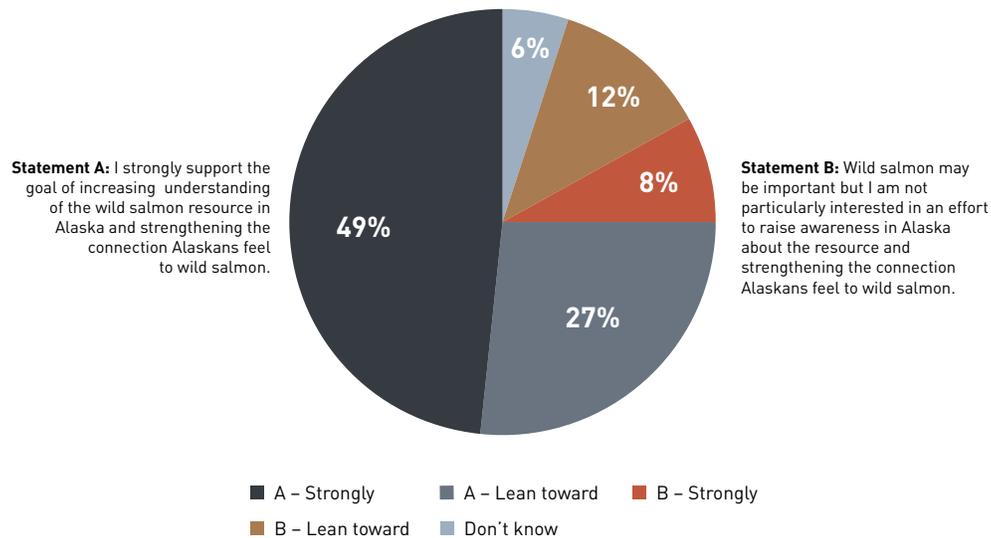
The development vs. protection issue generated differences by region as well. PW/SE and SW resembled each other with approximately half their populations endorsing a strong A position, and just one in 10 opting for strong B. Strong A response in the other regions ranged from 42% to 45%, but soft A (lean toward) response was weaker in North, where strong B response was highest among regions at 19%.

V. The Outlook for Public Engagement

Our objective to explore the potential to raise public awareness about wild salmon and strengthen connections to the resource returned a wealth of results. The focus groups in particular tested a wide range of concepts related to messaging and action. What are Alaskans interested in hearing about wild salmon? How do they want to hear it? And what, if anything, are they willing to do?

For starters, Alaskans appeared firmly on board with an effort to increase understanding of the wild salmon resource and strengthen connections. Response to the public engagement aspect of the survey was exceptional, not least because 728 participants - more than a third of the sample - provided personal contact information to The Salmon Project for follow-up.

Figure 8
Increasing Understanding and Strengthening Connections
Which statement comes closer to your point of view?



The survey tested two statements to see which came closer to residents’ views about public engagement with the state’s wild salmon resource. Statement A strongly supports the goal of increasing understanding and strengthening connections; Statement B expresses appreciation for the resource but no particular interest to help raise awareness (Figure 8). Nearly half the sample (49%) opted strongly for Statement A, and another quarter (27%) leaned toward it. Strong feeling for A was consistent across all regions (from 47% to 49%), except for SW where it soared to 69%.

Survey participants also indicated their willingness to support outreach events and activities. Statewide, Alaskans were most willing to use websites or social media applications, attend or participate in community events, and pay more in user fees, licenses, and salmon-related products. Combined willingness (very and somewhat) on these three items ranged from 60% to 63%. Other proposals involved purchasing, or borrowing from the library, different kinds of salmon-related materials (e.g., “salmon narratives” from Native elders and others with close ties to the resource, or scientific information presented in an accessible manner), and volunteering one’s time. Combined willingness on these activities ranged from 47% (volunteering) to 55%. There was considerable regional variation as SW residents topped the charts on most items with combined rates from 70% to 80%. North was typically a close second to SW, except when it came to paying more for user fees, licenses, or salmon-related products, where North was lowest among the regions with combined 50% willingness. Residents of Cook Inlet responded relatively more coolly to most of the proposals.

The focus groups also weighed in on ideas and activities. Opinion varied along with personal inclinations, but salmon narratives, farmer's markets, a "salmon run," apps and websites were all relatively popular.

VI. Reaching People

The Salmon Project - like most nonprofit service organizations - faces a challenging journey. But the subject of salmon adds a particular twist. "As soon as you hear salmon is the topic," said an interviewee, "the first thing you think is it's an anti-Pebble organization." Another remarked, "Salmon has not really been an issue in its own right, but something that gets used as a weapon against others." Stepping into a politically and emotionally charged environment, The Salmon Project must choose its path with care.

And the path presents other obstacles. Opinion leaders emphasized the geography of the state and lack of understanding between people, especially when it came to rural vs. urban residents, coastal vs. upriver interests, scientists vs. laymen, and people of differing political ideologies. Participants pointed to poor communication, the sad state of civil discourse, entrenchment in familiar ways of doing things, short-sightedness, and self-interest as major culprits in the failure of mutual understanding. "It's hard to solve problems when you don't understand the people," remarked one person. "It's hard for someone - who lives down the street from Costco where they can get everything they want for cheap - to understand what it's like to live where you don't even have running water, and where gas and heating oil cost \$9 a gallon."

The research shows that Alaskans, like many Americans, are tired of tendentious public speech, and suspicious of the paid media bite that typifies the modern transfer of information. Constant exposure may render people vulnerable to the easy charms of the sound bite, but they are cynical about motivations and veracity.

In this challenging environment, how will it be possible to reach people and inspire them to make a difference for the future of wild salmon in Alaska?

The research offers some promising avenues of approach. As a starting point, it will be important to present demonstrably factual information in an objective, transparent and fair manner that resists engagement in ongoing political disputes. It will also be important to communicate in a way that resonates with values and convictions Alaskans already hold.

Two examples arose when testing several factual statements in the focus groups. Participants responded especially well to the statements, "Salmon play an important role in the social and economic fabric of Alaskan communities," and "Approximately 42% of the world's commercial harvest and about 80% of production of high-value salmon species are from Alaska." These statements struck the chords of Alaskan cultural identity and pride that reverberated throughout the studies. In response to the latter statement, an Anchorage woman said, "The thing that tells me is that we have a responsibility here. It's not just Alaskans. It's the world that's looking at us, and depending (on us). What we do really has an impact on the rest of the world - we're tied together." The idea that Alaska is the last great frontier for wild salmon speaks to a deeply felt sense of identity.

A theme that arose again and again in our qualitative discussions and related specifically to increasing Alaskans' connectedness with the wild salmon resource was the importance of direct personal interactions with the resource and/or with other people interested in protecting it. In the words of an interview participant, "Personal contact is really the only way to make a powerful difference."

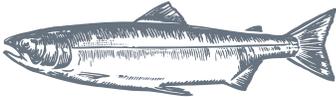
Participants pointed to education as an instrumental means to forge personal connections. "In terms of real social change that takes place, it has to be generational. So the work you do with children is the most important - that's where the attitudes are going to be built." This view received strong validation from the survey, which asked respondents to rate the effectiveness of 10 ideas for making a positive difference to Alaska's wild salmon resource. Fifty percent of the sample rated as very effective educational programs for schoolchildren, including an outdoor component where children come into contact with salmon and salmon habitat. Another 35% felt such programs would be somewhat effective. The next highest very effective result was 40% for improved management with stricter regulations on the heaviest users of the resource (37% somewhat).

"Try getting people doing things where they can see they're making a difference by doing something tangible," said an interviewee. "So going local - it's hard, it takes time, but it might be more beneficial in the long term." Another observed, "People are much more likely to get together in one-on-one settings or along riverbanks than through TV advertising. You need to make human connections. I don't think mass media has proved to be very positive on these issues." Survey respondents differed somewhat, rating increased public awareness through mass media, and development and promotion of community outreach programs and events as similarly effective ways to make a difference in protecting wild salmon (combined 78% and 75% respectively). And there is much to be said for creative forms of mass outreach, especially those that use factual statements that resonate with Alaskan values and convictions, and provide access to an informational website. But overall the research supports a conclusion that local initiatives bringing people together in meaningful ways will create a strong and lasting foundation for ensuring the future health of the Alaska wild salmon resource.

A Brief Note on Regional Differences

All five survey regions showed impressive levels of connection to Alaska's wild salmon resource in many ways, especially through food and the feeling that wild salmon is a symbol of the state and/or part of Alaskan identity. At least nine in 10 residents of every region felt strongly or somewhat connected to wild salmon in this latter way.

- Throughout the survey, SW consistently stood out for enthusiasm, strength of concern, and willingness to support wild salmon issues. The region was distinctive for bringing economic aspects of the resource to the forefront. The impact of the commercial fishing industry and higher levels of public involvement with wild salmon in SW was widely evident. The region exhibited higher percentages of connectedness in virtually every way, higher percentages that saw providing jobs and income as a big benefit, higher percentages that took pride in the state's providing nearly half the world's supply of wild salmon, less perception of overfishing by commercial operations as a threat, and more perception of farmed fish as a threat.
- PW/SE often resembled SW, but feelings there did not typically run as high.
- North displayed the strongest cultural and traditional component to connectedness. Residents of the region recognized the importance of the resource and showed strong concern for it, generating rates of willingness to support public engagement projects and to volunteer their time. But economic concerns appeared to have a deep impact on the region, where residents were more likely to support Statement B on the economic development test, and were least likely to be willing to pay more in user fees, licenses and salmon-related products to support the resource.
- Interior typically displayed weaker connections, perception of benefits, and concern than other regions. Cook Inlet often showed stronger ties to salmon than Interior, but fell significantly below levels found in SW and PW/SE on most tests.

THE  PROJECT

For more comprehensive information, please contact The Salmon Project.

Contact:

The Salmon Project

Project Manager

Erin Harrington

eharrington@salmonproject.org