



## CONNECTIONS TO THE WILD SALMON RESOURCE IN NORTH ALASKA

### Highlights of Opinion Research Sponsored by The Salmon Project

As part of a feasibility study in early 2013, the Salmon Project sponsored extensive opinion research among Alaskans to learn about our connections to wild salmon, our perceptions of the benefits of the resource and the threats it faces, and our interest in supporting efforts to raise awareness and increase connectedness. DHM Research, an independent firm, conducted 11 focus groups, 35 opinion leader interviews, and a scientific telephone and online survey of more than 2,000 Alaskans in five regions of the state (Figure 1).

Public opinion research is just that—inquiry into the public’s attitudes, beliefs, interests, and concerns on a given topic. For an organization or for policy makers, opinion research is useful in understanding what people think and what they most care about in public life. Research helps organizations make connections with the people they are trying to serve. It helps find opportunities to build on existing passions, and can also identify areas where education and information are needed to bring public perceptions up to speed with the facts.

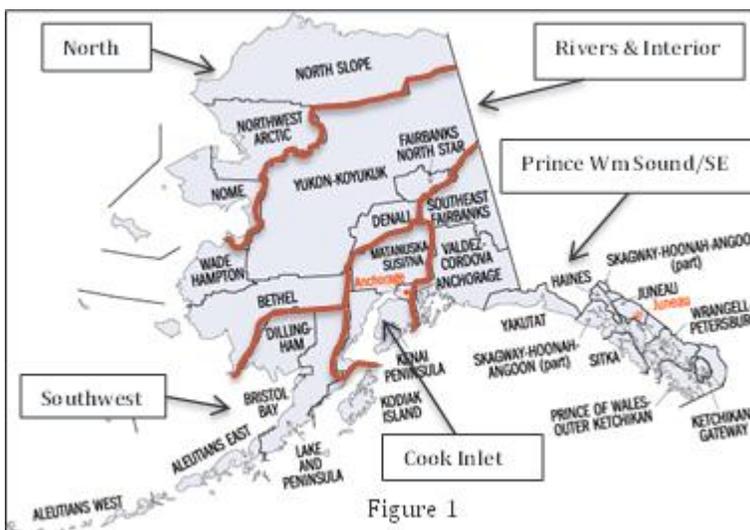


Figure 1

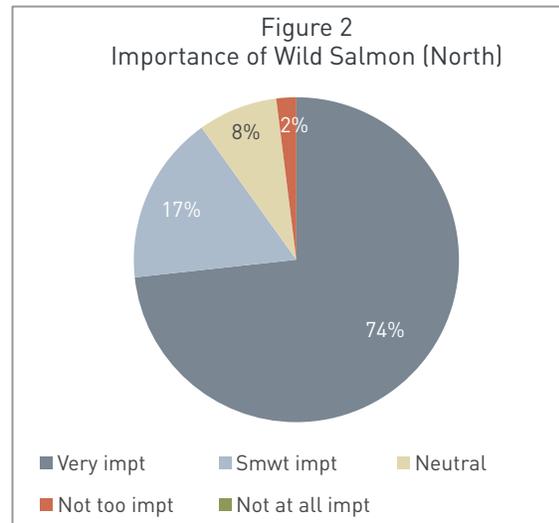
Results from the studies carried out by DHM Research will support the Salmon Project’s efforts to develop meaningful, responsive programs that address Alaskans’ real interests and needs related to wild salmon. This document presents highlights of research performed in northern

communities of the state (see figure), based on a demographically representative survey sample of 125 residents. More detailed statewide information and results from other regions are available from the Salmon Project at the locations provided on the last page of this report.

## Values and Connections

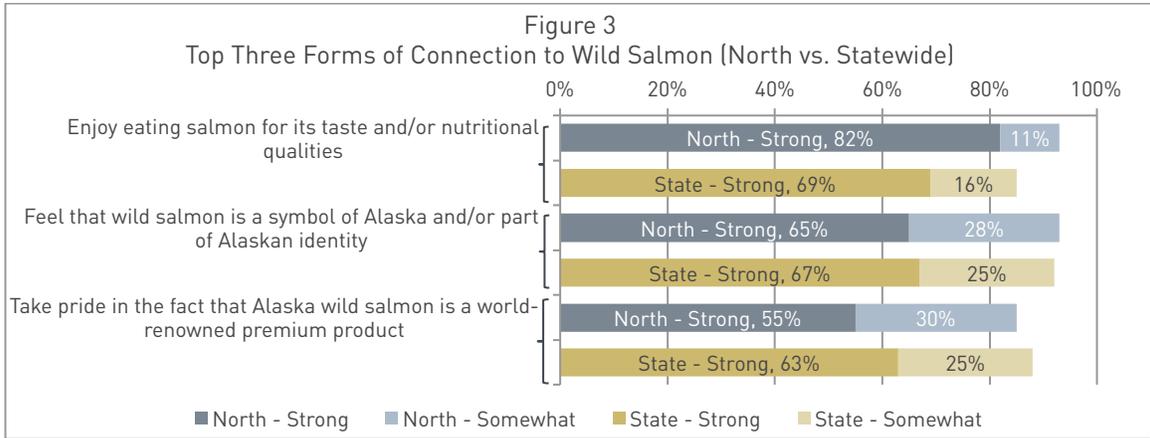
The North region stood out from the rest of the state for the value placed on subsistence and traditional cultural practices, and for connectedness to wild salmon in ways related to those values. Hunting and fishing, culture and lifestyle, and subsistence living came up as values more frequently in the North than elsewhere. But the importance of wild salmon as a food source, especially to subsistence cultures, was a top association for Alaskans across the state as well as in the North.

On a 1 to 5 scale where 1=not at all important and 5=very important, responses from the North about the importance of wild salmon averaged 4.6, and nearly three quarters (74%) rated the resource a 5 (Figure 2). This result closely paralleled the statewide mean of 4.7 and 76% who saw wild salmon as very important.

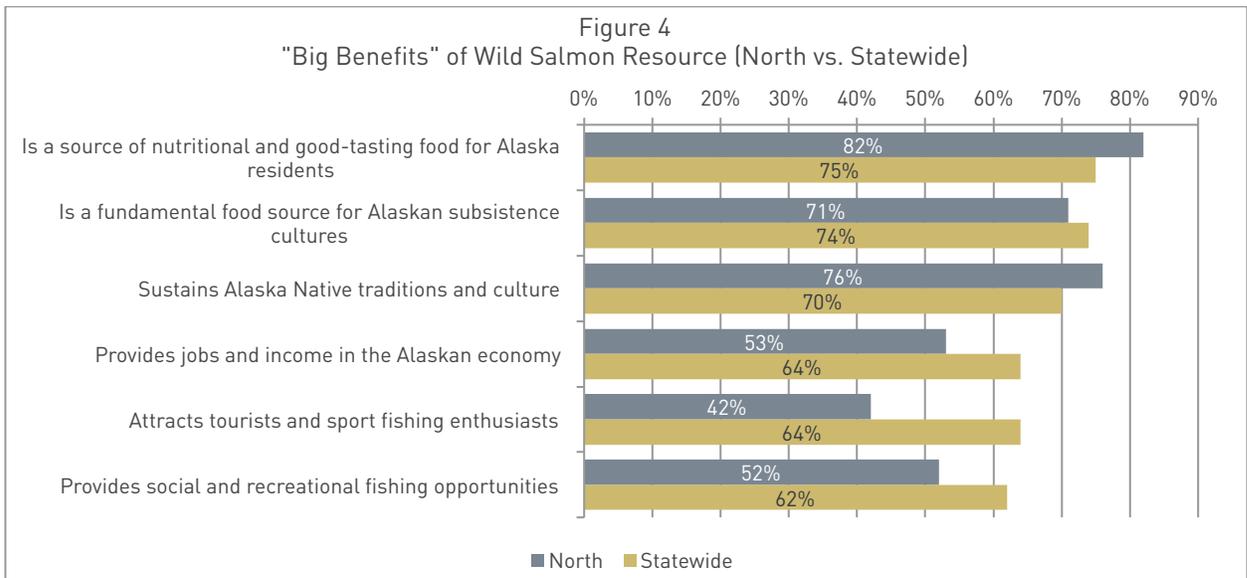


In response to a question about how connected they felt to the wild salmon resource, four in ten respondents in the North (42%) said they were “very connected,” nearly a quarter (24%) said they fished for salmon as part of a subsistence lifestyle, and two in ten (19%) described other types of connection through fishing for and/or eating salmon. Ten percent said their connection to wild salmon was moderate, and just 15% said they did not feel connected.

Alaskans gave many reasons for their sense of connection to wild salmon. Three emerged at the top of every regional list, with at least 84% saying they felt either strongly or somewhat connected through eating, symbolic value, or pride (Figure 3). In terms of strong feeling only, respondents in the North were more likely than their peers to identify strong connections through eating salmon (82% vs. 69% statewide), through the important role wild salmon play in cultural practices (67% vs. 42%), and through visits to streams, spawning grounds, and habitat (60% vs. 51%).



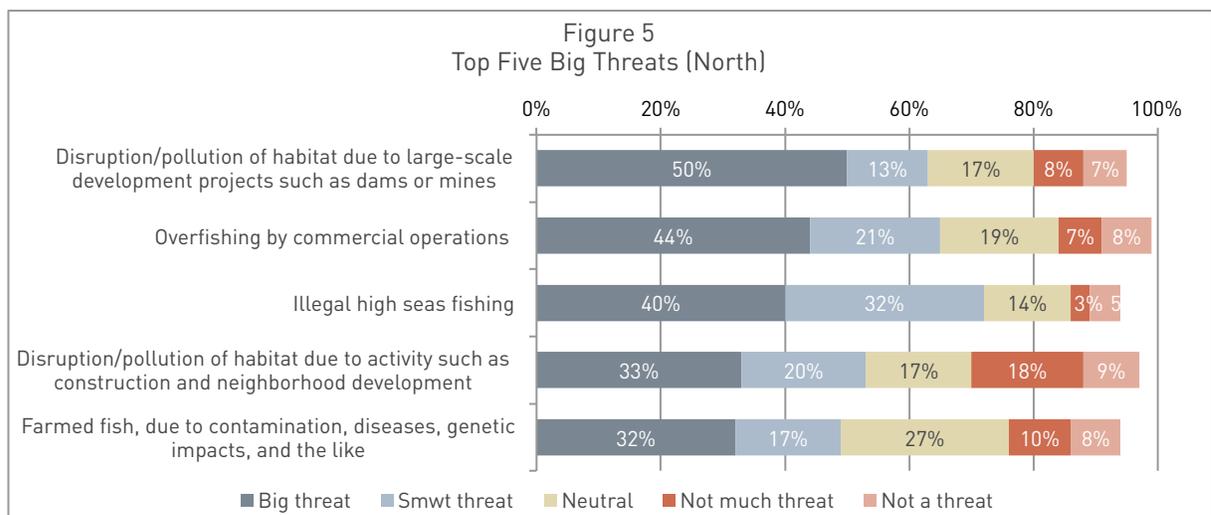
Survey respondents in all regions valued the nutritional and cultural aspects of wild salmon in a series of questions about the resource’s benefits, where food, subsistence culture, and Alaska Native traditions featured most prominently in the North and statewide (Figure 4). But respondents in the North differed from other residents of the state in being less likely to regard jobs and income, the attraction of tourists and sport fishing enthusiasts, and social and recreational fishing opportunities as big benefits of the wild salmon resource.



## Concerns and Threats

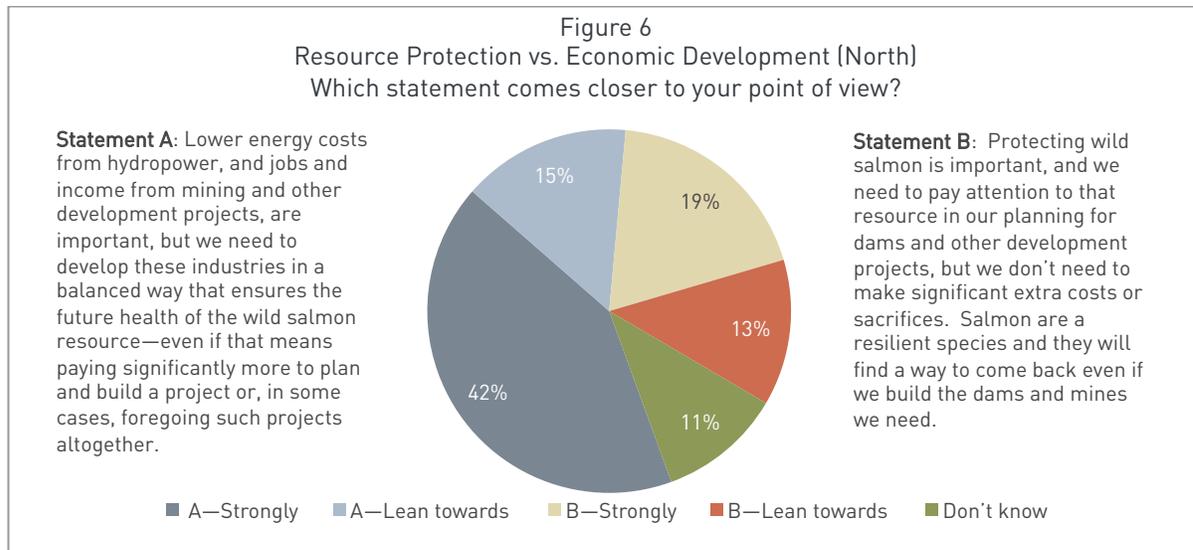
Nearly eight in ten (78%) respondents in the North were concerned about the wild salmon resource—47% very and 31% somewhat—numbers that match levels of concern across the state. In comments, people in the North most often mentioned the shrinking salmon population. “The salmon, the king salmon, is heading towards the endangered list,” remarked one respondent. Those who were not as concerned felt there were plenty of fish, that the state was managing the resource successfully, or that other issues took precedence. Belief that salmon “will take care of themselves” was also a factor.

Figure 5 presents the top five big threats to the salmon resource identified by survey respondents in the North. In comments we heard about “conflicts between commercial and subsistence” interests, the exploitation of “the heart of Alaska . . . to make a buck,” and threats from “increased mining, farmed salmon,” and “uncontrolled development.” The North showed more sensitivity to habitat disruption due both to large-scale development projects (50% vs. 41% statewide) and to building, road, and neighborhood construction (33% vs. 20%). In other respects the region’s response resembled statewide results for the five issues shown in the figure below. Inhabitants of the North were less sensitive than other Alaskans to threats from invasive species, which was the fifth biggest threat statewide (13% vs. 28%).



## Resource Protection and Development – Desire for Balance

The survey tested attitudes about the balance between protecting natural resources and generating much-needed economic activity with two competing statements related to the treatment of the wild salmon resource (Figure 6). The research team gave particular attention to crafting test statements that were “values neutral,” in order to avoid response bias from leading statements.

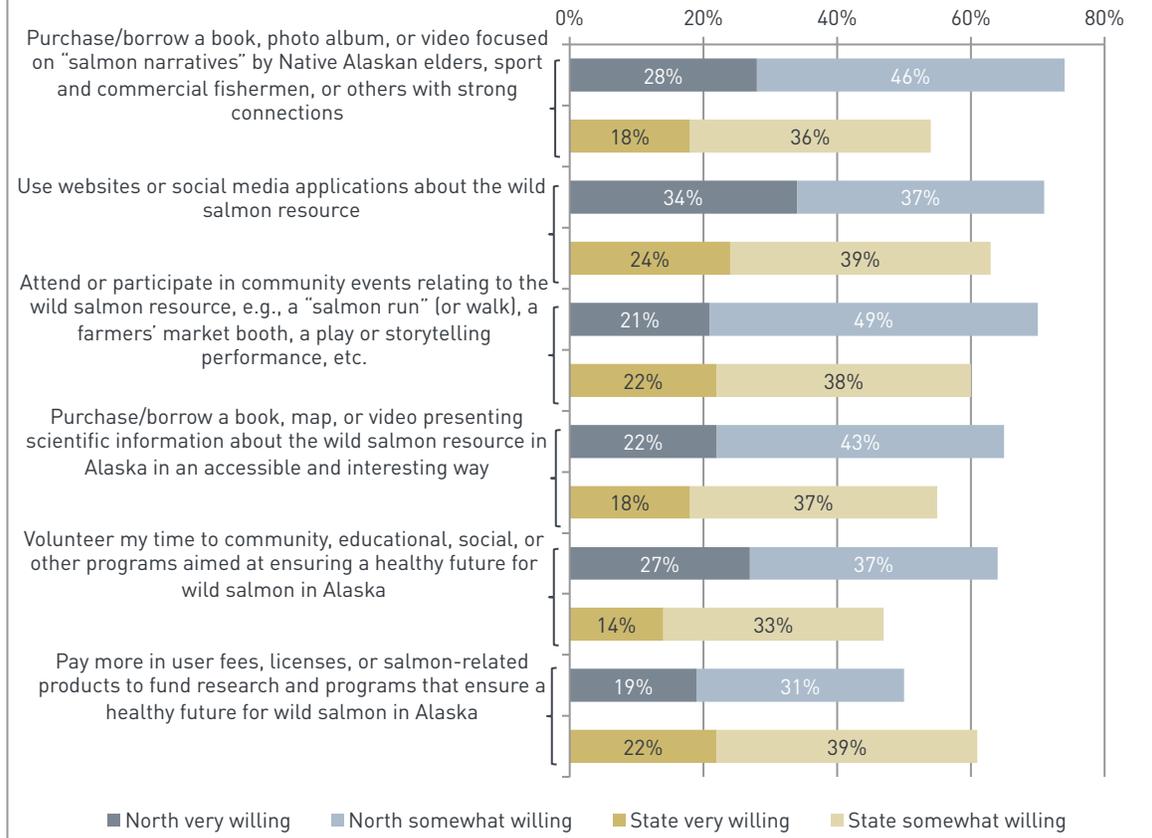


In the North, four in ten respondents (42%) opted firmly for Statement A—very similar to the statewide response of 46%. The North differed from the rest of the state, however, in less “lean towards A” response (15% vs. 22% statewide) and more strong support for Statement B (19% vs. 13% statewide). These results suggest a more acute perception in the North of the need for economic development—and perhaps also greater faith in the resilience of salmon to adapt in response to human activity.

## The Outlook for Public Engagement

The research explored the potential for raising public awareness in Alaska and strengthening connections to wild salmon. The North stood out for its positive response to a series of questions asking about support for specific outreach events. In five of the six tested activities, support in the North was significantly higher than statewide (Figure 7). Only when it came to paying more in user fees, licenses, or salmon-related products did the North show less willingness compared to other regions (50% vs. 61% statewide)—reflecting, perhaps, more acute economic issues characteristic of the area.

Figure 7  
Willingness to Participate in Activities Related to Wild Salmon  
(North vs. Statewide)



## Conclusion

The Salmon Project appreciates your interest in this research. If you would like to know more about what we're doing in your area, or if you have additional insight into regional salmon issues or topics discussed in this report, please share your thoughts. You can contact the Salmon Project at [engage@salmonproject.org](mailto:engage@salmonproject.org). And you can find us on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#) or [YouTube](#) under the username "aksalmonproject."