

# THE PROJECT



## CONNECTIONS TO THE WILD SALMON RESOURCE IN THE RIVERS & INTERIOR REGION OF 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.

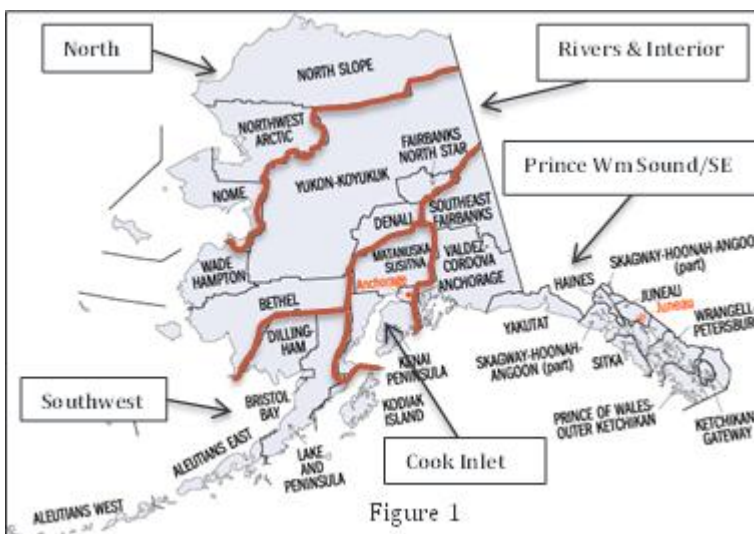


Figure 1

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 the Rivers &

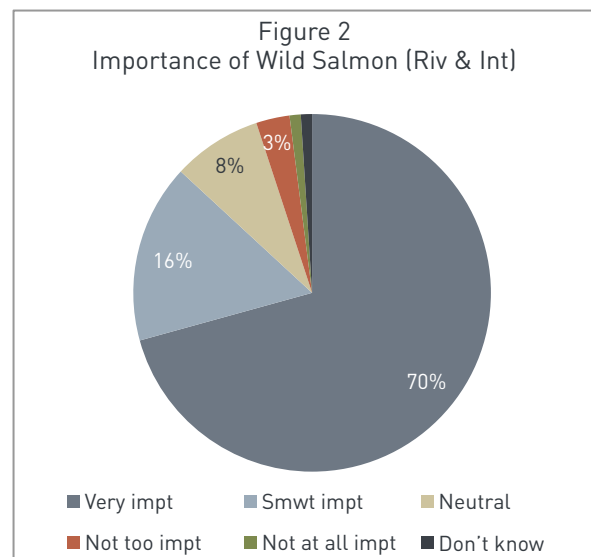
Interior region of the state (see figure), consisting of a demographically representative survey sample of 442 residents and three focus groups held in Fairbanks and Bethel. More detailed statewide information and results from other regions are available from the Salmon Project at the locations provided on the last page of this report.

## Values and Connections

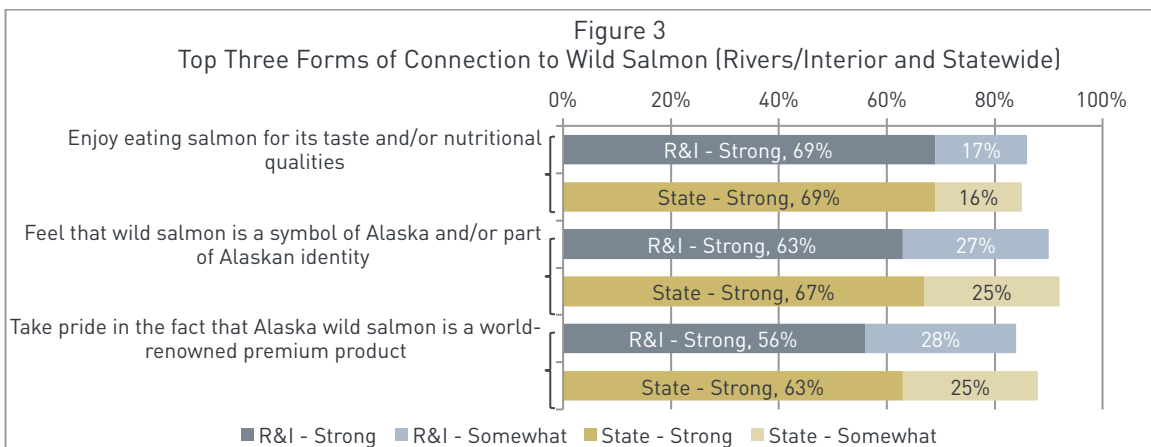
Survey response from Rivers & Interior inhabitants mirrored statewide results on most issues. This correspondence stemmed largely from shared perspectives in Rivers & Interior and Cook Inlet regions on salmon engagement and issues. Compared to all other regions—from the fishing centers of the Southwest and Prince William Sound/Southeast, to the North with its wider prevalence of Alaska Native culture and subsistence, and even to Cook Inlet where recreational fishing was more common—inhabitants of Rivers & Interior were less likely to be involved in fishing for salmon either personally or commercially, correlating to a relatively lower level of engagement with the resource discernible in many ways throughout the survey. But like their peers across the state, large majorities of Rivers & Interior residents also showed deep attachment to and concern for the wild salmon resource in Alaska. So, while this area’s inhabitants may be less fish-focused than other locations, their attitudes and beliefs about wild salmon were largely consistent with views across the state.

Asked what they value about living in Alaska, people in Rivers & Interior were most likely to mention freedom and natural beauty, which were also the top two values statewide. In thinking about Alaska’s wild salmon resource, Rivers & Interior inhabitants again resembled their peers across the state in talking about good, tasty eating, the importance of the resource to subsistence cultures, and perceptions of dwindling numbers.

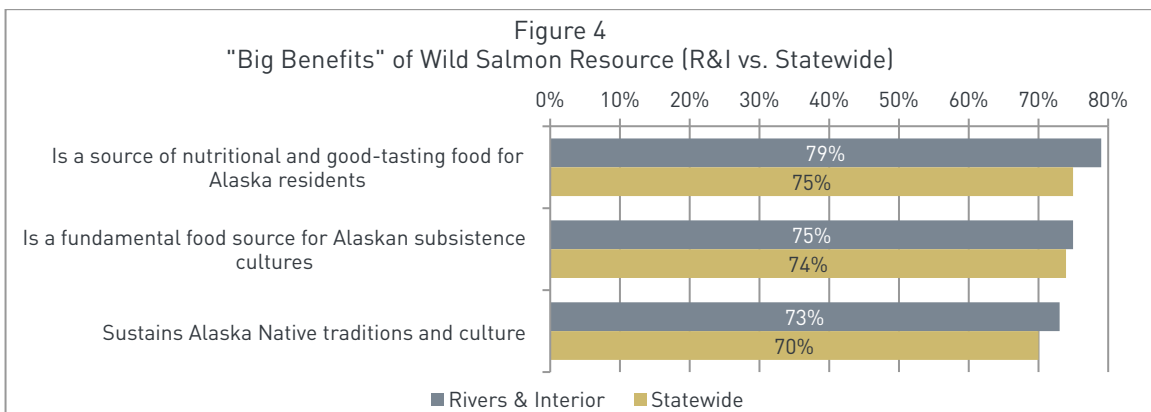
On a 1 to 5 scale where 1=not at all important and 5=very important, responses from the region about the importance of wild salmon averaged 4.5 (see Figure 2)—a strong result, but the lowest among the five regions. Consistent with and possibly explaining this response, Rivers & Interior inhabitants were less likely than other Alaskans to say they were “very connected” to wild salmon (25% vs. 37% in the next lowest region—North—and statewide). This difference was especially notable vis-à-vis the Southwest and PWS/SE (50% and 48% respectively).



Alaskans gave many reasons for their sense of connection to wild salmon. Three connections emerged at the top of every regional list, with at least 84% saying they felt connected either strongly or somewhat through eating, symbolic value, or pride (Figure 3). Overall response from Rivers & Interior residents stayed within seven percentage points of statewide results on other connections as well, such as pride in Alaska’s constitution and sustainable management (78% strongly or somewhat connected in Rivers & Interior), enjoyment of visiting salmon streams and habitat (73%), feeling a benefit from participation in Alaska’s economy (68%), enjoyment of sport fishing (67%), and enjoyment of salmon as an important part of cultural practices (66%).



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 (Figure 4). With respect to middle tier benefits, 51% to 60% of Rivers & Interior inhabitants (compared to 56% to 64% statewide) confirmed the value of providing jobs, attracting tourists, providing social and recreational opportunities, serving as a keystone species and indicating the health of the wider environment, and being a source of identity and pride for Alaskans.

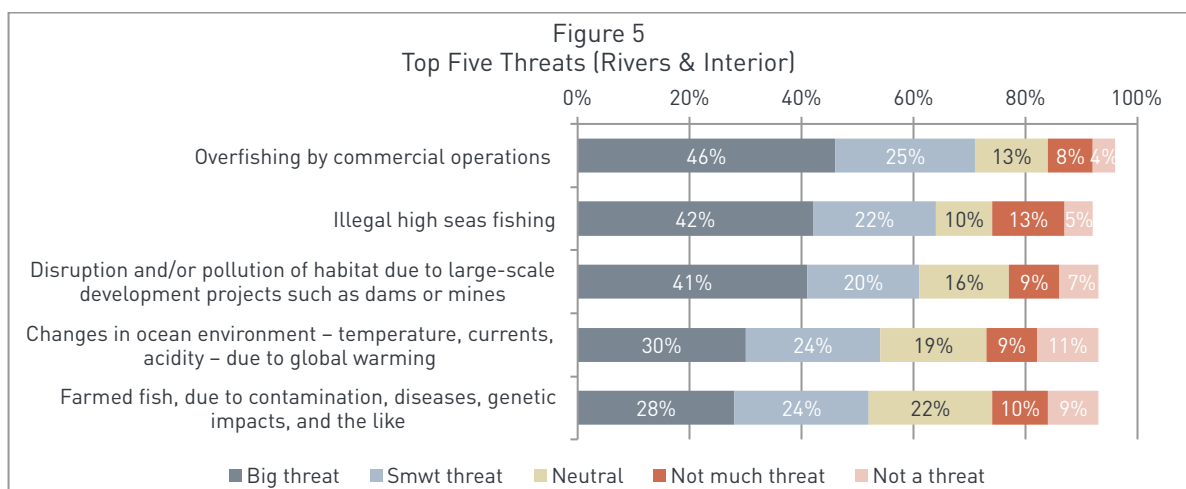


## Concerns and Threats

Eight in ten respondents in Rivers & Interior felt concerned about the wild salmon resource—39% very and 41% somewhat. This result closely matched response across the state as other regions fell between 78% and 83% overall, with similar splits between strong and soft concern in Cook Inlet and Rivers & Interior. The North and the Southwest showed relatively more strong concern.

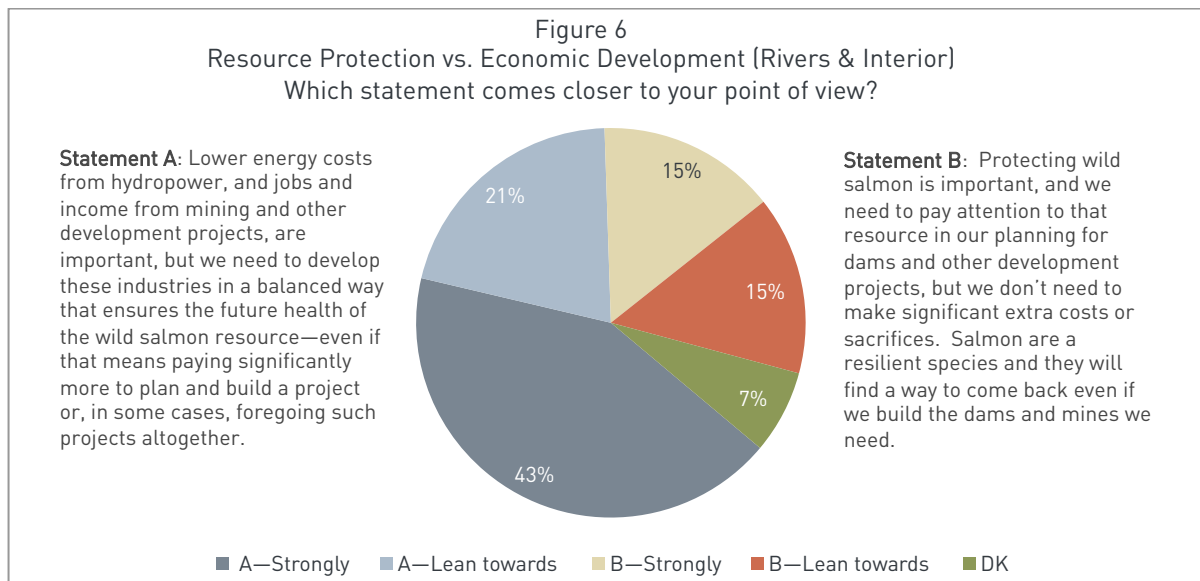
In comments, survey respondents often pointed to the shrinking salmon population and worried about overfishing. Focus group participants in Fairbanks expressed concern about the diminishing king runs on the Yukon. “We’re losing out statewide on king salmon,” said one person who went to the Yukon every year, “[but] last year I didn’t even go.” In the Fairbanks and Bethel groups we heard many concerns about Bristol Bay and its integrity as the last great wild salmon fishery. The two in ten residents who were less or not at all concerned about salmon typically felt there were plenty of fish and that the state was managing the resource successfully.

Figure 5 presents the top five threats to wild salmon identified by survey respondents in the Rivers & Interior region. Overfishing by commercial operations (46%) edged out illegal high seas fishing (42%) as the top big threat, flipping the order but still closely resembling statewide response (41% and 43% respectively). Disruption of habitat due to large-scale projects was the third biggest threat in both populations (41% each). Rivers & Interior residents were less likely than other Alaskans to be concerned about farmed fish as a big threat (28% vs. 37% statewide), but concern over changes in the ocean environment due to global warming was similar (30% vs. 27% statewide).



## 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.



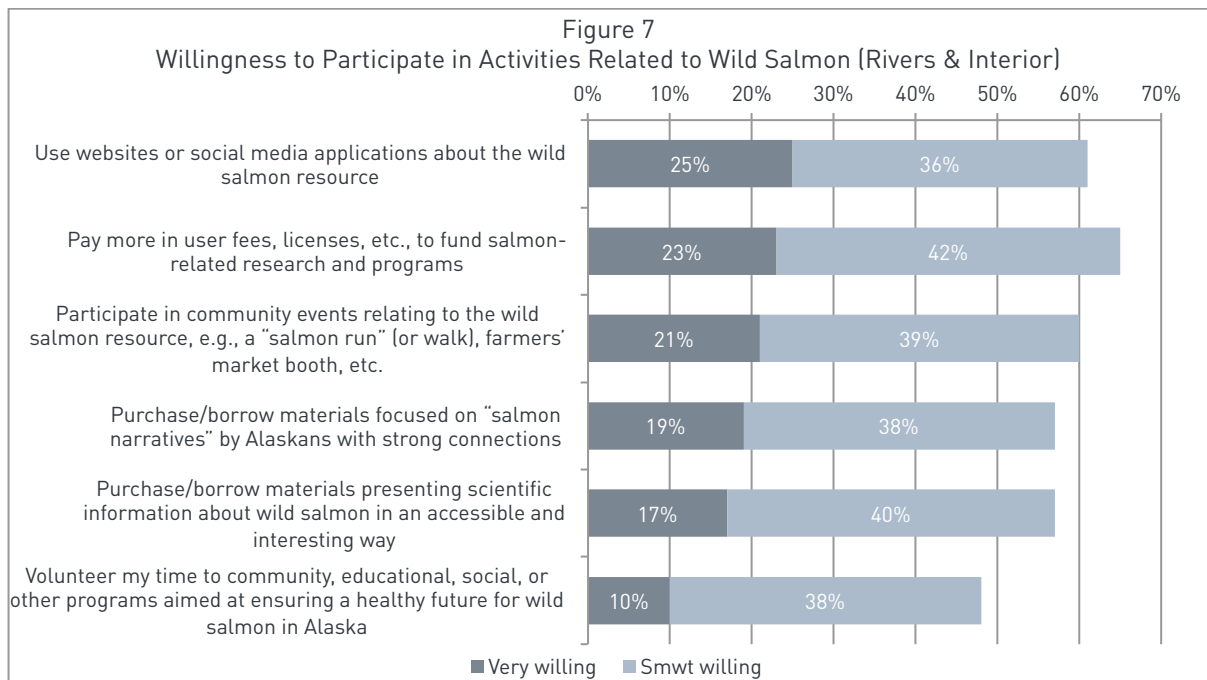
Consistent with trends evident throughout the survey, Rivers & Interior closely resembled statewide response on this question. Four in ten respondents (43%) opted firmly for Statement A, and another two in ten (21%) leaned towards A—very similar to the 46% and 22% statewide. On the other side, 30% in Rivers & Interior strongly supported or leaned towards Statement B (15% each), compared to 25% statewide (13% and 12% respectively). In general, residents expressed the desire for balance—without, however, defining what such a balance would look like. “I listen to all that about all the mining,” said a Bethel focus group participant, “and the disaster to the salmon industry or the salmon fishing. There has to be a way to balance so that the state can survive. So my concern is, let’s find a happy medium.”

## The Outlook for Public Engagement

The research explored the potential for raising public awareness in Alaska and strengthening connections to wild salmon. As in other parts of the study Rivers & Interior resembled peers across the state, but here showed slightly above-average levels of enthusiasm for ways to make a difference in protecting Alaska’s wild salmon resource. For example, 90% of Rivers & Interior respondents thought educational

programs for schoolchildren with an outdoor component where children come into contact with salmon and salmon habitat would be effective in making a difference to the resource. This result was higher than the statewide 85% and second only to the fishing centers of Prince William Sound/Southeast (93%) and the Southwest (95%). Other top proposals statewide were increased public awareness through mass media, improved management with stricter regulations on the heaviest users, and development of scientific materials, community outreach events, and educational materials. With the addition of a university-sponsored summit for stakeholder groups, which ranked relatively in higher Rivers & Interior, these proposals were also the most popular regionally.

In reporting on their willingness to engage in different ways of connecting with wild salmon, Rivers & Interior response again closely mirrored statewide results, diverging no more than three percentage points on any of the six items. Figure 7 presents figures from the region.



## 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."