

THE



PROJECT

CONNECTIONS TO THE WILD SALMON RESOURCE IN SOUTHWEST 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.

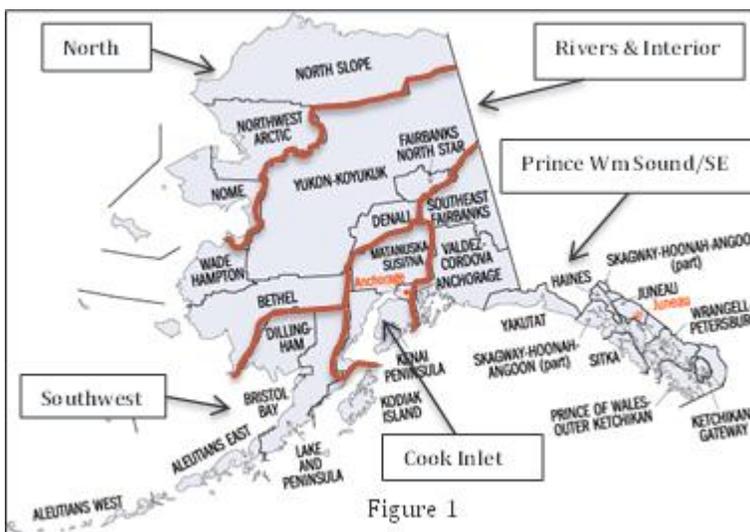


Figure 1

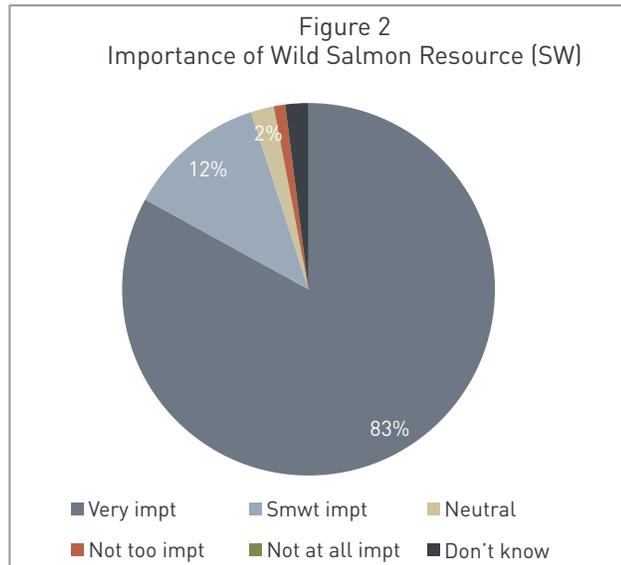
Results from the studies carried out by DHM Research will support the Salmon Project's efforts to develop meaningful, responsive programs that address Alaskans' real interests and needs related to wild salmon. This document presents highlights of research performed in the Southwest region of the state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

figure), consisting of a demographically representative survey sample of 304 residents and one focus group held in Dillingham. 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 Southwest stood out throughout the survey as the most connected, engaged, and enthusiastic of the five regions on wild salmon issues. Inhabitants of the region were among the most likely statewide to work in the fishing-related tourism industry or to sport fish, and were more likely than residents of all other regions to work in the commercial fishing industry or to fish for subsistence or personal use.

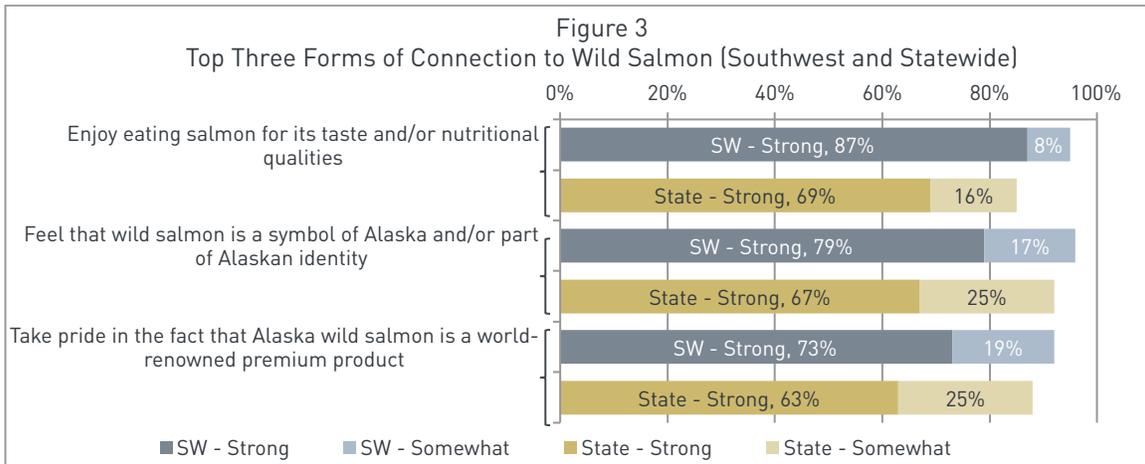
Asked what they value about living in Alaska, residents of the Southwest were most likely to mention the beauty of the landscape, hunting and fishing, and freedom—values that were also widely shared statewide. Culture and subsistence living were relatively more important in the Southwest than any other region except the North. In thinking about Alaska’s wild salmon resource, inhabitants of the Southwest were more likely than all other regions except Prince William Sound/Southeast to point to the economic value of the resource, and less likely to talk spontaneously about good eating or diminishing numbers.



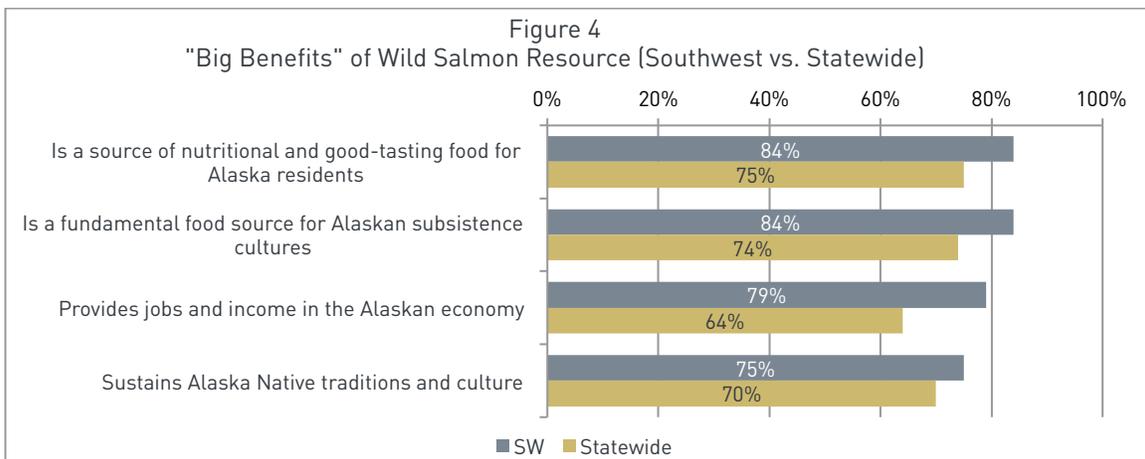
On a 1 to 5 scale where 1=not at all important and 5=very important, 83% of regional residents responded that wild salmon are “very important” (Figure 2), leading to a mean score of 4.8—along with Prince William Sound/Southeast the strongest result statewide. Southwest inhabitants were also more likely than their peers to say they were “very connected” to wild salmon (50% vs. 37% statewide).

Statewide, 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). Southwest residents stood out on these and all other modes of connection we tested. In the middle tier, combined response in the region ranged from a low of 78% for connection through sport fishing (71% statewide) up to 90% for visiting salmon streams

and habitat (80% statewide). Statewide response for the same set of connections ranged from a low of 68% for enjoyment of salmon as part of cultural practices (86% in Southwest) to 81% for pride in Alaska’s constitution and sustainable management of the resource (85% in Southwest).



In a series of questions about the resource’s benefits, survey respondents in all regions valued the nutritional and cultural aspects of wild salmon, where food, subsistence culture, and Alaska Native traditions featured as three of the top four big benefits in every region. In both the Southwest and the state, the fourth related to jobs and income (see Figure 4). Middle tier benefits included social and recreational opportunities, environmental values, attracting tourists, and serving as a source of pride for residents of the state.

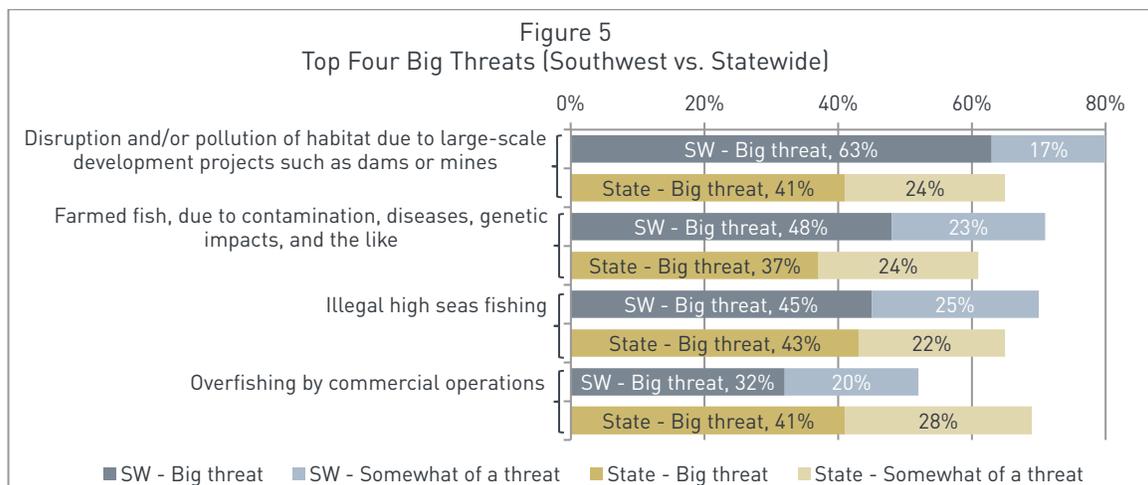


Concerns and Threats

Just over eight in ten respondents in the Southwest (83%) felt concerned about the wild salmon resource. Overall, this result closely matched response across the state, since all other regions fell between 78% and 81%. But only the Southwest had a very concerned majority (54%). Strong concern was also relatively higher in the North (47%), but elsewhere response split more evenly between very and somewhat concerned.

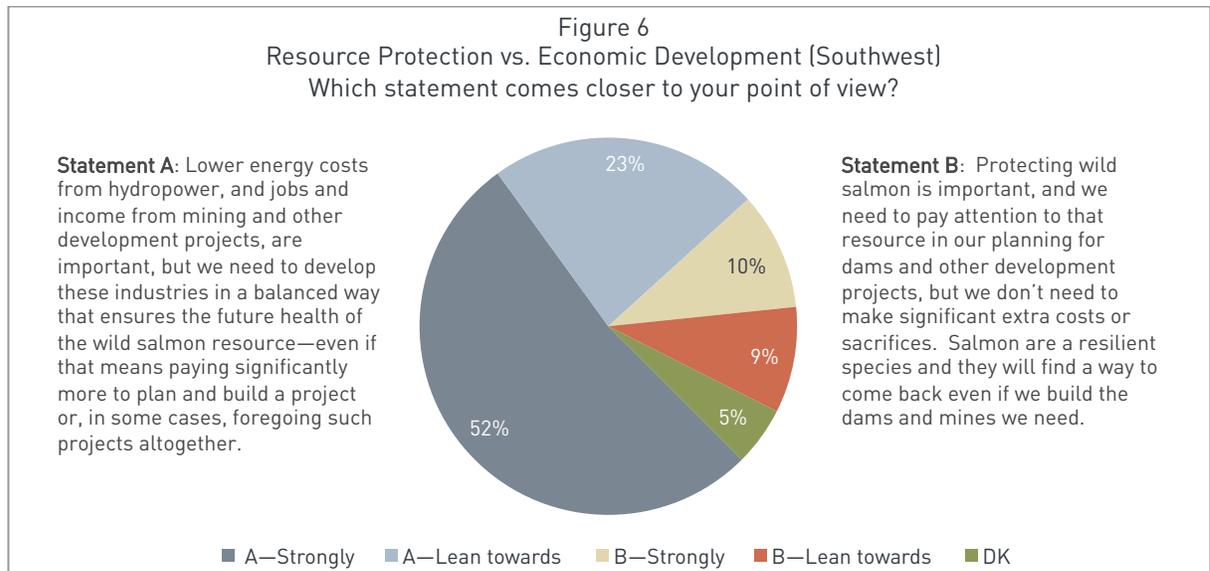
In comments, we heard a great deal about shrinking salmon populations and Pebble Mine—a widespread concern statewide but especially prominent in the Southwest. “I’ve seen what the copper mines have done worldwide,” said one survey respondent from the region, “and they could tell me whatever they want, but I have seen what it can do and it will destroy us.” Residents worried about the integrity of Bristol Bay (“one of the only remaining 100% wild salmon runs remaining in the world,” in the words of a Dillingham focus group participant) and about Alaska Natives and others who rely on salmon for survival. Those who were less or not at all concerned about salmon typically felt the state was managing the resource successfully and that there were plenty of fish.

Concerns about Pebble Mine rose to the top again as more than six in ten inhabitants in the Southwest saw habitat disruption due to large-scale projects like dams and mines as a big threat (Figure 5). This rate significantly exceeded response from other parts of the state, where the more typical figure was four in ten (five in ten in the North). Response rates from the Southwest were also comparatively higher on most other threats, but the region and the state did share the same four items at the top of their respective lists (though in different order—see figure). Concerns about bycatch, invasive species, changes in ocean environment due to global warming, environmental and fishing practices of neighbors, and other forms of habitat disruption were middle tier threats regionally (from 41% to 55% combined big/somewhat) and statewide (44% to 58%).



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, the Southwest and Prince William Sound/Southeast were more likely than other regions to opt strongly for Statement A (52% and 50% respectively vs. 42% to 45% in other regions). In addition, nearly a quarter of Southwest respondents (23%) leaned towards A, bringing total support to 75%. Statewide, combined support for A was also quite high at 68%. Regional lows were 57% in the North, where strong support for Statement B was highest (19%), and 64% in the Rivers & Interior region.

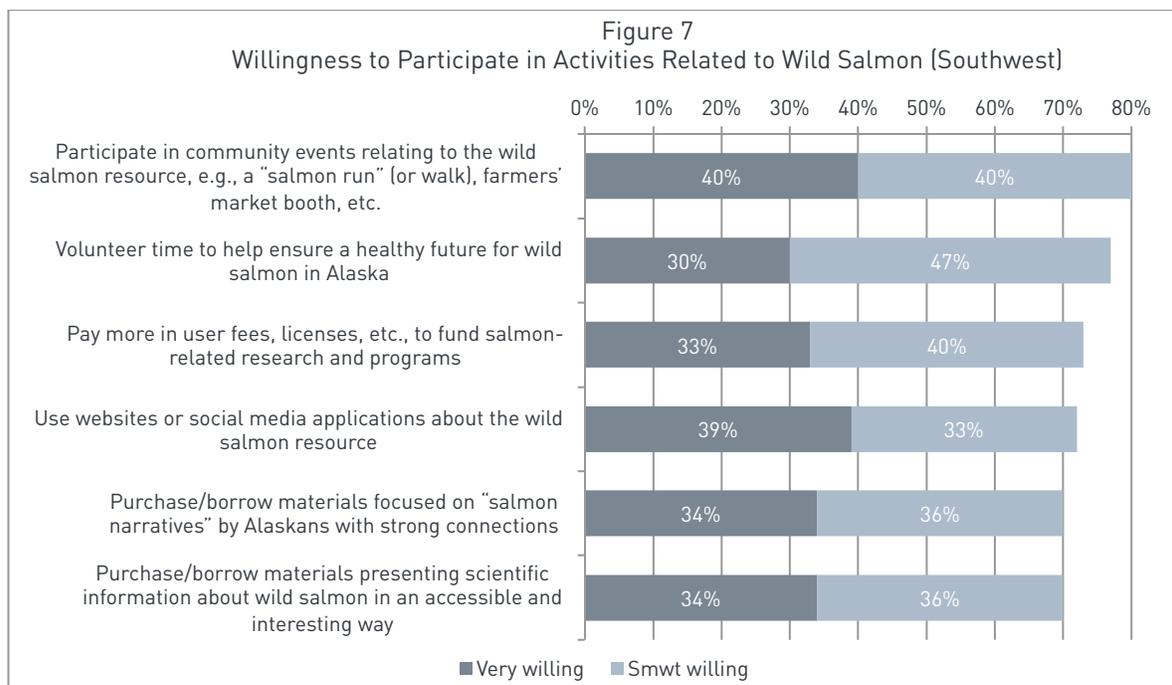
The Outlook for Public Engagement

The research explored the potential for raising public awareness in Alaska and strengthening connections to wild salmon. As in other parts of the study the Southwest led regions in enthusiasm for ways to make a positive difference to wild salmon and for willingness to contribute time and resources to bring that difference to pass.

In terms of ways to make a difference, Southwest response ranged from a low of 77% who said improved management with stricter regulations on the heaviest users of the resource would be very or somewhat effective, to a high of 95% for educational

programs for schoolchildren that focus on salmon and include an outdoor component that brings kids into direct contact with the resource. Educational programs topped the list in every region with combined support of 85% statewide. Other top proposals statewide were increased public awareness through mass media, improved management with stricter regulations on the heaviest users, and development of scientific and educational materials. Except for improved management, which ranked lower in the Southwest, these proposals were also the most popular regionally.

At least seven in ten Southwest residents said they were very or somewhat willing to participate in every one of the six activities tested to raise awareness and strengthen connections to wild salmon. Statewide the range was 47% for volunteering time to 63% for using websites and social media applications. Inhabitants of the North (where cultural ties to salmon were very strong) and Prince William Sound/Southeast were relatively more engaged than people in the Cook Inlet and Rivers & Interior regions; but residents of the Southwest were most engaged of all. Figure 7 presents Southwest results ranked by combined totals.



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. And you can find us on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#) or [YouTube](#) under the username "aksalmonproject."