



OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS RELATING TO ALASKA NATIVE AND SUBSISTENCE USERS

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—North, Rivers & Interior, Southwest, Cook Inlet, and Prince William Sound/Southeast.

The research results—including a general overview, regional highlights, and several subgroup and special interest memos—are available at www.salmonproject.org/research. This document presents observations and conclusions relating especially to Alaska Native and subsistence users, and assumes general familiarity with the survey and related qualitative studies. To put this memo in context, please refer to the more comprehensive description of the research and its results available at the above link.

Value of Wild Salmon as Food and Basis of Native Traditions and Subsistence Cultures

The survey shows that Alaskans place a high value on wild salmon as a nutritional food source both generally and as a fundamental mainstay of subsistence cultures and Alaska Native traditions. At least seven in ten respondents rated as “big benefits” wild salmon’s characteristics as (i) a source of nutritional and good-tasting food for Alaska residents, (ii) a fundamental food source for Alaskan subsistence cultures, and (iii) sustenance for Alaska Native traditions and culture. Economic, environmental, social and recreational advantages followed these food and subsistence values in being seen as big benefits of the resource.

Results reflecting the significance and value of wild salmon to Alaska Native and subsistence cultures were consistent across regions and ethnicities. In contrast, the economic value of the resource showed differences by both region and ethnicity. Regionally, we found that the value of salmon as nutritional and good-tasting food and as a fundamental food for subsistence cultures were the two highest-ranking benefits in every region except the North, where *Sustains Native traditions and culture* ranked higher than *Fundamental food for subsistence*

cultures. By comparison, *Sustains Native traditions and culture* ranked third or fourth in other regions, with competition from economic benefits such as *Provides jobs and income* and *Attracts tourists and sports fishing enthusiasts*.

The strong food connections shone through clearly in verbatim comments from residents explaining why they felt wild salmon was important. By far the most frequent reason volunteered was that people depend on salmon for food (34%). Economic dependence came second at 22%. Verbatim comments like these were representative:

- “I know for many Alaskans that’s their entire way of life—they fish and that’s how they make it through the winter.”
- “It’s a source of food for a lot of Alaskans, and a traditional food for a lot of people.”
- “A lot of people who don’t have access to grocery stores rely on it.”
- “It’s been a way of life since the beginning. Natives rely on it, and I don’t want to see them decimated.”
- “It’s important to Alaska Native culture.”
- “So many people depend on it for subsistence fishing.”

Role of Ethnicity as a Differentiating Factor on Key Issues

The survey revealed many demographic differences by region, gender, age, political and economic views, and several other factors including ethnicity. Many of these differences were predictable, e.g., stronger connections and more economic associations with salmon in the commercial fishing regions of the Southwest and Prince William Sound/Southeast, deeper cultural connections in the North, and differing attitudes towards economic development and resource protection among liberals and conservatives. Ethnicity was one factor among many that often correlated to different points of view. But it was not a material differentiating factor on key issues of the survey relating to the importance and benefits of wild salmon, threats to the resource, and willingness to support efforts to protect it.

For purposes of analysis we focus here on three ethnic categories: whites (representing 73% of the survey sample), Alaska Native/American Indians (12%), and non-white, non-Native (15%). The latter category (abbreviated to NWN in the discussion below) encompasses those identifying themselves as Asian/Pacific Islander (5%), Latino/Hispanic (2%), African American (3%), and Other (5%). The following is an overview of similarities and statistically significant differences by ethnicity:

- Whites and NWNs more often mentioned the beauty of the landscape and outdoor activities in saying what they value about living in Alaska. Alaska Natives more often said simply “it’s my home.” Both Natives and NWNs pointed more often than whites to culture or lifestyle values.

- Respondents of all groups rated the importance of wild salmon similarly (mean values of 4.7 among whites and Alaska Natives and 4.6 among NWNs on a 1 to 5 scale). In explaining why, whites and Natives were more likely than NWNs to mention dependence on the resource for food (36%, 37%, and 24% respectively). Alaska Natives mentioned dependence on salmon fishing for one's livelihood more often than NWNs, and pointed to the cultural significance of the resource more often than whites. Whites were more likely than Natives to talk about economic benefits.
- Whites, Natives, and NWNs expressed concern about the wild salmon resource at rates of about eight in ten (81%, 82%, and 78% respectively), but Natives and NWNs were more likely to be very concerned (50% and 49% vs. 39% among whites).
- In terms of combined strong and soft feeling, the three groups shared seven of ten tested forms of connection to wild salmon at similar rates, including eating enjoyment, feeling that wild salmon is a symbol of the state or part of Alaskan identity, pride in Alaskan salmon as a world-renowned product, visiting salmon streams and habitat, pride in the Alaskan constitution and sustainable management programs, participation in the Alaskan economy, and working in the salmon-related tourism industry.
- Whites expressed more frequent strong and combined strong/soft connections to wild salmon through sport fishing, while Alaska Natives were more frequently connected (strongly and combined strong/soft) through cultural practices or traditions and through working in the fishing industry. Alaska Natives also stood out for more often feeling strongly connected to the resource through visiting streams and habitat and eating enjoyment.
- In balancing resource protection and economic development, whites were more likely than Alaska Natives to favor Statement A¹ (48% vs. 38% strongly and 69% vs. 60% overall). Neither group differed significantly vis-à-vis NWNs on this issue.
- Whites, Alaska Natives, and NWNs returned similar results on nine of 12 tested benefits of the wild salmon resource, including its role as a food source for Alaskans generally and for subsistence cultures, sustaining Alaska Native traditions and culture, serving as a keystone species and indicator of the health of the larger environment, being a source of identity and/or pride for Alaskans, and providing certain social and recreational opportunities. As to the differences, whites saw social and recreational fishing opportunities, attraction of tourists, and providing jobs and income in the Alaskan

¹ Participants were asked which of two statements came closer to their point of view: **Statement A:** "Lower energy costs from hydropower, and jobs and income from mining and other development projects, are important, but we need to develop these industries in a balanced way 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." **Statement B:** "Protecting wild salmon is important, and we need to pay attention to that resource in our planning for dams and other development projects, but we don't need to make significant extra costs or sacrifices. Salmon are a resilient species and they will find a way to come back even if we build the dams and mines we need."

economy as bigger benefits than did Alaska Natives and NWNs. NWNs in turn rated attraction of tourists more highly than Natives did.

- In evaluating ways to make a positive difference to wild salmon, Alaska Natives (and to a lesser extent NWNs) were more likely than whites to endorse the effectiveness of most of the proposed options. But there were no significant differences between whites and Natives regarding improved management with stricter regulations, development and promotion of community outreach programs, and development of accessible scientific and educational materials.
- In assessing threats to the resource, whites, Alaska Natives, and NWNs responded similarly on key issues like overfishing by commercial operations, farmed fish, hatchery fish, illegal high seas fishing, bycatch, changes in ocean environment, environmental and fishing practices of neighbors, disruption of habitat due to large-scale projects like dams and mines, and disruption of habitat due to timber and agriculture harvest. The only areas of difference were the more frequent perception among whites that invasive species posed a big threat to the resource, and, among Alaska Natives, that disruption of habitat due to construction and neighborhood development was a big threat. In addition, NWNs stood out as viewing overfishing by sport, personal use, and subsistence fisherman as bigger threats than did whites and, in the case of subsistence fishing, Alaska Natives.
- Very few differences arose in connection with willingness to support or participate in various outreach efforts. Exceptions were that Alaska Natives more often expressed willingness to buy or borrow salmon-related cultural and artistic materials and to volunteer their time, while whites more often said (*vis-à-vis* NWNs) that they were willing to pay more in user fees, licenses, and salmon-related products.

Feedback from Focus Group and Interview Participants

Both the focus groups and the interviews yielded results consistent with the findings reported above. Again and again participants expressed connections with the wild salmon resource that demonstrated deep cultural ties—often stemming from involvement in or encounters with Native communities and traditions, but also relating to non-Native subsistence practices or the eating and recreational experiences of families and friends. Many personal stories and comments showed recognition that wild salmon is a fundamental component of Alaska Native culture, and also that it is deeply-rooted in Alaskan culture more generally.

Resource management issues were constant themes in the qualitative discussions. Many participants in focus groups and interviews alike expressed positive views about the federal and state management systems and felt the individuals involved generally did a good job. But many others felt the process was too politicized, too susceptible to the influence of money and commercial interests, or not sufficiently inclusive of Alaska Native and rural positions.

These kinds of concerns were expressed more and less succinctly, but regardless of the particular expressions, very often a shared theme lay at the bottom, namely, that we need to make sure wild salmon are available to those who depend on it to live. “We have five major Alaska Native groups here,” said a focus group participant in Anchorage, explaining what she valued about living in Alaska and why the value was related to wild salmon. “And they all depend on it. These major groups – the Haida, the Tlingit, the Eskimos, the Yupiks, and the Athabascan groups – they all depend very heavily on subsistence, and salmon is a big part of that.” In the words of one of the interviewees: “The loss of [the wild salmon] resource means there’s been complete failure to an entire culture of people.” Not everyone spoke to the issue so pointedly, but we heard no contradiction of this sentiment.