



OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS RELATING TO COMMERCIAL FISHERIES

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 the commercial fisheries, 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.

The Alaskan Brand

—“I’m not a fisherman, but I love the salmon. I also love the cadence of the community during the fishing season. I came up the first time in September and had a little sleepy town here. I remember how I was really put out when the fisherman started coming back and there was no place to park on the street. I’m going, ‘Who are all these people, and what is this?’ Then the harbor starting filling up, and there’s just a real buildup with excitement and the anticipation, and the first opener and going down to the docks. That whole thing is just really exciting. Now I’m really caught up in just the environment. And again, I love the cadence of the fishing season. And I like at the end when we just go back to hibernating for the winter months.”

—Cordova focus group participant

—“Anybody who lives in Southeast Alaska or anywhere near the water is connected [to wild salmon], whether they realize it or not. The [fishing] industry, whether it goes up or down—everybody is affected by it.” (Cordova resident)

— “I’ve had four different employment positions here. They’re not directly involved with the fishing, but I think it’s all connected. If there weren’t an economy out here, which is fishing, I know I wouldn’t have a job.” (Dillingham resident)

Wild salmon is widely regarded as *the* Alaskan icon. Personal connections to the resource run deep among residents, reaching into eating habits, fishing habits, personal and cultural identity, employment, and state pride. In discussion and from verbatim remarks in response to survey questions we heard repeatedly about the importance of wild salmon to residents. We also heard about its instrumental role in connecting Alaskans to the rest of the world. Informed that 42% of the international wild salmon harvest and 80% of high-value species come from Alaska, focus group participants were both proud and humbled. “I knew it was high, but I didn’t know it was *that* high,” said an Anchorage resident. “That’s like orange juice. When I lived in Florida, I never realized that we provided like 80% of the world’s orange juice. That’s pretty important.” “[What] that tells me,” said another Anchorage participant, “is that we have a responsibility here. It’s not just Alaskans. It’s the world who is looking at us and depending [on us]. What we do really has an impact on the rest of the world. We’re tied together.” “[Wild salmon] are the Alaskan ‘brand,’ if you will,” said one of our interviewees, using a word that cropped up more than once from research participants across the state.

Perceptions and Attitudes about the Commercial Fisheries

Economic Value. Talking about an Alaskan “brand” implies values relating to identity, culture, and pride—all top benefits of the wild salmon resource and ways in which Alaskans feel connected to it. But the idea of a brand also implies an economic component, and that, too, was a top association for research participants. In an open-response question asking why they thought salmon was important, residents most frequently pointed to people who depend on it for food (34%), but then to people who depend on it for their livelihood (22%) and to its importance to the Alaskan economy in general (20%). Verbatim comments included one observation after another along the lines of, “A lot of people make their living off of fishing for wild salmon,” or “It brings a lot of money into the state. It brings a lot of jobs,” or, “It’s one of our primary industries.”

Asked about 12 particular benefits of wild salmon, respondents were again most likely to see the food (75%), subsistence (74%) and cultural (70%) aspects of the resource as “big benefits.” After that, economics took over. Statewide, 64% identified both *Providing jobs and income* and *Attracting tourists and sport fishing enthusiasts* as big benefits. Residents of the Southwest were especially focused on *Provides jobs and income*, which 79% said was a big benefit, ranking

it third overall ahead of *Sustains Alaska Native culture and traditions*. In the Southwest and Prince William Sound/Southeast, residents felt that their communities lived and breathed according to the rhythms of the fishing season. “Even though I’m not commercially fishing anymore,” said a gentleman in Cordova, “it’s been built up in me so much that I have to go out every time there’s an opener nearby. I have to go out and watch the boats leave. I have to go back out and watch them return. My wife and I have the tide book right there. Even though we’re not going out, we want to know what’s happening out there.”

Statewide survey results reflecting the economic value of commercial fishing and the anecdotal information gleaned from hundreds of verbatim comments and dozens of in-depth conversations make clear that Alaskans regard the commercial fisheries as a fundamental feature of their state’s economic, social, and cultural fabric. But we heard many concerns and criticisms as well.

Concerns about Greed and Overfishing. The most significant concern related to diminishing salmon stocks and the danger of overfishing. In line with the primacy statewide of food, subsistence, and culture over jobs and income in considering the importance and benefits of wild salmon, Alaskans are concerned about the future of the resource and its impact on entire villages and cultures of people. In the survey, respondents statewide viewed *Overfishing by commercial operations* as the top threat to wild salmon when measured by combined “big threat” (41%) and “somewhat of a threat” (28%) response.¹ Focus group participants expressed concern about the size and influence of the commercial fisheries, fearing—in the words of a Fairbanks resident—that they “are being allowed to overfish just for the sake of getting that profit margin.” Another participant said, “To me it seems like our resources are for sale to the highest bidder, and the commercial people are the highest bidder.”

On the other hand, it was not crystal clear what people meant by the phrase “overfishing by commercial operations.” We asked this question in four focus groups conducted after the survey results came in. Some comments reflected concern that commercial operations are allowed to take too much or are short-sighted and greedy: “I understand that this is how a lot of people make their living,” noted a Bethel resident, “but when there are no more fish, there is no more industry.” Another Bethel resident said, “I think as a commercial fisherman, I’m not really concerned with 100 years from now. I’m concerned with how much fish can I get in my boat today. I think that’s true of most commercial fishermen.”

Much more often, however, comments about commercial overfishing pointed to outsiders—“mostly other countries fishing on the open seas,” in the words of a Ketchikan participant. “I

¹The top “big threat” was illegal high seas fishing at 43%.

believe commercial fishing within Alaska’s fisheries is well managed and regulated,” observed a Dillingham resident making a very representative comment. “Therefore not a tremendous risk to the population. [But] commercial fishing outside of Alaska’s fisheries including high-seas drift nets and foreign countries present a substantial risk due to bycatch and over-harvest.” Such remarks offer an anecdotal and potentially slanted point of view—coming as they do from residents of commercial fishing towns—but they suggest that a clear definition of terms is needed to gain a better understanding of Alaskan attitudes towards the commercial fishing industry.

Concerns about Outside Control and Inadequate Economic Contribution. Many people felt the economic value to Alaska of its commercial fisheries should be greater than it is. One focus group participant in particular expressed strong views on the subject: “No commercial fisherman pays one single cent to the government of Alaska for taking a resource that belongs to all the people of Alaska. The mining people pay a tax to Alaska. The oil people pay a tax. The commercial fishermen do not. They take what belongs to all of us and sell it to the highest bidder and pocket 100% of the profit for themselves.” Despite the fact that commercial fishermen and processors do pay taxes to the state,² this point of view was relatively common, and was exacerbated by the widely-held perception that commercial fishing interests often belong to outsiders. A community leader we interviewed said, “Certainly the industry provides a lot of jobs, a lot of economic opportunities in the state. But I think there’s significant outside control, still, through outside processors, outside permit holders who don’t fish here but hire people to do their fishing. The industry by itself contributes very little to the state in terms of taxes.”

“If I were king for a day,” said another of the community leaders in an interview, “I would put a small tax on every fish caught, a dime or whatever, to fund the kind of tracking we need [of salmon in the ocean]. We catch millions of fish every year. No one would object except the big guys. You’ve got foreign ships coming in here that don’t pay anything for the fish they take. Salmon are no less a resource than oil and gas, or gold, or any of that. Copper, the big copper mine out west near Lake Clark—they’ll pay taxes, plus 12.5% of what comes out of the ground goes to the state. And it probably ought to be higher—30%, 40%. It should be the same for fish stocks.”

Need for Unity in a Common Cause. Several participants commented on the poor relations between sport and commercial interests, observing that being at loggerheads with each other does more harm than good to their shared interests in protecting wild salmon for the future. In

² See <http://www.tax.alaska.gov/programs/programs/index.aspx?60620>. The research invited people to share their values and beliefs, and did not attempt to provide corrective or educational information. The belief that commercial fisheries do not contribute tax revenues to the state was widespread.

the words of one of the community leaders we interviewed: “The commercial and the sport industries have to find common ground. It does nobody any good to be throwing bones at each other. There’s always going to be competition, I understand that, but there’s got to be common ground.”

Perceptions and Attitudes of Commercial Users

We asked survey respondents about their involvement in salmon fishing. About a third said they felt strongly or somewhat connected to wild salmon through the fishing industry (30%). Six percent (6%) said they had worked during the previous year in a commercial fishing operation. Thirty-two percent (32%) had fished during the previous year using a subsistence or personal use permit, and 46% had fished with a sport fishing permit. There was also cross-fertilization among these groups: those who fished in one way were more likely than their peers to fish in other ways as well.

In telling us what they value about living in Alaska, those directly involved in commercial fishing were significantly less likely to say “natural beauty” (the number one response category statewide) and more likely to say “hunting and fishing” and “wildlife.” They were also less likely to think about the need for protection when asked what came to mind in connection with wild salmon, and more likely to mention salmon’s importance to jobs and the economy—differences that make sense in light of the commercial fisherman’s active engagement with the resource, and particularly its economic aspect.

When it came to evaluating particular benefits of the resource and threats to it, commercial users responded in ways quite similar to their non-fishing counterparts. We found no significant differences in the assessment of benefits, and only two differences regarding threats: (i) commercial users rated *Overfishing by commercial operations* much lower on a 1-5 scale where 1 = not a threat and 5 = big threat (mean score of 3.0 vs. 4.0 among their non-fishing peers); and (ii) they were much less concerned about a threat from hatchery fish (2.4 vs. 3.1).

Commercial fishermen also resembled their counterparts in how they responded to many other topics in the survey. This similarity covers questions about the balance between economic development and resource protection, the connections of younger Alaskans to the outdoors and wildlife, and the effectiveness of ideas to make a positive impact on the resource. Like other fishermen, those working in the commercial fisheries expressed more willingness than their peers to support community outreach and engagement efforts to protect the resource. Out of six activities tested, commercial users were more willing to support all except paying more for fees, licenses, and salmon-related products—a stumbling block for many other groups as well.