



OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS RELATING TO RECREATION, PERSONAL USE, AND TOURISM

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 recreational and personal use fishermen and the fishing-related tourism industry, 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 was stationed down in Anchorage 12 years ago, and that’s when I fell in love with Alaska. Then I left, couldn’t get back, couldn’t talk the military into sending me back for ten years. So then I had to retire to actually come up here.”

—“I started fishing the year I moved up here, actually the year I came on vacation here and fell in love with it and then moved up here the next year.”

Salmon is widely regarded as *the* Alaskan icon and is closely tied up with what people value about the state. From the Fairbanks resident who moved to Alaska after falling in love with it on vacation to the Air Force retiree who left the military in order to return to his favorite posting, residents report again and again being drawn to Alaska for its beauty, wilderness, outdoor lifestyle and, of course, hunting and fishing.

The Salmon Project's opinion research supports the impression that Alaskans of all stripes widely use, respect, and love the state's distinctive salmon resource. Personal connections run deep, reaching into eating habits, fishing habits, personal and cultural identity, and state pride. In discussion and from verbatim remarks in response to survey questions we heard about the importance of wild salmon to Alaskans, but also about the instrumental role that wild salmon play in connecting Alaskans to the rest of the world. They are "the Alaskan 'brand,' if you will," said one of our interviewees.

The movement from pride in the Alaska wild salmon brand to concern for the resource and responsibility to ensure it remains healthy was an obvious one for many. "Wild Alaska salmon is almost—there's a brand associated with it, and it's threatened," said a Ketchikan woman. "It's not anything we can get complacent about." In Fairbanks we heard that, "As Alaskans, we have a responsibility to protect and further the interest of the salmon. We have something extraordinary here that the rest of the world does not have. And it should be incumbent on us to make sure that we protect that, not only for Alaskans, but for all kinds of people everywhere."

Attitudes of Recreational and Personal/Subsistence Users

We asked survey respondents about their involvement in fishing and the fishing-related tourism industry. About a third said they felt strongly or somewhat connected to wild salmon through working in the fishing (30%) and/or the tourism industry (33%). Six percent (6%) worked during the previous year in a commercial fishing operation, and another 6% worked as an owner, guide, or employee of a tourism operation, outfitter, or other business that caters to fishermen. 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. The groups also cross-fertilized each other, particularly commercial, sport, and subsistence/personal users: 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 fishing or a fishing-related industry were significantly less likely to offer more observational comments such as "natural beauty" (the number one response category statewide), and significantly more likely to say things suggestive of activity and engagement, such as "the outdoors," "wildlife," and "hunting and fishing." Sport fishermen, who were demographically more likely to be Republican and both socially and economically conservative, also stood out for valuing freedom and less government interference.

People who fish for sport and personal/subsistence use were more frequently connected to wild salmon—and more often connected strongly—than their peers in the general population. They also rated certain benefits of the wild salmon resource more highly in ways consistent with

what they valued in their activities. Sport users gave comparatively higher ratings to salmon as an important source of food, as an attraction to tourists, and as providing social and recreational opportunities to fish, to build relationships, character, and values, and to observe salmon and salmon habitat. For their part, personal/subsistence users gave relatively higher ratings to salmon's benefit as a fundamental food source for subsistence cultures, for sustaining Alaska Native culture and traditions, and for providing social and recreational opportunities to build relationships, character, and values.

The stronger connections to salmon and perceptions of the resource's benefits correlated to higher importance ratings in the survey. Sport and subsistence/personal users both gave wild salmon a mean score of 4.8 on a 1 to 5 scale, two decimal points above the rating of their non-fishing peers. Those directly involved in using the resource or who rely on it for food were also more likely to be very concerned about it. Eighty-five percent (85%) of sport fishermen said they were concerned about wild salmon (47% very concerned) compared to 77% among non-fishermen (38% very concerned). Among personal and subsistence users, 49% were very concerned compared to 38% percent of their non-fishing counterparts.

When it came to particular threats, sport users were relatively more sensitive than their non-fishing peers to illegal high seas fishing, commercial overfishing, and bycatch, but less sensitive to threats from habitat disruption due to building and road development and from sport fishing itself. Tourism industry workers gave a much higher threat rating to illegal high seas fishing than did their peers (mean score of 4.4. vs. 4.0). Personal/subsistence users did not differ significantly from their counterparts when it came to threats.

Sport fishermen and tourism workers went farther than their counterparts in supporting Statement A in the balancing test between salmon protection and economic development—i.e., the statement imposing potentially stricter and more costly standards to protect salmon in connection with economic development projects.¹ Sport fishermen in particular were more likely than their non-fishing peers to indicate strong support for Statement A—an interesting result in light of their more Republican and economically conservative demographic.

¹ Participants were asked to indicate their support (strong or somewhat) for one of two statements as follows: **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."

Fishermen—both sport and personal/subsistence—were also more emphatic than their peers in disagreeing with the statement that Alaskans of the future will feel less connected to nature and wildlife than previous generations.

When asked what needs to be done and to evaluate the effectiveness of various proposals to sustain wild salmon in Alaska, the views of fishing enthusiasts and tourism workers were largely similar to those of their peers. Consistent with their stronger connectedness to and concern for wild salmon, however, these worker and user groups showed more frequent and stronger willingness to support outreach and engagement efforts. All three groups responded with relatively greater enthusiasm than their counterparts to all of the tested activities, each with one exception: tourism workers (who were typically younger and lower on the earning scale) were not more willing than their peers to pay more for fees, licenses, or salmon-related products; sport users were not more willing to buy or borrow cultural or artistic materials featuring “salmon narratives”; and personal/subsistence users were not relatively more willing to buy or borrow educational or scientific materials.

Attitudes Towards Salmon-Related Recreation and Tourism

The research provided many opportunities to learn how Alaskans perceive the recreational fishing and tourism industry. For the most part, the response was strongly positive. Attracting tourists and sport fishing enthusiasts to the state was one of the higher ranked benefits of the wild salmon resource—especially after setting aside the top three fundamental benefits related to food, subsistence, and Alaska Native traditions. Sixty-four percent (64%) of the population said attracting tourists was a big benefit of the resource (83% combined big/somewhat), on a par with providing jobs and income in the Alaskan economy (64% big/85% combined).

Focus groups in cities like Cordova, Ketchikan, and Dillingham talked about the dependency of their regions on the fishing industry, referring both to recreational and commercial activity. “We basically live and die as a community, because we revolve around [it]. Our largest industry here is fishing,” said one Cordova resident.

But there were concerns as well—about overcrowding, overuse of certain areas, tensions between sport and commercial fishing, and the behavior of recreational users in the wilderness—particularly outsiders who might not know local traditions or correct practices. A comment from a Cordova resident captures the ambivalence felt by some: “It does bring a lot of sports fisherman into the area, particularly when the silvers are running, which really does put a lot of money into the community. [But] I know that the commercial fisherman don’t like it, and personally my husband doesn’t like it either that the river is so busy.”

The feelings of some crystallized more definitively on the negative side—e.g., the person who spoke of “outfitters [who] take their clients to the airport, and they may have 10 or 15 wetlock

boxes full of filets. I've heard of some people [who] even take that fish that they caught here sports fishing and sell it outside to pay for their trip up here." Or this from a Cordova resident: "Everybody thinks that they own the fish. The sportsmen think they own the fish and they have priority, or the halibut fishermen or whatever. . . . We got yelled and screamed at by this obnoxious young man in a boat because he didn't like where we put our net. . . . I thought, What is this? We live here. We live here year-round. We're just trying to catch some fish for the winter, to have our personal fish. He's just having a great big fit about it like he owns all this fish."

Throughout the research we heard residents express many such concerns about outsiders taking, impairing, or otherwise attempting to control Alaska's salmon resource without paying their fair share or due respect to local rights. Both recreational and commercial fishing gave rise to comments like the one above, or this one from an Anchorage resident: "It's not only the commercial fishing guys. The charter guys go to the Kenai. Ninety percent of the guys catching salmon, guiding for salmon, on the Kenai do not reside in the State of Alaska. Southeast of [inaudible], same thing: 90% of the guides in the State of Alaska for commercial fishing are from the lower 48. They pay nothing to the state, nothing at all."

And we heard observations about the poor relations between sport and commercial interests—more than once accompanied by the sentiment that being at loggerheads with each other does more harm than good to their shared interests in protecting wild salmon for the future. In 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."