



## OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS RELATING TO NEXT-GENERATION ALASKANS

### 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](http://www.salmonproject.org/research). This document presents observations and conclusions relating especially to Alaskans under the age of 35 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.

### Attitudes and Perceptions of Younger Alaskans

Looking at Alaskans under age 35 as compared to middle (35-54) and older (55+) age groups, we find numerous differences through the survey. The differences were often scattered, without establishing clear trends or giving rise to strong conclusions. Nevertheless, an indication does emerge that younger residents feel less connected to the wild salmon resource than the oldest cohort, and that they are less likely to think it important or to be concerned about it. Whether these differences are a normal function of youth that would have been similarly true 30 years ago, or whether they suggest a change in Alaskan values is not clear, but the issues deserve to be watched over time.

Younger Alaskans are less likely than both sets of older counterparts to say they value freedom and the lack of government interference in living in the state. They value beauty more frequently than the middle age cohort, and nature and the outdoors more often than the oldest.

Along with the middle group, younger residents are less likely than their oldest peers to say the wild salmon resource is very important, and more likely to say somewhat important. Again in line with their middle-age peers, the youngest are also less likely than the oldest group to be concerned about the resource. On both issues the response rates are still very strong: more than seven in ten (72%) younger Alaskans say wild salmon is very important, and nearly eight in ten (78%) say they are concerned about it. But the concern is notably less strong in the younger group: 31% are very concerned vs. 43% of 35-54 year-olds and 54% of those over age 55. On the flip side, 15% of the youngest cohort say they are not very concerned, vs. 9% of the oldest.

Consistent with these findings, younger Alaskans (again joined by the middle age group) also report feeling less of a personal connection to the resource than do their older peers. About a quarter (27%) said they were not connected, compared to 17% of those over age 55, and seven as compared to eight in ten said they were connected (70% vs. 82%). In terms of strong connection the difference was 31% among 18-34 year-olds vs. 46% among those over 55.

We find confirmation of these results when looking at particular ways in which Alaskans are connected to salmon. Many forms of connection showed no statistically significant differences—e.g., connection through visiting streams and habitat, through cultural practices and traditions, and through the symbolic aspect of the resource. In other ways there were no significant differences overall, but younger Alaskans less often felt strongly, e.g., sport fishing, eating enjoyment, pride in salmon as a world-renowned premium product, and pride in the state constitution and management practices. In still other ways younger Alaskans were *more* likely to feel connected (e.g., through working in the fishing industry and participation in the Alaskan economy) than one or both of their older peer groups.

Younger Alaskans closely resembled their older peers in assessing the benefits of the wild salmon resource. We found no significant differences by age in mean ratings on a 1 to 5 scale where 1 = not a benefit and 5 = big benefit.

Using a similar scale (1 = not a threat and 5 = big threat), respondents also evaluated threats to the resource. Here we found no statistically significant differences regarding habitat disruption from large-scale projects such as dams and mines; habitat disruption from timber and agriculture; changes in ocean environment due to global warming; hatchery fish, or overfishing by subsistence users. But younger respondents turned in significantly lower ratings of several threats that both older groups viewed more seriously, namely, illegal high seas fishing, invasive species, the environmental and fishing practices of neighbors, and bycatch. They also viewed commercial overfishing and farmed fish as less significant threats than did the oldest age group. On the flip side, the youngest cohort saw overfishing by sport and personal users as bigger threats than did both older groups, and saw habitat disruption due to construction and neighborhood development as a bigger threat than the oldest group.

As one of its important aims, the survey tested how Alaskans felt about the tradeoffs between salmon protection and economic development. Younger residents resembled their older counterparts in favoring Statement A, which imposed potentially stricter and more costly protection standards on development projects.<sup>1</sup> We found no differences by age in combined preference for A. But the balance between strong and soft support for A did differ in ways consistent with the other findings we have discussed: 43% of younger residents strongly supported A as compared to 50% of Alaskans over age 55, while a quarter (25%) leaned towards A as compared to 18% in the oldest group. Support for Statement B revealed no significant differences by age.

The remainder of the survey asked questions about the effectiveness of several ways to protect wild salmon and residents' willingness to support proposals to do so. In an open-ended question, residents over age 55 more often said the way to truly make a difference was through government regulation; by contrast, those under age 35 were more likely than their older peers to suggest community involvement and education.

Relatively few differences emerged in the engagement sections of the study. But older residents were more skeptical than the youngest group about the effectiveness of certain tested proposals (e.g., a university summit of stakeholders, a "state of wild salmon" speech and action plan by the governor, and community outreach programs). And—although older respondents were more likely to strongly support Statement A in favor of increasing public understanding of and connections to wild salmon<sup>2</sup>—they indicated less willingness than their younger peers to actually participate in proposed activities. The younger group was relatively more willing to attend community events, use websites and social media, and buy or borrow cultural/artistic and scientific/educational materials about the resource.

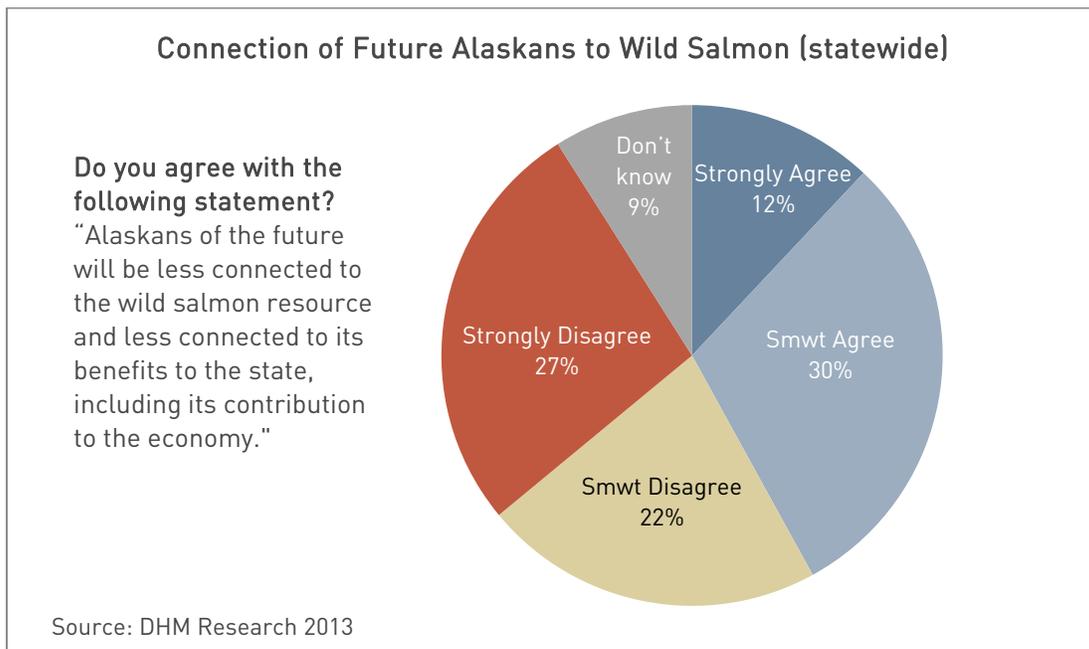
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<sup>1</sup> Participants were asked to indicate their support (strong or somewhat) for one of two statements as follows: **Statement A:** "Lower energy costs from hydropower, and jobs and income from mining and other development projects, are important, 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."

<sup>2</sup> Participants were asked to indicate their support (strong or somewhat) for one of two statements as follows: **Statement A:** "I strongly support the goal of increasing understanding of the wild salmon resource in Alaska and strengthening the connection Alaskans feel to wild salmon." **Statement B:** "Wild salmon may be important but I am not particularly interested in an effort to raise awareness in Alaska about that resource and strengthening the connection Alaskans feel to wild salmon."

## Alaskans of the Future

For the most part our look at next-generation Alaskans is based on statistically significant differences between the views of residents under and over the age of 35. But the survey asked one question directly aimed at finding out what current residents thought future Alaskans would be like when it came to feeling a connection to the wild salmon resource and its benefits to the state. Respondents were more likely than not to disagree that Alaskans of the future would be less connected to the resource and its benefits, but at 49% disagreement vs. 42% agreement it was a close call (see figure). On the other hand, strong disagreement outweighed strong agreement by a ratio of more than two to one.



Disagreement tended to be more frequent and stronger in regions where existing connections to wild salmon were most firm. In the fishing centers of Southwest and Prince William Sound/Southwest, combined disagreement was 59% and 52% as opposed to just over a third who agreed, and strong feeling against the statement rose to 40% in the Southwest. By contrast, Rivers & Interior, where connections to salmon were relatively weaker, was the only region where overall agreement exceeded disagreement (47% vs. 43%). But even then strong feeling was still more common on the side of disagreement (24% vs. 16%). In the North it was a close call: 44% agreed with the statement (20% strongly) while 47% disagreed (24% strongly).

And what about younger Alaskans' views on this question? We found no statistically significant differences by age group in combined or strong agreement. But younger Alaskans did disagree with the statement less often overall than the middle cohort, and they disagreed strongly less often than both older groups. The numbers don't prove anything decisively, but they reinforce

suggestions elsewhere in the survey that younger Alaskans may be less strongly connected to the wild salmon resource. As such, the results suggest an area worth watching as this group of Alaskans moves through the years.