



OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS RELATING TO SCIENCE, RESEARCH, AND MANAGEMENT

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.thesalmonproject.org/research. This document presents observations and conclusions relating especially to people involved in science, research, and management of the resource, 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.

Freedom vs. Regulation

Managers of the wild salmon resource face the challenge of balancing fundamental but competing values in trying to do their job. Alaskans' top two values about living in Alaska, statewide, were natural beauty and the outdoors on the one hand, and personal freedom/lack of government interference on the other. Personal freedom—including property rights, enjoyment of the outdoors, and the ability to hunt and fish as desired without a lot of red tape—was an important value throughout the research as people had opportunities to say what they liked about living in Alaska. In support of strong management, however, we found that Alaskans' connection to the wild salmon resource is related to pride in the state's history of assuming and successfully living up to the responsibility for management. In the survey, for example, eight in ten residents (81%) felt connected to wild salmon through pride in the state constitution and sustainable management.

Other results also show that residents expect and want reasonable controls and enforcement to protect the natural environment generally and wild salmon in particular. In an open question asking what they think really needs to be done to protect Alaska's wild salmon resource for future generations, the top three responses were limiting fishing (21%), more environmental protection (20%), and more/stricter government regulation (13%). In response to a related question, nearly eight in ten (77%) felt *improved management with stricter regulations on the heaviest users* would be an effective way to make a difference to wild salmon (40% very effective). These attitudes suggest that programs and communications must walk a fine line between individual rights and common objectives.

Perceptions of Alaska Department of Fish and Game and Other Research and Management Organizations

Views about the quality of salmon resource management varied, but among the general population favorable remarks about the Alaska Department of Fish and Game far exceeded negative comments. "I don't see any great risk to [the salmon resource] that isn't being managed," said a Kenai/Soldotna woman in a representative comment. "I think we've got people in the Department of [Fish and Game] in this state that are working day and night to make sure that the resource is protected. I trust them as the experts to do it."

A smaller and more localized survey of 150 Mat-Su Borough residents validated our impression from the qualitative research that residents widely respect the Department of Fish and Game. ADFG was the most well-thought of organization tested (followed by the US Fish and Wildlife Service), with 38% reporting a very favorable impression, 30% a somewhat favorable impression, and 19% feeling neutral. Only 7% were somewhat unfavorable and 3% were very unfavorable.

Many of the opinion leaders we talked to echoed these views, praising Alaskan management of the resource and expressing optimism about the future of wild salmon:

- "I think the future is solid. As a fishery, both commercial and sport, and the subsistence fishery, it seems to be fairly well managed. Sustainability is on everyone's mind—it's one of the best managed fisheries in the world."
- "I'm very positive about it. For all the issues that crop up, the Department of Fish & Game is the best resource manager in the world for fisheries. The stocks are abundant—if you look at a graph over the past 100 years, the last 30 years have been in the top producing years. The resource is being well managed."

But in talking to opinion leaders we were also more likely to hear doubts, concerns, and in some cases pointed criticism related to the politicization of the management process, the excessive influence of money and commercial interests, and the underrepresentation of Alaska Native

positions. Some representative quotations raising questions about Alaska's management of the wild salmon resource include:

- “The processes around federal and state management of fisheries are flawed. The bottom line is it’s a political agenda for the most part—not Democrat or Republican, but industry vs. subsistence. It’s an industry-driven process and I don’t think that’s wise for the state or the resource. The public does not get heard, especially if you have a concern or question about how things are being done. I think the state should be willing to conceive of a better process.”
- “Fish wars. Fish politics. I used to say Native politics was rough until I started listening to fish politics.”
- “Generally I feel pretty good about [Alaska’s management of the resource] because we still have laws in place that really support sustainability. Both the federal and the state system generally have worked pretty well, with some exceptions. But I’m concerned about major projects like the Pebble project, and the newly proposed Susitna Dam, which depending on how it’s scaled and designed may or may not interfere with the free flow of the Susitna. So I’m concerned about that, and about the extent to which recent administrations in Alaska are interfering with science in their own agencies in a politically manipulative way that has never been done before in Alaska.”
- “I’m apprehensive about what we’re facing. For most Yukon/Kuskokwim stocks, part of the political discussion will have to be that these stocks have to be preserved for subsistence use, for traditional personal use. It will be a hard pill to swallow.”

Desire for a Fair, Inclusive, and Meaningfully Collaborative Process

The research made clear that Alaskans of all stripes share a strong desire for a fair resource management process that properly weighs and decides among competing objectives while successfully preserving a healthy wild salmon resource into the future. This task, already challenging in its own right, becomes more difficult in conditions of scientific and/or public uncertainty. Many participants expressed doubts about the human ability to know what’s really going on with salmon populations, especially in the ocean and/or as a result of the complex interaction of factors over which we have limited knowledge or control, such as the environmental or fishing practices of neighbors, changes in ocean temperatures and currents, and global warming more generally. The absence of scientific certainty implied, for some participants, greater social and political uncertainty. Indeed, even where the science is certain, lack of accessibility or understanding among the general public may still pose challenges to management. The research revealed numerous widely-held misconceptions, e.g., relating to contributions made by commercial fisheries to state coffers and the most significant threats to the resource.

No one solution came out of the research for how to resolve disagreements over management goals and techniques, but many observed that staying out of allocative issues—or sidelining

them into a separate (and inevitably more political) realm of action—might aid the goals of participation and collaboration in the effort to protect wild salmon. At a certain point allocation has to be addressed, but those who spoke to the issue (typically interviewees) widely accepted that a successful management program had to achieve, at a minimum, sustainable salmon returns for subsistence users. “The loss of [the wild salmon] resource means there’s been complete failure to an entire culture of people,” said one interview participant. The research did not explore the question explicitly, but we heard no contradiction of this sentiment.

The interviews also left us with the impression that respected and educated individuals believe it is possible to better combine Native Alaskan values and traditions with modern scientific management. Part of this task was improving communications—e.g., teaching scientists how to talk to laypeople and those with different cultural backgrounds, and creating opportunities for shared, practical engagement on salmon issues. The need for better communications between the scientists and management professionals on the one hand, and everyday users of the resource on the other, was one of the most consistent messages we heard during the interview process.

We tested the desire for more accessible scientific information in the survey, where we found that three quarters (76%) of residents felt the development and promotion of educational and scientific materials in an informative and accessible manner would be effective in making a positive difference to wild salmon. The studies also emphasized the need for direct forms of action that had tangible results. Residents would appreciate more personal involvement and interaction between scientists and local communities.

The desire to build Native Alaskan values and traditions into salmon (and other resource) management was not confined to communications issues. Several of those interviewed wanted to see Alaska Native organizations become an equal partner in the management process. In the words of one community leader: “Get state and federal biologists and scientists together with traditional and cultural experts—to me, that’s the way it should be. It’s not a bunch of voodoo or hokey spiritual type of stuff. There’s some real science behind why our elders have taught people to hunt at certain times, when not to take animals, when’s the best time to get the fish, how to take care of it. The teaching passed on from generation to generation—it’s completely disrespected. We have people coming here from out of state telling us how to treat the resource. They need to be sure to consult with regional and local representatives.”

Need for Research, Communications, and Leadership from University Segment

The opinion studies suggest that Alaskans look to those involved in education and research for reliable information about salmon and leadership on resource and management issues. In addition to “improved/stricter management,” residents volunteered “more studies/research

about fish” as a way to really make a difference to salmon, and placed a relatively high value on scientific research and university involvement in comparison to other proposed actions. Education in schools and communication with the broader community through accessible scientific materials were also important approaches tested by the survey.

Focus group participants often expressed skepticism about information provided through the media, concern with agendas, and frustration over not knowing whom to trust. Universities—as one of the most trusted sources of knowledge nationwide—have an opportunity to fill this gap.

Survey results also suggest that respondents’ concerns about threats to salmon track with issues featured prominently by the news media, while other important problems are less recognized. In evaluating threats to the wild salmon resource, for example, 43% statewide felt illegal high seas fishing was a big threat—the top result among 14 items tested. This issue has received prominent media attention (see, e.g., “Begich says sink seized fishing vessel,” *Anchorage Daily News*, October 4, 2011). But subsequent conversations with salmon managers suggest illegal ocean fishing is subordinate to many other challenges.