

THE PROJECT

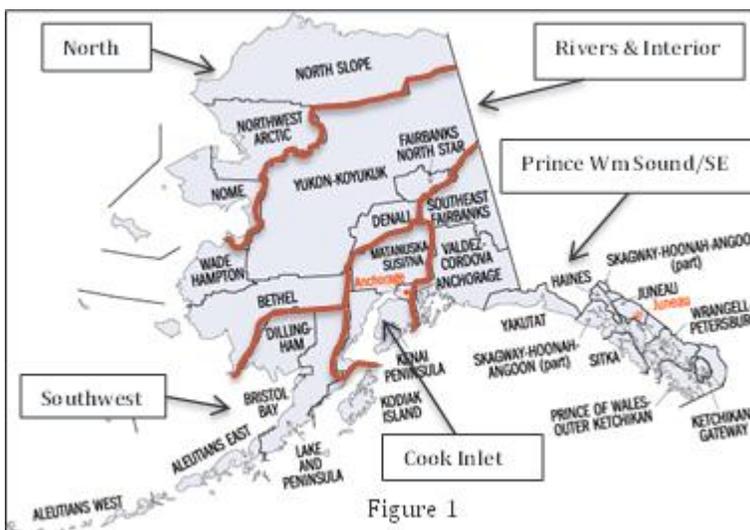


CONNECTIONS TO THE WILD SALMON RESOURCE IN COOK INLET

Highlights of 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 (Figure 1).

Public opinion research is just that—inquiry into the public’s attitudes, beliefs, interests, and concerns on a given topic. For an organization or for policy makers, opinion research is useful in understanding what people think and what they most care about in public life. Research helps organizations make connections with the people they are trying to serve. It helps find opportunities to build on existing passions, and can also identify areas where education and information are needed to bring public perceptions up to speed with the facts.



Results from the studies carried out by DHM Research will support the Salmon Project’s efforts to develop meaningful, responsive programs that address Alaskans’ real interests and needs related to wild salmon. This document presents highlights of research performed in the Cook Inlet

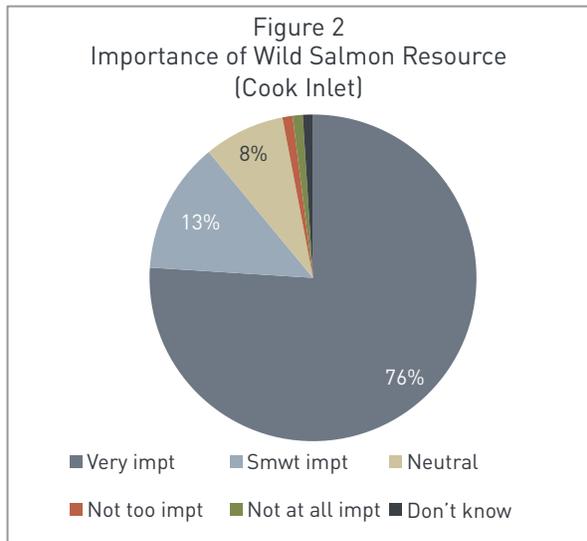
region of the state (see figure), consisting of a demographically representative survey sample of 752 residents and five focus groups held in Anchorage, Mat-Su, and Kenai-Soldotna. More detailed statewide information and results from other regions are available from the Salmon Project at the locations provided on the last page of this report.

Values and Connections

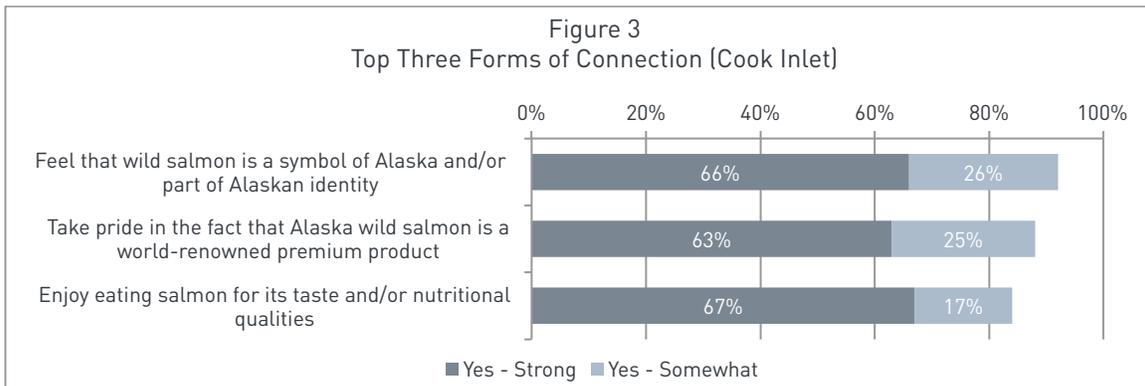
Inhabitants of Cook Inlet (along with Rivers & Interior, whose perspectives they often shared) were less likely than people in the fishing centers of the Southwest and Prince William/Southeast, and in the North with its wider prevalence of Alaska Native culture and subsistence, to be involved in fishing for salmon either personally or commercially. This difference correlated to a relatively lower level of engagement with the resource discernible in many ways throughout the survey. But like their peers across the state, large majorities of Cook Inlet residents also showed deep attachment to and concern for the wild salmon resource in Alaska. So, while this area's inhabitants may be less fish-focused than other locations, their attitudes and beliefs about wild salmon were largely consistent with views in other regions across the state.

Asked what they value about living in Alaska, people in Cook Inlet stood out for mentioning the beauty of the landscape (22%), followed by freedom and the outdoors in general (11% each). These values were widely shared across the state, but Alaskans in certain other regions were much more likely to mention hunting and fishing and, especially in the North and Southwest, culture and subsistence living. In thinking about Alaska's wild salmon resource, Cook Inlet inhabitants most often talked about good, tasty eating, the need for protection, the value of the resource, and perceptions of dwindling numbers.

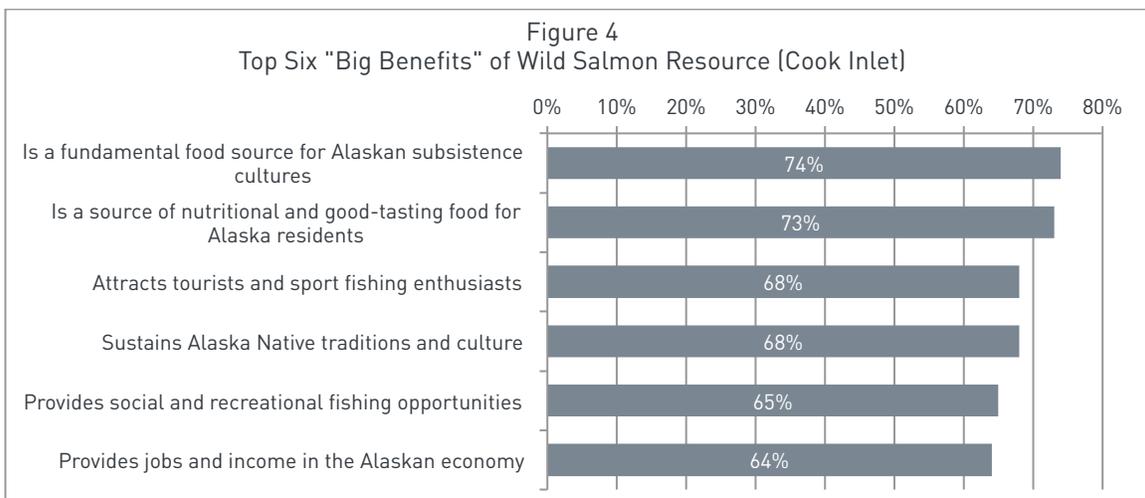
On a 1 to 5 scale where 1=not at all important and 5=very important, responses from the region about the importance of wild salmon averaged 4.7 (see Figure 2), just lower than 4.8 in Southwest and PWS/SE, but higher than 4.5 in Rivers & Interior and 4.6 in the North. Consistent with this result, Cook Inlet landed in middle again in being "very connected" to wild salmon (38% vs. 25% in Rivers & Interior, 37% in North, and 48%-50% in PWS/SE and SW).



Alaskans gave many reasons for their sense of connection to wild salmon. Three emerged at the top of every regional list, with at least 84% saying they felt connected either strongly or somewhat through eating, symbolic value, or pride (Figure 3). In the middle tier, Cook Inlet response ranged from a low of 65% for strongly/somewhat connected through cultural practices to highs of 81% for visiting streams and habitat and taking pride in Alaska’s constitution and sustainable management. Connection through sport fishing and participation in the Alaskan economy, in which wild salmon play an important role, were a combined 72% and 70% respectively.



Survey respondents in all regions valued the nutritional and cultural aspects of wild salmon in a series of questions about the resource’s benefits, where food, subsistence culture, and Alaska Native traditions featured most prominently. In Cook Inlet, attracting tourists, providing social and recreational fishing opportunities, and providing jobs and income also ranked high as “big benefits” (Figure 4).

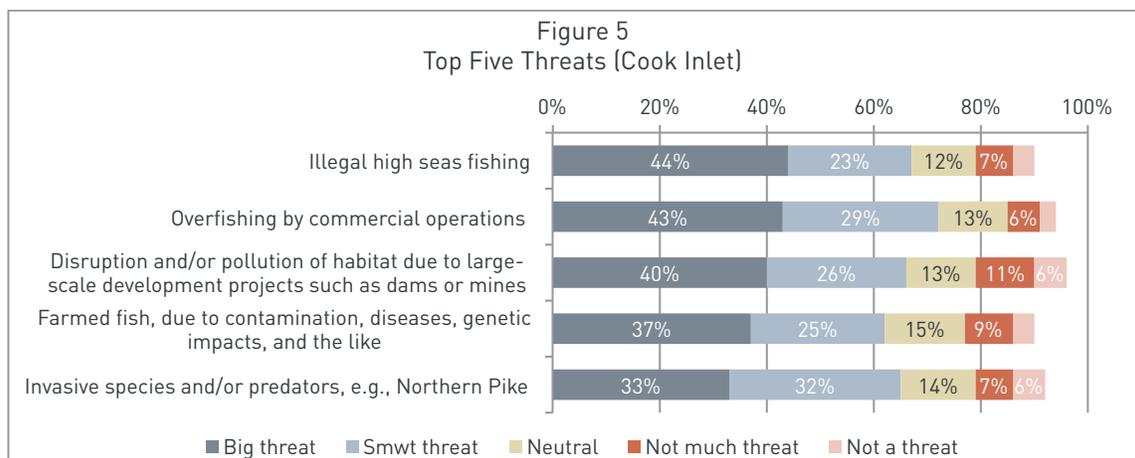


Concerns and Threats

Eight in ten respondents in Cook Inlet were concerned about the wild salmon resource—a very consistent result across all regions. Also consistent was the 42%-39% split in Cook Inlet between strong and soft concern; only the Southwest differed significantly, with 54% very concerned and 29% somewhat. In comments, survey respondents often pointed to the shrinking salmon population and worried about overfishing. “There’s a lot more pressure than there used to be,” said a Mat-Su focus group participant, “a lot more people up here than when I was growing up.” Pebble Mine worried many people. “I think that mining would devastate the resource,” said an Anchorage woman. “I also think that not controlling the international water fishing is devastating to the fish. And building is also . . . I mean there are a whole lot of things. The weather changes, the climate changes. But I think that it would only hurt things faster, quicker, and more if we brought in these huge mines.”

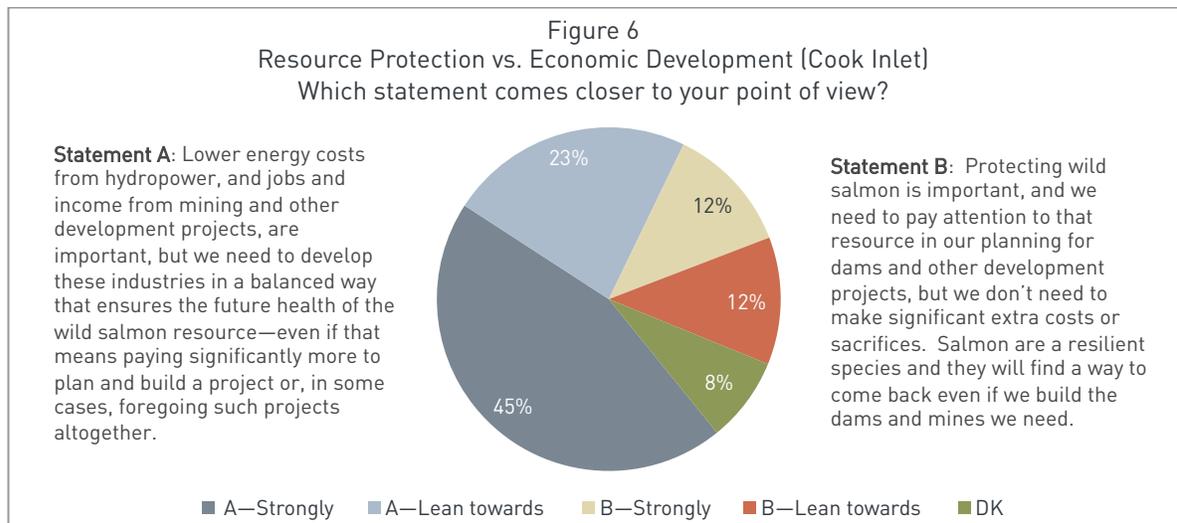
The two in ten residents who were less or not at all concerned about salmon typically felt the state was managing the resource successfully—“I don’t see any great risk that isn’t being managed,” said a Kenai-Soldotna woman—or had faith in numbers and renewability of the resource. In the words of a Mat-Su gentleman: “If anything, the salmon, I’m sure they’re going to be fine.”

Figure 5 presents the top five threats to wild salmon identified by Cook Inlet survey respondents. Illegal high seas fishing, commercial overfishing, habitat disruption due to large-scale development projects, and farmed fish were four of the top five “big threats” in every region. The fifth big threat varied by location and included: changes in ocean environment (30% big/24% somewhat in Rivers & Interior and 28% big/24% somewhat in PWS/SE), disruption of habitat due to building and road construction and neighborhood development (33% big/20% somewhat in the North), and bycatch (30% big/21% somewhat in SW).



Resource Protection and Development – Desire for Balance

The survey tested attitudes about the balance between protecting natural resources and generating much-needed economic activity with two competing statements related to the treatment of the wild salmon resource (Figure 6). The research team gave particular attention to crafting test statements that were “values neutral,” in order to avoid response bias from leading statements.



In Cook Inlet 45% of respondents opted firmly for Statement A, and nearly a quarter more (23%) leaned towards A. These figures were similar to support in Rivers & Interior (43% strong/21% soft) and higher than the North (42% strong/15% soft), which returned the most support for Statement B (19% strong/13% soft). In PWS/SE and the Southwest (where Pebble Mine was an especially prevalent issue), strong support for A was highest at 50% and 52% respectively. Residents in all regions expressed the desire for balance—without, however, defining what such a balance would look like. In an Anchorage focus group, after one participant worried about the potential impact of Pebble Mine, two others spoke up with a message heard frequently in the research: “I can see the relationships, but I also see the value of creating jobs. I think it’s all about responsibly using the resource.” “I agree, I think you can have responsible companies. I do believe in responsible development.”

The Outlook for Public Engagement

The research explored the potential for raising public awareness in Alaska and strengthening connections to wild salmon. Results in Cook Inlet were lower than other regions but still showed a healthy interest in both objectives. In evaluating effective ways to make a difference, regional response ranged from a low of 53% for a “State of the Wild Salmon Resource” speech and action plan by the governor to a high of 81% for

educational programs for schoolchildren that include an outdoor component to bring kids into direct contact with the resource. Educational programs topped the list in every region with statewide support at 85% and a high of 95% in the Southwest. Other top ideas in Cook Inlet were improved management with stricter regulations on the heaviest users (77%), increased public awareness through mass media (73%), and development and promotion of several initiatives, from scientific and educational materials (73%), to community outreach programs (72%), to cultural and artistic materials (70%).

Cook Inlet residents were less likely than their peers to be willing to participate in various salmon-related activities. Still, six in ten said they were willing to use websites and pay more in user fees, and at least half said they would attend community events and buy or borrow salmon-related artistic or scientific materials. Only four in ten were willing to volunteer their time. Response rates for these activities were similar in Cook Inlet and Rivers & Interior, but considerably higher in other regions, particularly the Southwest.

Urban-Rural Differences

In Cook Inlet and Prince William Sound/Southeast the research separately tracked urban and rural populations to explore potential differences in their attitudes. In Cook Inlet, residents outside of Anchorage were more likely to be connected to wild salmon and more likely to engage in sport fishing. In free associating about the resource they were more likely to talk about diminishing numbers (Anchorage residents more frequently mentioned eating and food). They were more likely to be connected through visiting streams and habitat, through sport fishing, and through working in the fishing industry, and they more often saw the opportunity to fish and build relationships through fishing as a benefit of the resource. But when it came to questions about balancing resource protection and economic development, or willingness to join in activities to raise awareness and strengthen connections, we found no significant differences. Nor were there many differences in evaluating threats to the resource—though Anchorage residents were more sensitive to habitat disruption due to large-scale development projects and from building, road, and neighborhood construction—or the effectiveness of programs aimed at making a difference to salmon preservation. Given the number of questions in the survey, the response from urban and rural residents was remarkably similar on most items.

Conclusion

The Salmon Project appreciates your interest in this research. If you would like to know more about what we're doing in your area, or if you have additional insight into regional salmon issues or topics discussed in this report, please share your thoughts. You can contact the Salmon Project at engage@salmonproject.org. And you can find us on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#) or [YouTube](#) under the username "aksalmonproject."