

Proposed Title

Voices from the Coast: Salmon Fishery Dependent Communities in Alaska

Abstract

In southern Alaska and in the North Pacific in general, humans and salmon share space in an intertwined and often complex social-ecological system. This research focuses on three unique fishing communities in different parts of coastal Alaska; Chenega Bay in Prince William Sound, Kokhanok in Bristol Bay, and Tyonek in Cook Inlet. Residents of these small coastal communities have a strong connection to salmon as a valuable resource for their way of life, and continuing to fish for subsistence is seen by residents important not only for their subsistence way of life, but also for continuity of their culture. Subsistence fishing as a family and community activity was unique in all three communities with commonalities between Kokhanok and Tyonek and major differences in the method of fishing with Chenega Bay, yet the importance of the fishery to all three communities was consistent. As the survey results were examined, it became apparent that the baseline should be expanded to other regions of coastal Alaska if possible to gather some basic statistics on which to understand commonalities and differences between regions. These additional surveys administered on the south side of the Alaska Peninsula, Kodiak, and Southeast Alaska also showed wide variations in participation in subsistence and commercial fishing. Some communities showing high participation and income in commercial fisheries and some little to no participation. Results of subsistence participation was somewhat more consistent across coastal Alaska with some showing very high levels of participation and others only moderate. These findings were then compared to results from other studies, both quantitative and ethnographic to understand if there could be common themes throughout. Using quantitative data about one community or region does not tell you the entire story about fishery dependent communities in Alaska, nor does it give you an accurate portrayal even of a single community. These are communities of families and cultures and each is unique. Using more than one as a case study helps to understand these differences. Another lesson learned is that communities should be allowed to tell their own stories, not examined through quantitative analysis.

Vulnerability and adaptive capacity are not values equitable with culture and wellbeing; culture and wellbeing are values more easily understood at the local level. Finally, coastal communities in Alaska are adaptive and the resilience of a community should be measured on a longer time scale. Coastal communities in Alaska have long histories embedded with memory, intertwined lives lived with the water, land, and resources on which their livelihoods are built. Fisheries resource abundance and the intertwined economics of these resources have changed over time, but people adapt because they have social memory, and a desire to pass this memory on to the next generation. Chenega Bay, Kokhanok, and Tyonek, as well as the other communities examined in this research are composed of resilient people who honor their past and are preparing for their future.