

INDIGENIZING SALMON SCIENCE & MANAGEMENT

*Kuskokwim Regional Summary
from Participating
Communities of Quinhagak,
Kongiganak, Bethel, Oscarville,
Aniak & McGrath*



WHY ARE WE DOING THIS WORK?

We want to engage Yup'ik and Athabascan fishers to document Indigenous knowledge, stewardship and ways of governing in hopes of improving salmon management for everyone in Alaska and beyond. This project helps us learn how to make salmon management more inclusive of Alaska Native people, knowledge and governance systems.

HOW DID WE DO THIS WORK?

In 2018, we met with Orutsararmut Native Council (ONC) and the Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission (KRITFC) to discuss the project and receive guidance on how to proceed. Janessa Esquible, Avery Hoffman, Destiny Ropati and Danielle Lowrey conducted semi-directed interviews in 2019-2022.

Learn more about the ISM project at <https://sites.google.com/alaska.edu/ism/home>



From left to right: ISM Circle Dialogue in Bethel, Venes Fishing Family Interview and Cleveland Elder Interview

YUP'IK & ATHABASCAN VALUES, KNOWLEDGE & STEWARDSHIP PRACTICES

**"Without our subsistence way of life, I don't know where we'd be.
- Kathleen Lindsey**

Yup'ik and Athabascan values include: having a deep respect for the Spirit that all life carries, never wasting, only taking what you need, sharing, maintaining a clean fish camp, properly disposing of bones, conserving fish for future generations, intergenerational knowledge transmission, taking care of your food right away, timing the salmon processing with good drying weather and covering the salmon with blood to prevent flies from laying eggs when drying.

Stewardship practices include: Elder and community-led decisions, conserving and self-enforced restrictions based on community needs and values, releasing large female salmon so they can lay their eggs and sustain future healthy salmon populations.

Ancestral stewardship practices include: limiting their fishing to incoming tides and smaller length nets and only fishing the "terminal" fishing areas (the tributaries).

WORRIES & CONCERNS ABOUT KUSKOKWIM SALMON FISHERIES

**"I worry about the king salmon going extinct. I just imagine my kids who love king salmon fishing with a rod. I just imagine my kids not having that opportunity. kind of hard to think about."
-Ferdinand Cleveland**

Environmental and fish related concerns include: high seas fisheries and bycatch, climate change, declining King and Chum salmon populations, declining size of salmon, increased observation of diseases and parasites in salmon, reduced quality of flesh in salmon, reduced stream quality and increased observation of invasive species, depleted food source for marine life and ocean pollution

Cultural related concerns include: not being able to put enough food away for their families, fewer active fish camps, loss of cultural traditions and teachings, younger generations disconnected from cultural traditions and subsistence ways of life and increased invasive species.

Management-related concerns include: criminalization of subsistence, continued lowering of the King salmon escapement goals, no place for spirituality in fisheries management, lack of Tribal involvement in fisheries management, poor relations between agency management and communities, lack of unity in management approaches, lack of regulation of sports fishermen and more boats in Quinhagak Bay due to inriver restrictions.



SALMON MANAGEMENT: WHAT IS WORKING?

"...Who else would be better managers than ourselves?"

- Jacqueline Cleveland

The Kuskokwim River-Intertribal Fish Commission (KRITFC) and the Kuskokwim River Salmon Management Working Group were both identified as strengths of the current salmon management system. The majority of project participants also viewed fisheries monitoring programs including the weirs, sonar and harvest monitoring projects as strengths as well. Some project participants viewed salmon fishing closures and river-wide conservation efforts to rebuild the King salmon populations as strengths of salmon management. Many participants want to continue to see Tribal youth and communities involved in fisheries research. Using Native values including deep listening and respect in management processes that the KRITFC and US Fish & Wildlife utilize in co-management was also viewed as a strength. A middle Kuskokwim River community felt positive about the current regulations on sports fishermen.

SALMON MANAGEMENT: WHAT IS NOT WORKING?

"Why are we fighting for subsistence? That's our right...to get food for millennia from generation to generation...that's our cultural and self-identity..."

- Evon Waska



From left to right: Nancy Simeon-Morgan and mother Betty Simeon processing fish, Charity Guest at her fish camp, and seal drying in Kongiganak.

Weaknesses of salmon management include the political and financially driven aspect of fisheries management in addition to the segmented and disconnected approach, unsustainable and top-down fisheries management approaches, poor management of the high seas trawl commercial fisheries, uncertainty of when people can fish, too many fishing restrictions and conflicts with good drying weather. Many participants felt agency managers lack understanding of the subsistence way of life and how regulations impact villages differently. Criminalization of subsistence and poor enforcement of sports fishermen in Quinhagak area were also viewed as weaknesses. Inequities in fisheries management included the prioritization of sports and commercial fishing over subsistence fishing, regulations not being user friendly and lack of Tribal representation in fisheries management and research as well as management decisions being heavily influenced by western scientific data. While some participants did feel their Yup'ik and Athabascan values were reflected in fisheries management, the majority of respondents did not feel this way. Improved relations between management and villages was also viewed by many participants as a necessary improvement in salmon management.

WISDOM FROM THE KUSKOKWIM

“They [our ancestors] would tell us that if we just leave any or if we have too much to give them away to people that wanted them, not to waste, because they told us that if we waste food too much...later in the years...there won't hardly be any because they said kelgaq.”

-Lucille Mark

“We need to try to conserve what is available to this community. Again, Alaska Department of Fish and Game doesn't want...to allow us to prioritize our community accessing the resource. They want it to be open to everybody unless it becomes a very serious thing.”

- Joshua Cleveland

"These fisheries need to be managed gravel to gravel...every step of the fish life cycle needs to be managed."

- Kevin Whitworth

QUYANA/TSE N'AHN/THANK YOU

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Thank you to Jackie Cleveland, Nancy Simeon-Morgan and Charles Guest for contributing photos to this report.

PROJECT NEXT STEPS

We plan to reach out to fisheries managers and researchers in hopes of conducting semi-directed interviews with them and to get their perspectives on the current salmon science & management processes in the Kuskokwim. We will also create a report summarizing results from what you all have shared with us to distribute to fisheries management and research staff, the Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission and the Kuskokwim River Salmon Management Working Group and Yukon-Kuskokwim Regional Advisory Council. Next, we hope to identify solutions and strategies for moving forward in a positive way and in hope for much needed changes that you all have identified.



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