Subsistence and Commercial Salmon Fishing: Threatened Cultural and Economic Lifestyles

Objective(s)
This research project aims to examine the cultural importance of salmon in commercial and subsistence lifestyles in Alaska. For brevity, I will focus solely on Alaska, as it is one of the last places on earth to still maintain a sustainable salmon fishery (Marine Stewardship Council). Salmon has been central to the narrative of Alaska for thousands of years; the harvesting of salmon traces the historical, political and cultural climate of the state. To understand how salmon continues to shape the lifestyles of the Alaskan people I will examine commercial and subsistence fishing. In the commercial industry I will examine how the rise of industrialization and economic and cultural value of salmon affects salmon fishermen today. In the subsistence portion of the essay I will examine the meaning of subsistence in Native culture as well as the role of salmon and subsistence in Native Alaskan lifestyles. Lastly, the current political struggle over subsistence rights will be discussed.

Summary of Findings

Introduction

“If one had to pick a single feature of Alaskan history that has been the most important to the largest number of people for the longest period of time and in the most ways, there cannot be much doubt about what it would be: [salmon].” –David Arnold, The Fisherman’s Frontier

Alaska is a place characterized by the wealth of its natural resources and the vast expanse of its wilderness. The abundance of the Alaskan wilderness has inherently shaped the narrative of the state, leaving its mark on the history, politics and people. Such richness has in turn has created intense debate and competition over who controls and benefits from these resources. Should priority fall with the Native Alaskans who have made their lives in Alaska for thousands of years, or with the local workers and citizens? Should government bureaucracy control the partitioning of resources, and if so state or federal? And what of capitalism and corporations? How do we promote the economic growth and lifestyles of Alaskans while conserving some of the very last wilderness of the world? This struggle for power and ownership is reflected in the salmon fisheries of Alaska, an industry and lifestyle central to the culture of the Alaskan people.
Fisherman have always been shaped by outside forces—ecological, economic and political (Arnold, 2008). Today, as salmon become increasingly scarcer in the rivers of the world and global demand increases, the livelihoods and lifestyles of commercial and subsistence fisherman are in danger. Fishing, both subsistence and commercial, has created a unique salmon culture that is central to the lifestyles of many Alaskans. Understanding the cultural significance of salmon is essential if we are to realize the far-reaching ramifications of loosing these last stocks of wild salmon. Preserving Alaska’s wild salmon populations is essential if we are to safeguard a rich yet endangered natural resource and preserve salmon cultures that have existed for hundreds and thousands of years.

Commercial Salmon Fishing in Alaska

The Limited Entry Act and Ramifications for the Fishing Lifestyle

To understand the current structure and issues surrounding the commercial salmon fishing industry in Alaska, some key historical events must be considered. Prior to 1973, the salmon industry acted under a common property system, meaning anyone could participate in commercial harvests of salmon. This open access system acted under a laissez-faire principle that promoted industrial exploitation and resulted in the continual decline of salmon populations. In 1973, with conservation in mind, the state passed the Limited Entry Act, which abolished the open fishery in favor of a property rights system that limited the number of permit holders allowed in the salmon fishery (ADF&G, Clark, 2006). This piece of legislation has been critical in sustaining wild Alaskan fish stocks, giving conservationists greater control over harvest size by limiting the amount of gear allowed in the fishery. By regulating the number of fishermen allowed to participate in salmon harvests, the new system pushed for industrialization of the fishery, promoting a more efficient, stable and professional fishing fleet. While the Limited Entry Act has been critical in safeguarding Alaskan fish stocks, this piece of legislation has had lasting consequences for the fishermen (Arnold, 2008; Iudicello, 1999).

The Limited Entry Act of 1973 transformed the salmon fishery from a lifestyle practice to an industrialized business. Fishing in Alaska was traditionally characterized by a mystique of independence; it represented an escape from modern society, offering a simpler life of freedom and autonomy within a vast and untamed wilderness. With the Limited Entry Act such lifestyle fisherman could no longer dabble in salmon fishing. Participating in the new system demanded huge input costs that many fishermen simply could not afford. With fewer fishermen allowed to participate, the same demand for salmon had to be met by a smaller fleet, this pushed for increased efficiency and intensity amongst fishermen. The growing input costs associated with costly permits and modern equipment and boats needed to keep pace with the new levels of competition, pushed those without economic backing out of the fishery and made it harder for family fishing legacies to continue (Arnold, 2008). In recent years there has been an increase in the amount of out of state owned permits; in some rural areas of the state more permits have been transferred out of the area than transferred to (Alaska Fishery Entry Commission, Twomley,
This has worrisome implications for the economic stability of rural communities and many are concerned that the fishing lifestyle is being engulfed by big investment businesses. The most drastic consequence of the limited entry act can be seen in rural villages particularly amongst those who used commercial fishing to offset subsistence harvests. Traditionally, Native communities held a large role in the commercial fisheries; with the new legislation their ability to participate in the market was limited. This development alienated Native fishermen from the industry causing both economic and cultural losses. Commercial fishing had traditionally provided a gateway for subsistence harvesting, which made up for the lower incomes in these communities. By limiting the access of these native communities to the commercial industry, the subsistence lifestyle was also negatively impacted (Arnold, 2008). The limited entry act, while essential for preserving wild salmon populations, has had lasting ramifications for the rural and Native fishing communities of Alaska, affecting economic stability, subsistence practices and ultimately the cultural richness of their fishing communities.

Economic Importance of Salmon and the Impact of Farmed Salmon

The Alaskan salmon fishery plays an integral role in the world’s salmon production and is the most valuable commercial fishery managed by the State of Alaska (ADF&G website). An incredible forty-two percent of the world’s harvest of wild salmon and eighty percent of the world’s valuable commercial salmon (king, sockeye, and coho salmon) come from the waters of Alaska (ADF&G, Clark, 2006). The salmon industry is both valuable and widespread; one hundred and thirty-six communities in Alaska participate in fisheries (Sepez, 2006). A report in 2003 identified 53,900 individuals who earned all or some of their income from seafood harvesting or processing; salmon accounted for 40% of these direct seafood jobs (ADF&G, Clark, 2006). The significance of the Alaskan salmon fishery in the economic well being of its citizens cannot be denied.

In recent years the prices of salmon have fluctuated drastically, driven by the development of salmon farms to meet increasing consumer demand (Knapp, 2007). The risks posed by salmon aquaculture threaten both the wild salmon population and the fisherman who harvest it. David Arnold identifies, “The economic… implications of salmon farming might just prove the most ruinous to small-boat fishermen, whose livelihoods could be rendered obsolete by an efficient system of global salmon mass production.” With the increasing demand for salmon, mass production farming systems meet the year round demand for salmon in ways reduced and seasonal population of wild salmon cannot. The market for farmed salmon is fast increasing, by 2002 farmed salmon accounted for over 60 percent of the world’s salmon while wild salmon stocks accounted for less than 20 percent; and this is only growing. The rise of modern aquaculture is not going to disappear, and globalization will not stop as Economist Gunnar Knap identifies (Arnold, 2008). The question now lies in whether a balance can be struck between wild salmon fisheries and the growing salmon farming industry, and whether or not it will be enough to save the salmon culture, lifestyles, and livelihood of Alaskan fishermen.
Subsistence

"Subsistence living, a marginal way of life to most, has no such connotation to the Native people of southeast Alaska. The relationship between the Native population and the resources of the land and the sea is so close that an entire culture is reflected...Traditional law...was passed from generation to generation, intact, through repetition of legends and observance of ceremonials which were largely concerned with the use of land, water, and the resources contained therein. Subsistence living was not only a way of life, but also a life-enriching process. Conservation and perpetuation of subsistence resources was part of that life and was mandated by traditional law and custom." –Nelson Frank, a Haida from Southeast Alaska

Defining Subsistence in Native Alaskan Cultures

To understand the significance of the subsistence lifestyle in Native Alaskan culture, the meaning of subsistence in these cultures must be made clear. In westernized culture the word subsistence is often associated with poverty and basic survival; in the Merriam-Webster dictionary it is even defined as the “the action or fact of maintaining or supporting oneself at a minimum level.” This perception of subsistence falls in stark conflict with Native cultures’ views of a subsistence lifestyle. In Native culture, subsistence is considered to be a rich and integral part of their society, identity and being. The way in which Native Alaskans define subsistence falls in line with Anthropologist Robert Redfield definition; that subsistence is the sacred and inseparable conjoining of humanity and nature in which interactions are based on exchange rather than dominion and nature is morally significant (Thornton, 1998). To associate subsistence living with welfare degrades the Native perception of the word and removes the meaning from the immense importance the practice holds in Native culture (Thornton, 1998). Such differing perceptions of subsistence have caused many misunderstandings between Native and non-Natives about how subsistence rights should be valued and safeguarded; this is reflected in current Alaskan policies (see Subsistence Rights: a Struggle for Power section).

Subsistence, Salmon and the Native Alaskan Lifestyle

Historically, salmon has played a vital role in the in the lives, culture and society of the Northwest Coast peoples. Salmon became an integral resource for North Pacific coastal people four to six thousand years ago when coastal ecosystems stabilized and promoted abundant salmon runs. The increased use of salmon gave rise to salmon cultures structured around the location and timing of salmon runs. The ability of these coastal people to effectively exploit their natural resources, particularly salmon, is believed to have been a major contributor to societal growth, distribution and success, giving rise to the complex hunter gatherer societies of the Northwest coast (Arnold, 2008)

Today, salmon continues to be a vital component of Native Alaskan culture and subsistence practices. The annual statewide subsistence salmon harvest is over a million fish and fish makes over half Alaska’s annual subsistence harvest (ADF&G, Lemon, 2011). While subsistence accounts for only a small fraction of the commercial harvest it is vital economic and
social sector of rural communities in Alaska. When the value of subsistence harvests are given monetary worth, they are estimated to fall within $134-$268 million dollars annually (ADFG, 2010). Subsistence provides an important economic base for rural economies (Wolfe, 1987), but it is also represents a complex social economy as Thornton identifies, “It is not only about how much you take from the land, but where you take it from, whom you take it with, whom you share it with and in what context.” Communal sharing is integral to the subsistence lifestyle as demonstrated by Tatitlek, a Yup’ik Eskimo community, in which one hundred percent of households gave away and in turn received resources from other households (Thornton, 1998). To this day, subsistence remains a vital practice to Native peoples and rural communities, however the rights of subsistence users remain politically and socially contentious.

**Subsistence Rights: a Struggle for Power**

The subsistence rights of Alaskans remain a highly debated public policy issue to this day, characterized by a power struggle between state and federal governments that begins with the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) in 1971. A large piece of legislation, one of the effects this state legislation had was the revocation of Native Alaskan subsistence rights. After much protest by Native Alaskans, the federal government passed the Alaska Native Interests Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) in 1980, which gave subsistence priority to rural residents in times of need. The state of Alaska failed to adopt this legislation within its own constitution and was therefore out of compliance with the federal rural preference law. This gave the federal government grounds to implement a dual management system of subsistence hunting and fishing in Alaska in which the state regulated state and private lands and the federal government regulated federal land. This dual system is in place to date and remains a sensitive federal, state government power struggle (Thornton, 1998).

From a Native Alaskan perspective, this tenuous subsistence legislation further weakens the legal claims Natives have to their subsistence lifestyle and culture. Rural preference fails to explicitly recognize the claim Native Alaskans have on the land and provides only an indirect and fragile endorsement of Native subsistence rights. The current system sets state and federal government, urban and rural residents, and Natives and non-Natives against one another. The fragile protection of subsistence rights in the current policy has sown social discord amongst many groups and represents a gradual erosion of Native Alaskan subsistence rights, a practice essential to Native culture. As the advocacy group *Cultural Survival* identifies, the current legislation threatens the very survival of Native Alaskan Cultures by threatening their subsistence way of life (Thornton, 1998).

**Conclusion**

Many issues face the commercial and subsistence lifestyles of Alaskans today. The wild salmon populations are depleted world round and Alaska remains one of the last stands of wild fish stock alive today. Thus far, the rich fishing culture and economy provided by commercial fishing and subsistence lifestyles persists within the state; however, pressures of industrialization,
increasing demand, and contentious political policy further threaten wild Alaskan salmon and the fishermen who harvest it. The question now remains, whether wild salmon fisheries can survive within the tides of industrialization and globalization that are redesigning the industry. The story of fishermen in Alaska is one of change and adaption. External forces that remain outside of fishermen’s control vastly determine the livelihoods of these people, and yet despite this, a rich culture persists. For the livelihoods, lifestyles and culture of the salmon culture to survive, the fishermen of Alaska must again adapt to these new pressures of industrialization and globalization and find ways to coexist within the new mass-market salmon production system.

Sources
Thornton, Thomas F. "Subsistence in Northern Communities: Lessons from Alaska." The