The Social and Cultural Dimensions of the Kodiak Island Commercial Salmon Fishery: The Collapse of Prices

ABSTRACT

The Alaskan salmon industry was declared a statewide, economic disaster in 2002 after a decade of declining prices for all species of salmon. Coastal communities, highly dependent on the salmon industry in the state, experienced a decade of rapid change as evidenced by the addition rate of fishermen and vessels out of the fishery, and resulted in the consolidation of the processing sector. The drop in prices displaced thousands of fishermen, as permit and vessel values plummeted. Within ten years the economic viability of the fishery collapsed. While the economic impacts have been recognized (Alaska Salmon Baseline Study, 2003), there is little documentation about the social, cultural, and human aspects of the haze, their families, and communities. In order to better understand the nature of this critical event that spanned over a decade, this paper explores the complexities of the Kodiak salmon fishery from 1991 through 2002, as a "point in time."

KODIAK IS THE MOST FISHERIES-DEPENDENT COMMUNITY IN ALASKA

"Industries that provide the economic base for a region determine the overall prosperity of a community. In Kodiak, the largest fishery industry is the seafood industry."

- Kodiak as the case study
- Sent to 70 salmon fishermen (purposive sample)
- Both year types
- Avg. years in flshing = 30
- 40% response rate
- Fishermen were eager to reply, many responded in weeks.

As the salmon prices collapsed, many were displaced and unable to continue fishing. Not only that, fishermen's traditional savings were made investments in their boats, permits, gear, and equipment.

Ex-Vessel Prices Collapse in 2002

Camaraderie

"There is a bond between fishermen unlike any other that I have seen in other occupations. It is difficult to explain, but I think it comes from facing the same challenges, and persevering in the face of adversity."

"When that legacy is broken, as it was for farming families in the 1960s, the loss to a community can be devastating."

Legacy and Uncertainty

"As it stands now, my two sons are unable to continue fishing even though they would like to, as the economic viability of a fishing community is questionable at best."

Forms of Capital in a Fishing Community: Asset Framework

Financial Capital

Human Capital

Social Capital

Cultural Capital

Salmon fishermen form long relationships. Social interactions are the essence of the place-based work they share.

"It's something only fishermen can understand."

"This next to me go and his family, he is my blood brother, inside from my wife, and a person I trust with everything."

"Being part of a fishing family means that you are affected by facing the same decisions on the water and the same stress and problems."

Three Legacy Goals in a fishing community:

- Enabling their children to have a place to live;
- A means by which to earn a living (standard of living);
- And personal fulfillment in life."

A CRITICAL ASPECT OF CULTURAL CAPITAL IS THE TRANSFORMATION OF "LEGACY" TO THE NEXT GENERATION

Legacy depends on current economic opportunities.

Most fishermen have tried to "weather" the price declines and rationalization.

The base of an industry can mean the loss of all three "Legacy Goals."

Legacy and Uncertainty

"To ensure sustained communities you have to have something for the younger generation to look forward to. They have nothing."

The loss of human, social and cultural capital from fishing communities

"The level of policy success will depend upon how well it promotes the well-being of people living in fishing communities."

If fishery management and policy are to be successful they must integrate human, social and cultural concerns.

"Fishermen are usually isolated in their perception of high degrees of job satisfaction."

Their identities are very strong.

Fishermen do not want to be "stigmatized."

To continue to fish, they need to be able to support their families and have the stress and anxiety of the salmon fishery.

Without a means to their fishing occupation by using examples of maintenance, gear and equipment.

The availability of diversity has led to a decline in the number of fishermen out of the salmon fishery.