Subsistence fishing in the Bristol Bay region of Alaska has persisted for centuries, changing with time and technology, but remaining central to the culture and economy. This thesis examines the effects of federal legislation upon subsistence salmon fishing in Bristol Bay. Looking at conflicts over natural resources through the lens of Alaska Statehood, the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, and the Community Development Quota program within the Magnuson-Stevens Act, the research analyzed how each of these federal laws treated subsistence, and how members of the Bristol Bay community viewed them.

For the residents of the region, and Alaska Natives in particular, Alaska statehood, ANCSA, and ANILCA profoundly affected the aquatic resources of the region and commercial, subsistence, and sport fisheries of the area that used them.

Subsistence in Bristol Bay continues to be threatened by over fishing by both foreign and domestic residents. The CDQ program was proposed to open participation in 1992, and was enacted permanently in 1996.

In the 1980s the gap between total catch for non-resident salmon fishermen and resident fishermen widened, affecting large areas of importance for subsistence and economic development.

For Bristol Bay, these national policies have not entirely resolved decades-long conflicts over the iconic salmon that shape the culture of the region.

The CDQ program was proposed to open participation in 1992, and was enacted permanently in 1996.

It generated more than $65 million for the Western Alaska economy.

BBEDC has used groundfish revenues to fund projects related to salmon including scholarships, ice houses, medical clinics, and boat building.

Bristol Bay Native Corporation received $95,000,000 and about 100,000 acres of land—about 0.3% of the land constituting the Bristol Bay Region.

ANILCA (1980) set aside 200 million acres in national designations; in the Bristol Bay region, these withdrawals affected large areas of importance for subsistence and economic development.

Today, subsistence in Bristol Bay continues to be threatened by over fishing by both foreign and domestic residents.

1. Salmon drying on racks, circa 1919, Naknek River, Alaska. (University of Alaska, Digital Photo Archive)
2. A student intern, funded by BBEDC, at the Sam Fox Museum, Dillingham, Alaska. (J. Blume photo)
4. Map showing the six regional CDQ organizations. (Western Alaska Community Development Association)
5. Map of Nushagak Bay and Kvichak Bay sections of the Bristol Bay region. (The Sam Fox Museum, Dillingham, Alaska)
6. In the Bristol Bay region subsistence is not only important to Alaska Natives but also to non-native residents because the geographic isolation of the region limits access to neighbor fresh foods.
7. A student intern, funded by BBEDC, at the Sam Fox Museum, Dillingham, Alaska. (J. Blume photo)
8. A student volunteer at the Sam Fox Museum, Dillingham, Alaska. (J. Blume photo)
9. Patrick Chiklak repairs a net after picking it clean of salmon, Ekuk, Alaska. (J. Blume photo)
10. Sunset in Dillingham, Alaska. (J. Blume photo)
12. BBEDC puts CDQ money into salmon (commercial and subsistence). The creation of the CDQ program, advocated by local interests, demonstrates the core role of salmon in the region. As Timothy Wolska said, "We have our heritage. We've got our pride. We've got to protect that along with the land because once our subsistence way of life is gone, it is gone." Without understanding the culturally significant link between subsistence and identity, lawmakers cannot hope to create laws that adequately protect subsistence rights.

Discussion

• Bristol Bay is home to the world's largest and most sustainable runs of Pacific salmon, and fish and fishing are the heart of the food supply, the economy, and the culture.

• The intersection of Alaskan Statehood, ANCSA, ANILCA, and the CDQ has created a complex system of resource regulation and responsibility that is incredibly difficult to navigate and can hamper Bristol Bay residents' abilities to practice subsistence.

• The drafters of federal laws looked at the situation in Alaska from an economic and environmental perspective and failed to fully appreciate the nuanced function of Alaskan natural resources – particularly aquatic resources – in Alaska Native culture.

• For Bristol Bay, these national policies have not entirely resolved decades-long conflicts over the iconic salmon that shape the culture of the region.

• It took a grassroots movement of fishermen in Western Alaska to advocate for changes in federal law that leveled the playing field between Native Alaskan fishermen in Bristol Bay and fishermen from outside.

• The resulting CDQ program has proved to be a successful source of jobs, income, and fishing capacity in western Alaska coastal communities.

• Securing access to the lucrative groundfish industry through the CDQ program indirectly helped protect subsistence rights to use coastal and aquatic resources for Alaska Natives in the Bristol Bay region.

• Today, subsistence in Bristol Bay continues to be threatened by over fishing by both foreign and domestic fleets, oil, gas, and mineral developments throughout the region, and the loss of traditional cultural knowledge in the end of contemporary American culture.

Conclusion

Subsistence fishing in particular, a fundamental aspect of life in Bristol Bay, suffered under federal legislation that ignored it, prohibited it, or failed to address the particular nature of salmon. By trying to define subsistence in federal legislation, Congress attempted to describe, at the national level, an activity that is local and conducted differently from region to region, and from community to community. Legislators at the state and federal level failed to grasp the inherently local nature of subsistence culture, which is largely dependent upon Alaska's diversity of landscapes, resources and people. Furthermore, while Congress acknowledged "customary and traditional use patterns" in the language of the law, this acknowledgment looked at the idea of tradition through a narrow historical lens and failed to see the evolution of subsistence practices and the incorporation of technological advances. Statehood, ANCSA, and ANILCA took the practice of subsistence and homogenized it. The federal government came closer to understanding the complexities of culture in Alaska when it created the CDQ program. By organizing the program at the local level, communities are able to put resources into areas of the most significance to them, economically and culturally. More importantly, in the most recent revision of the CDQ program, Congress actually put the decision-making power into the hands of the CDQ local entities, removing the necessity of secretarial approval of local plans. Because of this it has been particularly successful in the Bristol Bay region. Even though the Bristol Bay CDQ makes its money from the harvest of offshore resources such as cod and pollock, BBEDC puts CDQ money into salmon (commercial and subsistence). The creation of the CDQ program, advocated by local interests, demonstrates the core role of salmon in the region. As Timothy Wolska said, "We have our heritage. We've got our pride. We've got to protect that along with the land because once our subsistence way of life is gone, it is gone." Without understanding the culturally significant link between subsistence and identity, lawmakers cannot hope to create laws that adequately protect subsistence rights.