

From the Heart

Fishing people of the North, though resilient, continue to face steep challenges in maintaining their livelihoods

In September 2011, over 150 people from 10 States of the United States (US) and seven countries spent four days together in Anchorage, Alaska, at a symposium titled “Fishing People of the North: Cultures, Economies and Management Responding to Change.”

The symposium provided an opportunity for scholars, fishery managers, fish harvesters and others to explore the human dimensions of fisheries and the growing need to include social-science research in policy development. Organized by the University of Alaska Fairbanks’ Alaska Sea Grant Programme, the symposium was a chance for sharing what we have learned about the opportunities and constraints that fishing people in Northern countries encounter in a time of significant environmental, social and economic change.

It was a fitting topic for a conference in Alaska, since Alaska is a fishing State and Alaskans are a fishing people. Recently, the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) documented that for the 22nd year in a row, Unalaska/Dutch Harbour, Alaska, has remained the largest commercial fishing port in the US. Kodiak, Alaska, is in the top ten every year, as are a number of other Alaska fishing communities—Sitka, Naknek, Petersburg, Cordova, Homer and Seward. Annually, over 50,000 people are involved in the commercial harvest and processing of seafood in Alaska. Thousands more are harvesting fish for sport, subsistence or personal use. At any point in the year, the vast majority of Alaskans

have some locally harvested fish in their freezers, on their drying racks or in glass jars on the shelves of their kitchens.

But why are fishing people of the North unique? In the North, we fish and hunt for marine mammals in rough, cold weather and dangerous waters; we are used to extremes—short days and long dark nights in the winter, long and intensely work-filled days of the summer. And we face geographic isolation. In Alaska, of the nearly 300 communities in the

...fishing people of the North recognize the value of their unique lifestyle through a strong sense of community...

State, the majority do not connect by land, just by water or air—creating hundreds of small virtual islands. Remoteness makes it difficult to access capital to expand fishing operations, information and educational opportunities, and access the public process and our ability to influence decisions that impact our lives.

Unique value

Yet, fishing people of the North recognize the value of their unique lifestyle through a strong sense of community, an identity that is fundamentally tied to marine resources, the ability to see and experience our natural world on a daily basis, and a sense of independence that cannot be replicated.

*This article is by **Paula Cullenberg** (paula.cullenberg@alaska.edu), Programme Leader, Alaska Sea Grant Marine Advisory Programme, School of Fisheries and Ocean Sciences, University of Alaska Fairbanks*

KURT BYERS / ALASKA SEA GRANT



Keynote speaker Clare Swan, from the Kenaitze tribe of Alaska, and her daughter Bunny Swan, who began the conference with a song about salmon

The Fishing People of the North symposium was organized into a number of themes—human/environment relationships; fishing communities in transition; indigenous and rural knowledge and communities; governance and management issues in the North; and celebrating the lives of fishing people.

Three common threads wove their way through the symposium—the impacts and response to rapid change; linking of local and cultural knowledge with science; and the struggle to develop governance of fisheries that value traditional practices.

Northern fishing people have a long history of being resilient to change. Now, however, change, particularly climate change, is happening at an unprecedented rate in the North, and with globalization reaching even the most remote communities, change now is more extreme, more widely felt and faster paced.

Assessing the vulnerability of a fishing community was the subject of an analysis by Hunter Berns, of Icicle Seafoods in Alaska, and Flaxen Conway, of Oregon State University. They ranked vulnerability in a number of Alaska fishing communities by measuring indicators of social, economic and natural capital. Age of fishing permit holders, education levels, capacity in the community for economic diversity, fleet capacity,

unemployment levels, natural capital such as resource base, and risk levels were used in their assessment. The ranking provided communities with information on risk, available for use in planning for the future.

Svein Jentoft, of the University of Tromsø in Norway, argued that in order to survive in a dynamic world, small-scale fishing communities must merge both the global and the local. They must find a way to balance the need to sustain a community's culture and tradition, while being responsive to global threats as well as opportunities.

Examples of fishing communities effectively adapting to change ranged from fishing behaviour in the rural Alaska village of New Stuyahok to planning for change in the coastal salmon fisheries of Japan. Ikutaro Shimizu, of the Institute of Fisheries Science in Yokohama, Japan, suggested that co-operation between hatchery salmon and wild salmon production could serve to buffer resource highs and lows as would economic strategies such as saving more income now in anticipation of less profitable years to come.

New Stuyahok, an Alaska native community, has integrated technology enhancements in boating and fishing into the villagers' lifestyles by shifting their traditional subsistence patterns away from their downriver camps to operate more centrally from their village.

While some might see this as a loss of traditional ways, Jory Stariwat, a graduate student at the University of British Columbia, argued that, instead, the shift reflects the community negotiating through a dynamic mixed cash/subsistence economy by taking advantage of both seasonal employment opportunities in the village as well as pursuing the subsistence harvest of salmon.

Traditional knowledge

The value of 'local' or 'traditional' or 'indigenous' knowledge linking to Western science was a thread presented at the symposium by a number of researchers and fishing peoples from around the North.

Three tribal communities along Lake Iliamna in Alaska were concerned about the lack of knowledge on freshwater seals in the area. They partnered with Jennifer Burns, of the University of Alaska Anchorage, to collect both traditional knowledge and scientific data to characterize the behaviour of freshwater seals. The data will be synthesized to better understand the role of the seals in the human and lake ecosystems.

Drawn to the conference by the link to indigenous harvest of marine resources, a group of native Hawaiians attended the conference and described, both in words and song, their ongoing efforts to reinstate traditional management practices—codified in the 'Aha Moku' system—on the island of Maui.

Tim Troll, of the non-governmental organization Nature Conservancy, described how traditional knowledge used for mapping subsistence harvest patterns along the Nushagak River, combined with scientific data about salmon runs, gave important information to Alaska native corporations, in planning use of their significant land holdings along the river.


Access to resources and governance of fishing harvests were major topics of presentations and discussion at the symposium. Maria Nakshina, of the Barants Centre for Humanities in Murmansk, Russia, discussed how access to local resources is, for rural people, strongly tied to their sense of belonging to place. She noted that local people's tolerance for illegal fishing, as defined externally through regulation, is situational and depends on the level of engagement someone has with place. She noted that this has been an informal means of negotiating entitlement to fishing resources.

Two presenters reviewed the community development quota (CDQ) programme in Alaska, considered one of the most successful rural-development fishing programmes in the country. Aggie Blandford, of the Western Alaska Community Development Association, discussed

how the programme, which allocates 10 per cent of the Bering Sea groundfish allocation to six associations representing 65 local communities, has served as a powerful tool in development and education in the region. Scott Miller, of NOAA, discussed how the programme has faced the challenge of restrictions on groundfish, which provides revenue to the region, in order to protect salmon, the mainstay of the rural subsistence economy.

Around the world, indigenous people are struggling to attain control of their traditional resources, to use that control to enable a higher standard of living and, at the same time, retain and reinvigorate traditional values, knowledge and beliefs. As Martin Robards, of the Wildlife Conservation Society, noted, national or State/provincial resource law and policies, combined with global markets and economic trends, can make participation in resource industries difficult.

The Fishing People of the North symposium celebrated the lives of fishing people through an evening poster exhibition and reception, a poetry reading session titled "Fishing from the Heart", and a final reception at the Anchorage Museum of History and Art and a tour of the Sailing for Salmon exhibit that documents the sailboat salmon fishery in Bristol Bay from the late 1800s through the 1950s.

A common sentiment among the participants of the symposium was that ensuring many of the traditions of the fishing lifestyles of the North, while working to adapt to change, is critical to the well-being of fishing people. Resolution of questions about governance, climate change and the new global society requires interdisciplinary responses that blend Western science, traditional knowledge and economic and ecological understanding. Fishing people of the North, while known for their resilience, continue to face steep challenges in maintaining their livelihoods. 

For more


seagrant.uaf.edu/conferences/2011/wakefield-people/

Sea Grant

www.marineadvisory.org

Marine Advisory Programme