

Alaska Native Policy Center

“Long Term Challenges to Alaska’s Salmon and Salmon Depended Communities”

**A workshop coordinated by the Center for Salmon and Society
Racial and Cultural Equity Dialogue and Work Group Summary
November 1-3, 2016**



Executive summary

On November 2, First Alaskans Institute (FAI) hosted a racial and cultural equity dialogue with participants at the UAF Center for Salmon and Society Workshop held at the Dena’ina Center in Anchorage, as well as a breakout session on the same topic. The racial and cultural equity dialogue was a plenary presentation with questions built in for conference participants to engage in table dialogues. The opening question asked participants to reflect on their personal connection to salmon – not just as researchers, agency employees, managers, or recourse users, but as holistic human beings.

Following this reflection, our dialogue hosts, Ayyu Jorie Paoli and Akall’eq Andrea Sanders, connected their own salmon stories to the topic of equitable access to the salmon resource. Ideas shared included the racially-based policies of Alaska’s boarding school era in disrupting the transfer of important traditional knowledge and skills in our communities – Jorie shared that her mom didn’t cut her first fish until she was 65, in part because she was sent away from Unalakleet to boarding school during her formative years. Andrea shared a concept that indigenous peoples’ have ‘geographic intelligence’ through sustained proximity and active stewarding of the salmon, that an entire way of understanding the resource, the ecosystem, the intrinsic connections between salmon and people is a data set available to us provided through indigenous ways of knowing. Stating *“We as Native peoples’ are scientists, knowledge bearers, rich in experience and hold a wealth of knowledge about our natural resources and human capacity, currently our salmon management system is not capitalizing on this in a meaningful way.”* These stories

helped contextualize salmon utilization and management within not only standard spheres like biology and regulation, but also within broader categories of colonization, assimilation and systemic inequities to demonstrate *why* looking at salmon management from an equity lens is important and necessary. A crucial message delivered was that equality and equity are not the same thing. In this context, FAI staff spoke about equity as the ability to utilize all the various ways of knowing and having the dominate system acknowledge them as valid and legitimate. Further arguing that we must harness these various ways of knowing and experiences, learn from one other, share information to make the most reliable informed decisions for our collective benefit. In a way that moves beyond the occasional inclusion of Traditional Ecological Knowledge when it is supportive to a researchers cause, but instead to recognize, respect and incorporate the geographic intelligence of indigenous people, in an equitable fashion to inform salmon management and underlying systemic decision making processes.

After the plenary conversation, participants spent approximately 25 min at their tables responding to the question: “What holds us back from having **real** conversations about equitable access to salmon? What are we afraid of?” Notes from the table discussions were collected, and participants invited to do a “gallery walk” to read them. Themes and samples of collected notes are shared below.



Participants doing a “gallery walk” to review notes from the equity dialogue.

Themes & Samples of the Dialogue Notes

- There is a lack of trust between groups: White vs. Native, users vs. regulators, etc.
- We want to be polite, not make others uncomfortable by saying what we really feel
- Fear of appearing ignorant, or racist
 - Lack of understanding of other peoples’ perspectives and motives
 - Not wanting to speak up for ‘others’ (not our group) – don’t want to misrepresent them, so instead they get left out of conversation altogether
- Logistical challenges: it costs a lot of time and money to bring people together for big dialogues like this one
 - And when we do, some regions/cultures tend to be better represented than others

- Even with translation to get over language barriers (e.g., for Elders who want to give testimony at agency meetings, etc.), paradigm differences impair communication
 - We may use the same words sometimes – like subsistence, or traditional knowledge – but if our worldviews are vastly different, the meaning of those words will be worlds apart
- Inequities are so deeply seated in history, they’re very difficult to disentangle
 - People feel overwhelmed, don’t know where to start equity conversations/work
- Fear of changing the status quo
 - For some, this translates to fear of losing what little they have, while for others, the (often unspoken/unconscious) fear is giving up positions of privilege
 - Others fear that because our management systems are so complex, if we try to fix one inequity, we may create or increase inequities elsewhere
- We talk primarily with people who already think like us
 - If our own biases and assumptions about the world aren’t being challenged by others, we don’t tend to question them ourselves

Following this racial and cultural dialogue, two panel discussions, one on salmon governance, and the other on the health and wellbeing of salmon-dependent communities reinforced many of the concepts and ideas shared by Jorie and Andrea. Both of these panels addressed issues from our equity dialogue, and helped contextualize specific examples of systemic inequities FAI staff highlighted in their presentation. For example, in the governance panel, speakers discussed how ADF&G listening sessions disempower Elders by mandating community input be limited to 3 minutes – *When have you ever heard an Elder make their point in just 3 minutes?* Giving recognition that Native people come from an oral history where storytelling and making deep connections to things learned over time through observation and synthesis is not conducive to sharing information in a timed 3 minute comment period. Or how the advisory council (AC) structure is more advantageous to urban residents, where you can drive to a meeting at a fairly low cost, as compared to rural residents, who have to make time and financial commitments to fly in from different villages with high cost of transportation and limited resources. The urban ACs can meet in person almost any time they want, but rural folks only have funding for one in-person meeting per year, with the rest of their business done via teleconference – *How often have you ever felt you accomplished anything significant through a teleconference?* Making the point that the AC process has inequities built in it that can be improved upon.

Working Group overview

On the final day of the conference, participants self-selected into one of four working groups to do a deeper dive into pre-identified priority areas. FAI hosted a breakout session on “Building understanding of cultural and racial dynamics in salmon issues.” There were 30 participants, about an even quarter of total conference participants.



Our workshop began in circle with introductions, FAI [dialogue agreements](#) and spending time reflecting on the topics and stories that had been shared over the past 2 days. Some key reflections include:

- How knowing our history can be both empowering and overwhelming
- There is an inverse relationship where the people who are the most dependent on salmon tend to be the people with the least power to make decisions about that resource
- The passion of everyone on stage and in conversation at the conference was evident and encouraging for future progress in equitable management of the salmon resource
- The need to overcome the tunnel vision that dominates so many peoples' perspectives on salmon
- We're in a moment of change, and we need to be comfortable embracing change, getting out of our boxes and comfort zones

Participants then self-identified three key equity topics to explore and discuss, around the question: "To ensure a healthy, equitably accessible salmon resource for the next 10,000 years, what topics must be addressed?" After suggestions were sorted by affinity grouping, topics identified were 1) climate change 2) power dynamics in salmon management systems and 3) co-management/traditional knowledge.

The guiding questions for all three groups were:

- What are the main problems/critical issues
- What is our vision to address these challenges
- What are the knowledge gaps in this area
- What is the pathway to address this issue, and
- What recommendations for change (such as policy or research) do we identify

Highlights from the Working Groups

Power dynamics in salmon management systems:

This group discussed power imbalances in the current system, exploring who makes decisions, and who constructed the systems. It discussed the invisibility of power and privilege, and questioned Alaska's status as the 'Gold standard' in fisheries management in the US, acknowledging that we have a long way to go until we can truly earn that title. Their vision is to create visibility, and restructure our framework, and redistribute power. The pathway to achieve that vision includes tripartite governance split between the state, feds and Tribes in equal partnership; civil disobedience like 'salmon ins' (inspired by the famous 'Barrow duck-in' act of civil disobedience); and changing the appointment process for the state board of fish.

Co-management/traditional knowledge:

This group discussed the problematic, assimilatory, neo-colonial nature of Alaska's current education system; the fact that state laws do not reflect Native groups' roles in governance (or Native values/worldviews overall); and that the standard measure of knowledge, for education, salmon management, and state systems overall, is thoroughly Western, with no room currently for Native ways of knowing. Some of the pathways to address these issues include decolonizing/indigenizing our schools and education system, such as through inviting more Elders into classrooms, and integrating Native culture, values, and worldviews into all aspects of the curriculum (beyond a 'heritage month' or general Alaska studies); reexamining/redefining our credentialing system, so that Native knowledge can be recognized as on par or even surpass Western knowledge ("Elders take precedence over Ph.D.s"); get more Native people in elected office and staffing agencies, and increase recognition of Native values in policies; have the state formally recognize the 231 Tribes in Alaska as governments; and facilitate more exchanges between urban and rural folks, including teachers, students, and policy makers, so they can better understand the importance of salmon in rural communities (it's not just a luxury, it's a necessity and way of life).

Climate change:

This group did not post their notes. Topics discussed included South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu's observation that climate change will be a bigger issue than apartheid, and his recognition that African people will suffer disproportionately from the effects of climate change. In that same vein, both the effects of and attempts to address climate change will create inequitable burdens on Native peoples.



Next Steps

First Alaskans Institute as a member organization of Salmon Connect, is working to connect people through networking and dialogue and to identify and incubate collaborative projects that advance equitable human relationships as core to healthy wild salmon systems.

FAI and our partners will continue to host racial and cultural equity dialogues across Alaska within the salmon and natural resource sector and with the broader public to re-envision an equitable salmon management system, through dialogue build trust and relationships, and through relationships contribute to lasting transformation that will shift our collective culture to one of openness, understanding, and mutual respect grounded on common interests.

If you are interested in working with us to elevate civil discourse and create robust public participation in re-envisioning an equitable salmon system management, are interested in participating or co-hosting a future dialogue, or have ideas for us to consider feel free to contact anpc@firstalaskans.org.

Quyana!