

Title

Sea Change, Know Fish: Catching the Tales of Fish and Men in Cordova, Alaska

Abstract

Cordova Alaska is a coastal community in Southcentral Alaska with an intricate history and identity in commercial fishing, primarily for the Prince William Sound sockeye salmon industry, extending back to pre-statehood. The salmon industry and local ecology has faced numerous transitions as a result of various social and environmental historical influences.

This dissertation collects personal narratives as a method to express cultural features of community identity and the role salmon has played in shaping identity, livelihood, and lifestyle in Cordova. Research is based on oral history interviews from which I construct character portraits to depict salient aspect of resident life in this fishing community and from other seasonal fishermen who use the community to access summer resources. Portraits are performed/ presented in public venues to obtain casual feedback from and review by community members. Each piece and subsequent commentary serve as a basis for analysis and my conclusions about life in this community and, on a larger scale, cultural dimensions common within other communities (either geographic or occupational).

Public performances offer a communication tool that provides a method to share differences within the industry without encouraging explicit controversy over challenging transitions. Although the tool of storytelling does not typically receive significant media or policy attention, I find it very effective in understanding and mediating conflict across different groups of people, especially when the main theme of conflict, sustainability and access to the fishery resource, is a mutual cultural feature to diverse participant groups. Additionally, public creative performances offer a venue of communication primarily designed for entertainment and as a result, the audience interaction with storytellers occurs more casually and perhaps more genuinely than it does in academic conferences or policy meeting venues.

Personalized stories related to the iconic feature of salmon with mutual significance in state and federal fisheries of the North Pacific are a valuable, intimate source of local and traditional knowledge. The opportunity to put meaningful and commonly shared emphasis on the fish as an economic and cultural resource and not on a particular stakeholder group may help lead to improved communications in a field that tends to illicit conflict in consideration of access to change in harvest change over time because although I do refer to direct commentary from the varied groups in the industry, when stories take the voice of a second author rather than as direct testimonial there is a diminished quality in accuracy. However, to emphasize this condition seems extraneous, especially regarding my intention to highlight personal experiences in the industry. It exemplifies some of the communicative conflict between academic analysis and opportunities for public commentary.