

Set netting goes beyond dollars earned

by Emma C. Nicolet
for the Tundra Times

Sandra Borbridge had already unbuckled her seat belt before the Boeing 737 came to a standstill in front of the terminal at King Salmon airport.

OPINION

Yupit Kaniautciat The Way Eskimos Talk

She stood up and hurriedly flung the strap of her heavy leather handbag over her left shoulder and reached for the carry-on bag from beneath the seat in front of her. She pushed her way into the aisle behind the line of passengers advancing in single file toward the forward section of the aircraft where they were to deplane through the open door, down the stairway and onto the paved runway below.

She paused for a moment on the small landing at the top of the staircase. It was 6 p.m., July 2, 1989. The evening sun was orbiting toward the northwest horizon that outlined the outer perimeter of the aquatic triangle of the Naknek-Kvichak watershed. The sun would be setting at 11 p.m. Five hours of sunlight remained to be enjoyed before nightfall.

She had begun making plans to return to Bristol Bay for the 1989 fishing season weeks prior to departing from Washington, D.C. When the temperature reached a sweltering 95 degrees in our nation's capital, she thought longingly of Bristol Bay and the cool refreshing breezes that blew from the southeast off the snow-capped mountain tops and of the soft breezes that invariably changed to gale force winds when blowing from the west, out of the Bering Sea.

The Smithsonian Institute where she had worked for the past five months was remote and far from her mind as she stepped out of the plane into the bright sunlight and clean fresh air. She wasn't surprised that no one was there to meet her. The salmon run had peaked early, and the fishermen were on the fishing grounds tending their nets.

The 1989 pre-season forecast for Bristol Bay's salmon run was average. But when the season got underway, an updated forecast boldly anticipated the return of a near-record run of sockeye salmon to the Naknek-Kvichak spawning grounds.

In response to the optimistic updated forecast released by the Alaska Department of Fish & Game, 998 drift gillnet boats hurriedly rushed to register in the district by June 28. That represented more than half of the drift gillnet fishing fleet in the entire Bristol Bay region.

By July 4, 32 additional boats had joined the fleet, bringing the total number of drift gillnetters ready and waiting to compete for salmon heading toward the shore, over the tide flats and into the river's mouth to 1,030.

But not all of the action was confined to the drifters. A total of 320 set net sites lined the beaches of the Naknek-Kvichak river watershed on the south, north and west side.

The legal distance between each set net site is set at 300 feet. It's illegal for drift gillnet boats fishing outside of the set net sites to come within 100 feet of the set net buoy. The length of net allowed for each set net site is 300 feet. The length of net allowed for each drift boat is up to 900 feet.

No limits are set on the amount of drift gear allowed to fish in a district

because drift gillnetters have the option of transferring to any district in the Bristol Bay region, following a 48-hour waiting period. The overcrowded conditions created when too many drifters move into one area is unfair both to the set netters and drifters whose livelihoods depend on their ability to harvest a fair share of the salmon resources.

As I stood on the bank overlooking my set net site, I watched hundreds of boats heading out to the fishing grounds, just prior to the first 12-hour period opening. The Department of Fish and Game, the regulatory agency headquartered at King Salmon decided to open the fishing period two hours after low water. They believed that the incoming tide would bring the fish closer to shore and cause the inflow of salmon to be more widely distributed throughout the district, thus enabling all gear types to share more fully and equally in the harvest.

Notwithstanding the length of the runout, the tide will sometimes reach the outer set net in time for it to commence fishing soon after the period opens. A number of drifters will often station themselves on the flats outside of these net sites.

When the fish hit the set net, drifters will move to within a few feet of the set net buoy, contrary to regulations, and quickly string out three shackles — 900 feet — of gear, thus effectively blocking off three set net sites at one time. The inflow of salmon heading

denied the opportunity to benefit fully from the near-record harvest of 13,878,800 sockeyes taken commercially from the Naknek-Kvichak district was inevitable.

I spoke to the fisheries management director of the Department of Fish and Game at King Salmon regarding concerns heard by all of us who depend on fishing as our main source of income.

I knew that while the managing agency could not determine the amount of gear allowed to fish in a district, they did have the discretionary authority to regulate the amount of fishing time allotted to both drifters and set netters.

The excessive amount of drift gear allowed to fish in the Naknek-Kvichak district led me to ask the agent whether he would consider opening the period for set netters at low water and for drifters at high water. This would give set netters one good fishing tide out of two or more tides.

He said that he could, but would not. He suggested that set netters should become more competitive, like the drifters, and clear their nets during the incoming and outgoing tides.

But in situations such as mine, where only a small number of salmon make it to shore, clearing my net would not affect it significantly. My largest catch of the season, netted on June 30, was about 260 salmon.

The agent didn't seem to realize or care that some set nets are on dry land

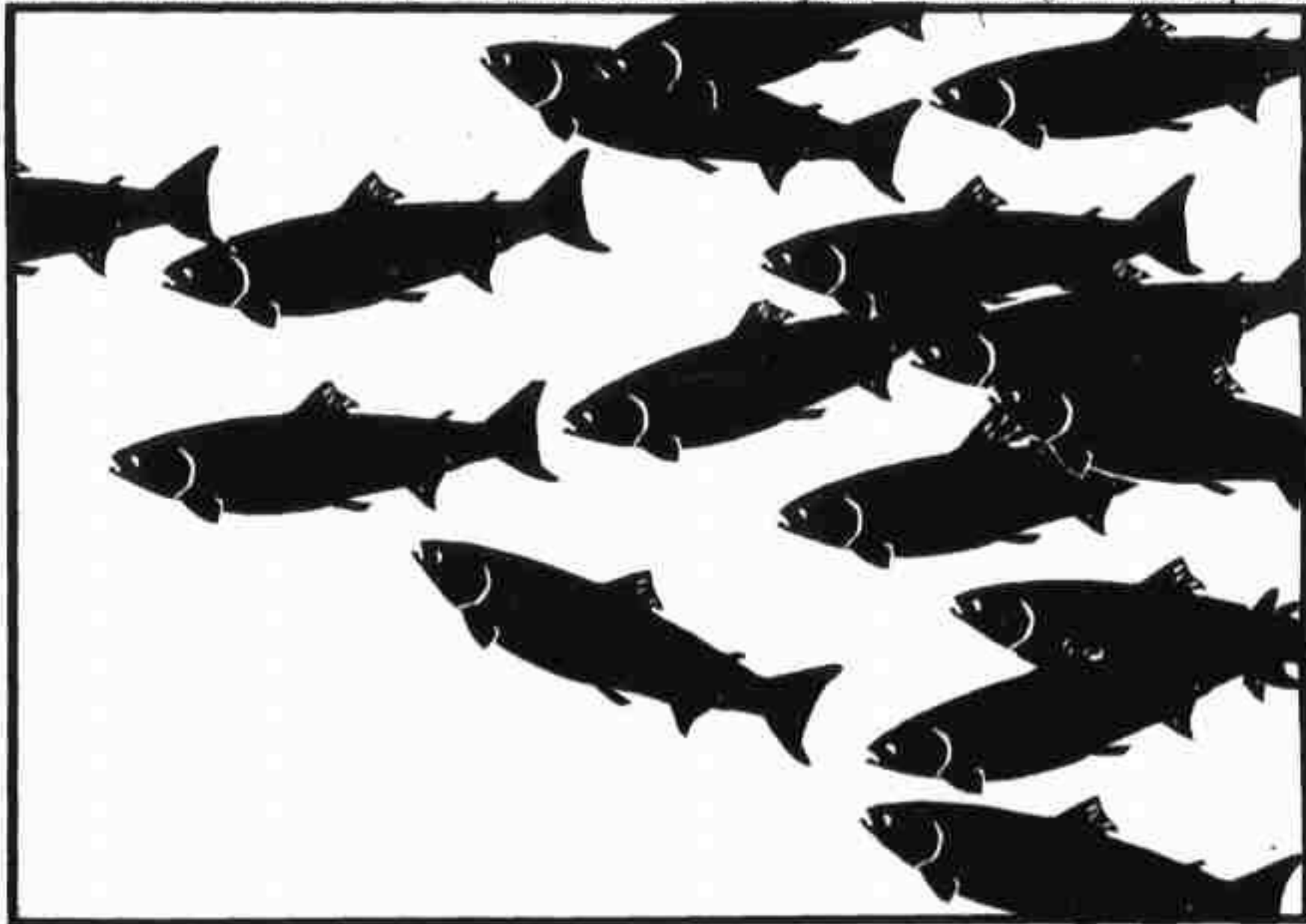
economic hardship because of declining salmon returns. Poor salmon returns led to drastic reductions in fishing time for several years in order to rebuild the salmon stocks nearly wiped out by overfishing.

Beginning in 1979, and through the '80s, the salmon returns have been maintained at a more consistently high level. But despite the millions of salmon that have returned each year to be harvested, the past three seasons have been disappointing to many set netters, due largely to the excessive amount of drift gear moving in to areas in response to optimistic forecasts.

In 1989, drift permit holders outnumbered set net permit holders by more than three to one. The ratio of gear allowed to be used by drifters over set netters in the Naknek-Kvichak district was more than nine to one.

When the limited entry commission was established in 1973, the permit buyback program, which could have reduced the amount of gear in the bay, was never implemented. Drift permits then sold for less than \$80,000. Today, the asking price on the open market is \$280,000.

It's the responsibility of the Alaska governor, the Legislature and the Board of Fisheries to be adequately informed and to recognize the inequities that exist between drifters and set netters with respect to the fisheries resource management agencies' allocation practices. They need a clear understanding of the fisheries process



to the beach and the river mouth is reduced to a trickling few.

The Naknek-Kvichak watershed fisheries management area encompasses about 240 square miles at high tide. As much as 175.56 linear miles of drift gear and about 18.19 miles of set net gear, for a combined total of 193.75 miles of net was allowed to fish that area in 1989.

The Naknek management area is less than one third the size of the two combined areas. Less than 80 square miles of fishing space was open to accommodate the 1,030 drift gillnetters who were allowed to fish up to 175.56 miles of gear during the tides when the Kvichak River was closed.

I believe that it's inconsistent with good management practices to allow that huge amount of gear into such limited areas. Economic hardships for many set netters and drifters who were

at least half of the fishing period, while drifters are able to fish all of the incoming and most of the outgoing tides.

Bristol Bay is home to the many who fish the tidal waters of the bay's shorelines and tideflats. Set netters and drifters who live in the region have continued to enjoy a life that has allowed them to live on the land that has been their home for countless generations.

Since about 1920, when residents began set netting, commercial fishing has provided the means for them to make a living, to be independent and to keep in step with the changing times. But fishing cannot always be measured solely by the dollars earned. Some seasons are good and some are poor.

Prices are never the same from year to year. Prior to 1979, fishermen experienced eight successive years of

and should demonstrate a willingness to respond more sensitively to concerns expressed by the bay's residents who depend on fishing as their sole means of earning a living.

The limited entry plan also included a provision to "...allow for the orderly and efficient harvest of allowable commercial take and not cause serious economic hardship to those currently engaged in the fishery."

Historically, the Alaska regulatory agency had always opened each fishing period for both drifters and set netters at the same time, regardless of the stage of the tide and what the impact on set netters might be.

Continuation of these practices has often caused set netters to lose a valuable portion of the incoming and outgoing tides because they had to set

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• Salmon delivered with a wiggle in their tails

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out their nets after the period's opening or to pull in before the period's closing.

The economic well-being of the set netters cannot be attributed solely to the number of salmon harvested in a season.

Their success also depends largely on the amount of actual fishing time they are allowed as they seek to harvest their fair share of the bay's salmon resources.

I look forward to the summer when I return to fish the shoreline and tideflats of Bristol Bay. With each passing year, I become more aware of what the bay has to offer me in terms of my personal growth and satisfaction.

It gives me the opportunity to grow stronger physically. My mental outlook on life becomes more clear. My spiritual growth is enriched. It inspires me to respond more fully to the mysterious life cycle that unfolds before me each year. It increases my understanding of what it means to be in tune with my surroundings.

I treasure the memories I have of my parents and how they taught me to appreciate the land we live on and the life that surrounds us. But most of all, I appreciate the time I share with my children and grandchildren and friends as we learn and grow closer together while fishing in Bristol Bay.

Sandra learned to appreciate being as one with her surroundings from her grandmother while fishing with her in Bristol Bay, but she had never fully appreciated its importance until that day last summer, when the plane began its descent into the Naknek area.

The aircraft leveled off at 10,000 feet in preparation for its final ap-

proach to the King Salmon landing field. The visibility was unlimited beneath a pale blue sky. She saw the sweeping tundra stretching from horizon to horizon, broken only by small hills and innumerable lakes. It was then that she knew, with sudden clarity, what it meant to be coming home.

The taxi ride from King Salmon to downtown Naknek seemed endless because of other arriving passengers who were dropped off at their respective homes along the way to downtown Naknek. While she didn't mind seeing places in Naknek that she had never seen before, she was anxious to be reunited with members of her family. She had not seen any of them for six months.

Half an hour after we left our fish camp and arrived at the trailer in uptown Naknek, her taxi pulled into the driveway. Among the many pieces of luggage she carried were several boxes filled with edibles and presents for her nephews, J.T. and Phil.

A few minutes after she arrived, it seemed as though she had never been away.

"Well, guys," she said to Phil and J.T. "the first thing on my list of things to do tomorrow is to cut my nails. No more polish on them for the rest of the summer."

A 10-minute drive by truck from the trailer to our camp took us over a stretch of dirt road that curved over high ground and low tundra before it ended on the beach south of Monsen Creek. Our camp was just beyond.

A special dinner had been planned by Sandra and brother John over long-distance telephone several weeks prior. A four-course meal was to be

topped by grilled steaks. Dessert would include a variety of fresh fruit from the public market in Seattle.

As the sun dipped into the ocean and disappeared, J.T., Phil and Auntie stood near the edge of the bank silhouetted against the paling sky. The two boys proudly wore their newly acquired Batman hats.

"I'm spending the night with Dad," J.T. said as he dashed across the boardwalk to Dad's cabin.

"I'm spending the night at Grandma's cabin," Phil said.

Sandra scanned the tundra behind the cabin before retiring to see if any caribou had moved into the area. None had.

The next day Charles spotted what he thought was a caribou wandering alone on the tundra. Sandra looked through the binoculars and exclaimed, "It's a bear!"

It was the first bear ever to wander in our area since we began fishing many years ago.

With our camp crew rounded out at six, it took me about 45 minutes to prepare a breakfast of sourdough hot cakes on the twin burner Coleman camp stove. Our meals and our going to bed and getting up usually coincided with the incoming and outgoing tides. Sometimes breakfast was delayed until noon, with lunch and dinner following at four- or five-hour intervals.

On July 3, the p.m. tide was closed to fishing. The day was warm and slightly overcast. At high tide the fish began to jump in areas near the shore where we set our nets during open periods. Mom always used to tell me, "Fish like to swim near the beach where the sun warms the water."

Like magic the fish appeared from

the ocean depth and jumped as if shot from underwater cannons. Their silver bodies shimmered in the bright light of day.

They took one, two, three, four, five leaps, one after the other as if making a few practice leaps before challenging the rapids they would encounter on their way up the river to the spawning grounds.

After swimming for hundreds of miles from the deep ocean, they were ready to undertake the final phase of their long journey.

I believe, as my parents taught me, that life in all forms is a gift. We should respect it and not waste it. Greed should not be allowed to have us take from one another what is given for all to share.

I can accept a poor season, but I find it hard to understand why some drifters are able to catch thousands of pounds of salmon in one tide, while my net brings in only 200 or 300 pounds.

Set netting is an important part of commercial fishing in Bristol Bay. But less appreciated is the fact that set netters deliver the best quality salmon in the bay. When set net fish are picked, they go from net to brailer to delivery truck and from delivery truck to the cannery, within a few hours of being caught.

In many instances, when the salmon are picked and delivered by skiff, they quickly go from net to brailer and to the cannery. They are the only fish delivered with a wiggle in their tails.

Editor's note: Emma C. Nicolet, 64, of Juneau, is originally from Bethel and the Bristol Bay region. She is a Yup'ik and has been a commercial fisherman, set netting in Bristol Bay, throughout her life.