

Civilization Pushes Back Subsistence Fishing in Bristol Bay

(Editors Note: This is the third in a series of stories by Alaska Native students attending the University of Alaska in Fairbanks. The stories cover a wide range of native experiences, culture, and traditional activities. From students such as these will emerge the native writers, poets, and journalists of tomorrow. The stories will also appear in a magazine called THEATA, which stands for Tlingit, Haida, Eskimo, Aleut, Tsimshian, and Athabascan, all of the native groups of Alaska.)

BRISTOL BAY SUBSISTENCE FISHING By PETER REAMEY Pilot Point

The coming of the white man and "civilization" to some Alaskan natives has meant the decline of their former self-supporting economy and dependence on the more modern monetarily

based type of existence. In pre-contact times the coastal natives of the lower Bristol Bay region lived by hunting and fishing, taking only enough game for subsistence.

When the Russians came in and began exploiting the fur-bearing animals, the natives were forced to become more dependent on trade and money for subsistence since game that the natives previously depended on were becoming scarce.

With the introduction of large fishing companies to the area at about the turn of the century they became more dependent on fishing as their main means of livelihood since the price and amount of furs declined as the cost of living went up.

Since then the economy of the Bristol Bay area has been a see-saw depending on the number of fish caught for the ups and downs.

Lately due to the continual overfishing, increased number of fishermen, severe weather conditions, and increased salmon take on the high seas by foreign fishing armadas, the fishing industry has taken a nose dive.

This combined with the continually increasing inflation has brought economic hardship to the area. Hardest hit by these conditions are the year-round residents of the area who have no other means of making a living.

The average take of salmon has been steadily declining in the past few years until commercial fishing is no longer a dependable means of making a living. There appears to be no immediate solution to the problem of the depleted salmon runs.

Even if the present conservation efforts prove successful it will take years to bring the salmon runs up to their

former numbers.

Conservation efforts were practically nonexistent in the early days of the commercial fishing industry. The large fishing companies had such strong legislative influence that until the conservation-minded White Act of 1924, no real effective conservation efforts were practiced.

Even then the famous fish traps which practically stopped all salmon from returning to the spawning grounds were still used commercially in the 1930's.

Conservation efforts are, as in the past designed to keep fishing efforts as inefficient as possible. This is well illustrated by the fact that fishermen in the Bristol Bay region were not allowed to use motor-powered boats until 1952.

Although the switch from sail to motor power made fishing a lot easier it hurt fishing in the area by encouraging more new

comers to join in the salmon take.

The most recent development is the "limited entry" policy designed to limit the issuance of new licenses in a given area based on the expected yield. The new regulations will give preference to those who are totally dependent on fishing but it seems to be about ten years late in coming.

There were so many licences applied for this year that the Alaska Department of Fish and Game came up with the limitation of twenty-five fathoms (77 feet) of net per gear license holder for drift fishing and 12 1/2 fathoms for set netters. This means that if both parties in a boat have gear licenses they will be using one third of the former 150 fathoms used. Even before, the 150 fathom limit seemed a small amount of net.

Regulation of the fisheries in the area that U.S. fishermen are allowed to fish can at best be only half effective while foreign fleets have the ability to eradicate the runs by hitting them on the high seas.

The abstention treaty of 1953, signed by Japan and Canada set an abstention line at 175 degrees West Longitude.

Since the treaty was signed, scientists have discovered that the salmon runs group up and migrate through the Aleutians farther west making the treaty far less effective than originally intended.

Obviously the policy of conservation based on the idea of keeping fishing operations as inefficient as possible has had little effect on the decline of the salmon runs. Very little if any effort has been directed at constructive rehabilitation of the fisheries.

Only recently has any major effort at providing fish hatcheries or improving the spawning grounds been made.

It is a bitter irony to realize that the natives who practiced conservation long before the word was invented are the ones who are suffering the most . . .