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# Constraints on community participation in salmon fisheries management in Northwest Russia



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## ABSTRACT

Salmon fishing used to be the primary source of income in many rural areas of Arkhangelsk oblast in northwest Russia. People who settled in the area received a name *Pomory*, from Russian *po moriu*, meaning *by sea*, because their subsistence activities became marine fishing and hunting and seafaring. Local fisheries have undergone significant changes as post-Soviet Russia embraced the market economy and the state introduced fishing concessions. The current Russian law only allows fishing for salmon through officially registered recreational or commercial fisheries. Both these options are often either unavailable or unaffordable to rural dwellers, which leaves them with limited or no legal access to their traditional salmon fisheries. There has been a growing concern for protecting communities' fishing rights among wider society in Arkhangelsk oblast. City activists promoted Pomory identity and appealed to the Russian government to grant Pomory an indigenous status to secure their access to fisheries. Although Pomor activism did not reach most of its proclaimed goals, it has contributed to promoting the image of Arkhangelsk oblast as a homeland to Pomor fishing. This image has played an important part in what Arkhangelsk authorities have called socially-oriented fisheries management. Officials have made good attempts to better accommodate rural communities' access to fishing resources. Yet, these attempts have failed to include fishermen as active participants in the process. This paper looks at constraints on community participation in fisheries management in Russia. It considers both historical and contemporary reasons for the low participation of local community in fisheries management.

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## 1. Introduction

Salmon in Russia is often referred to as *tzar fish* (Rus., *tzarskaia ryba*), as according to literature [1] and popular stories it used to go directly to the *tzar* table from remote fishing communities along the White Sea coast in Arkhangelsk region. Fishermen themselves consumed little salmon as they traded most of it for other goods. During the Soviet times, all salmon went to restaurants in Moscow and to private tables of local party elites. The majority of Soviet citizens did not see salmon in shops; nor could they harvest it individually. Many people in fishing communities in the White Sea area today still do not have a legal access to salmon fishing. The situation in fishery management in contemporary Russia is gradually evolving towards better accommodation of fishermen's interests. It nevertheless remains a complex entanglement of managerial legacies of the Soviet past and contemporary economic and social issues.

This paper looks at small-scale salmon fisheries in Arkhangelsk

oblast to study contemporary constraints on community participation in fisheries management in Russia. Arkhangelsk oblast is an administrative unit in the northwest of Russia. It operates large-scale fisheries in the Barents Sea and small-scale fisheries in the White Sea and mainland rivers and lakes [Fig. 1]. Russian fisheries occur across a vast territory that encompasses significant administrative and geographical differences. Data provided in this paper refers to fisheries only in one administrative unit of Russia and does not represent the entire country. At the same time, the analysis of the fisheries management system and predicaments of fishermen's everyday life as they unfold in Arkhangelsk oblast touches upon issues that are relevant for fishermen across the country.

Data for this paper was gathered in 2014–2016 in the city of Arkhangelsk and in several villages in Mezen region of Arkhangelsk oblast [Fig. 1]. All villages are located near salmon migration routes. Names of villages are not used for the sake of confidentiality, as sensitive subjects such as fishing outside official regulations are discussed in this paper. Study methods included interviews with fisheries managers, political activists, scholars,

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Fig. 1. Map of Arkhangelsk oblast. The city of Arkhangelsk is the capital of the oblast; the town of Mezen is a regional centre. Dots in Mezen region represent villages.

chairmen of several fishing collective farms, and local people in the city and village. Participant observation and engagement in informal activities, including fishing, as well as official celebrations of fishing collective farms was conducted in several villages. Information on fisheries legislation and statistics was gathered mainly from official websites of fisheries management organisations. Information that does not appear online is usually internal and not easily available to outsiders. Arkhangelsk oblast officials have been very supportive otherwise and shared their knowledge and expertise wherever possible.

## 2. History of salmon fisheries in the northwest Russia

Russian people came to the White Sea coast around the 12th century [2], attracted by rich fish and sea mammals resources. Their initial seasonal settlements gradually turned into permanent villages. People that settled along the White Sea and later the Barents Sea coasts received a name *Pomor*, from Russian *po moriu*, which means *by sea*, because their subsistence activities became sea fishing and hunting and seafaring. Salmon fishing in particular played an important role in Pomor economy. The natural environment of the White Sea area was not conducive to farming, and Pomor depended on external sources to obtain grains. Trading salmon for other goods such as wheat was crucial for Pomor's survival and allowed them to maintain their cultural identity as Slavic people [3].

People fished salmon in self-organised collectives during the pre-Soviet period [4]. The village commune controlled fishing grounds collectively [5]. Lajus [3] stresses the role of monasteries in salmon fisheries in the White Sea area. A lot of fishing grounds belonged to monasteries, which gradually appropriated the richest salmon fisheries. Monasteries served as managers of the resources, organising fisheries and collecting taxes from the peasant communities. During the secularization period of the 18th century, the state took possession of most of fishing grounds belonging to the monasteries and gave them to the villagers.

The Soviet state appropriated and actively exploited fishing resources throughout most of the 20th century. Villagers were organised into *kolkhozes* (collective farms) in the 1920–1930s [5]. “The aim of the *kolkhoz* was first to collectivize the work but also to produce surpluses that could be directed into the stream of national Soviet production” [6]. All salmon fishing during the Soviet period was done by *kolkhozes* and state enterprises, whereas individual fishing for salmon was entirely forbidden [7].

David Koester in his work on Itelmen indigenous fisheries in Kamchatka in the Russian Far East argues that collectivisation together with other Soviet policies led to multiple levels of political, economic, social, and personal alienation of people from renewable raw resources like salmon [6]. The situation with Pomor fisheries was slightly different in that fishers on the White Sea coast were alienated from their right to salmon not as a staple food source, as was the case with Itelmen in Kamchatka, but from their right to trade salmon. All trade was now conducted by the state, and people had no control over the remuneration for their labour as fishers.

At the same time, state organisations and collective farms could fish without major quota restrictions. The state guaranteed sale of fish produce and kept transportation and equipment costs low and fixed. This generated significant employment in fisheries. It also allowed people to procure precious fish such as salmon, through work channels for subsistence [7].

Many people mentioned during interviews that life in the village was difficult until fishing collective farms received loans from the state in the 1950s to purchase large ships, which allowed them to conduct large-scale fishing in both domestic and international waters. Fishing *kolkhozes* soon became sustainable and could support a wide range of social welfare initiatives in the villages. They built roads, hospitals, schools and sustained enterprises such as agricultural and dairy farms.

The situation in fishing *kolkhozes* remained more or less stable until the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991. The state introduced fishing concessions in the 1990s, as post-Soviet Russia embraced the market economy. State organisations and collective

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