

# Impacts of neoliberal policies on non-market fishing economies on the Yukon River, Alaska



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## ARTICLE INFO

Available online 31 December 2014

### Keywords:

Neoliberalism  
Subsistence  
Salmon  
Customary trade  
Bering Sea  
Yukon River

## ABSTRACT

This paper describes how and why a relatively minor, mostly native non-market economy founded on subsistence-caught Chinook salmon in Alaska has become the object of controversy and increasing regulatory pressure. Small-scale exchanges of cash for subsistence-caught fish conflict with a neoliberal emphasis on markets, profit maximization, and private property. This paper clarifies the role of neoliberal policies in shaping and even causing the controversy over these exchanges, and the consequences for management of Chinook salmon on the Yukon River.

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## 1. Introduction

"It is perhaps the true mark of human uniqueness that we make rules with avidity and then proceed to break them with no less enthusiasm."

–Robin Fox [1]

In the broader context of neoliberal economic restructuring, which tends to subordinate social and environmental policies to economic policies [2–6], this paper describes how and why a relatively minor, mostly native non-market economy founded on subsistence-caught Chinook salmon has become the object of controversy and increasing regulatory pressure, and the cultural consequences of that pressure for native and other rural peoples along the Yukon River, Alaska (Fig. 1). In federal and state regulations, non-market exchanges of subsistence-caught fish for cash are called "customary trades." Following James Scott [7], as well as recent discussions of neoliberalism and resource management [8,9], the argument of this paper is that, customary trade practices are elusive to state observation, they stand outside of easily quantifiable techniques of data collection, and they do not fit Western economic rationality. In addition, people on the Yukon River resist participating in the quantification of their customary trade practices. As a consequence, state and federal resource managers have come to regard such practices as inimical to managing Yukon River Chinook fisheries in the context of declining Chinook runs. Neoliberal economic policies, in other words, are ill-equipped to accommodate cultural values and practices that do not conform to the logic of markets [10], especially in situations of natural resource governance [11–13].

To advance this argument requires a discussion of interconnected social and environmental contexts in which to situate small-scale

exchanges of cash for subsistence-caught fish. These contexts include relative scales of harvest, legal definitions and related policy issues, management practices, markets, incompatible cultural values, and concerns over the health safety of traditionally processed fish.

## 2. Discussion

### 2.1. Scales of harvest

It is rumored that, in the summer of 2010, someone on the middle portion Yukon River sold enough Chinook salmon purportedly caught for subsistence to buy a truck worth US\$15,000 [14]. The details remain murky. It could have been one fisherman or perhaps an extended family, whose members combined the proceeds of their catch to purchase the pickup, possibly as a gift for a mother-in-law. The story was told as an argument that foul deeds were being committed. Fish caught for food was being turned into a commodity for profit. As the story circulated, the value of the truck increased to US\$20,000, but the moral remained the same. In the context of scarcity and food security, the profit motive had undermined traditional values of subsisting on and sharing fish caught from the Yukon River. By 2012, the price of the truck had risen to US\$40,000 [15].

The story about salmon providing pickups became prominent in 2010. The timing makes sense in part because the prior year's fishing was unusual. In 2009, some 879,185 salmon of all species had been harvested in the subsistence fishery in Alaska. This was the lowest subsistence harvest of salmon in over sixteen years of record-keeping. That year 33,932 Chinook salmon were harvested for subsistence and personal use on the Yukon River, well below the ten-year average of 55,510 [16]. As a protective measure, the first

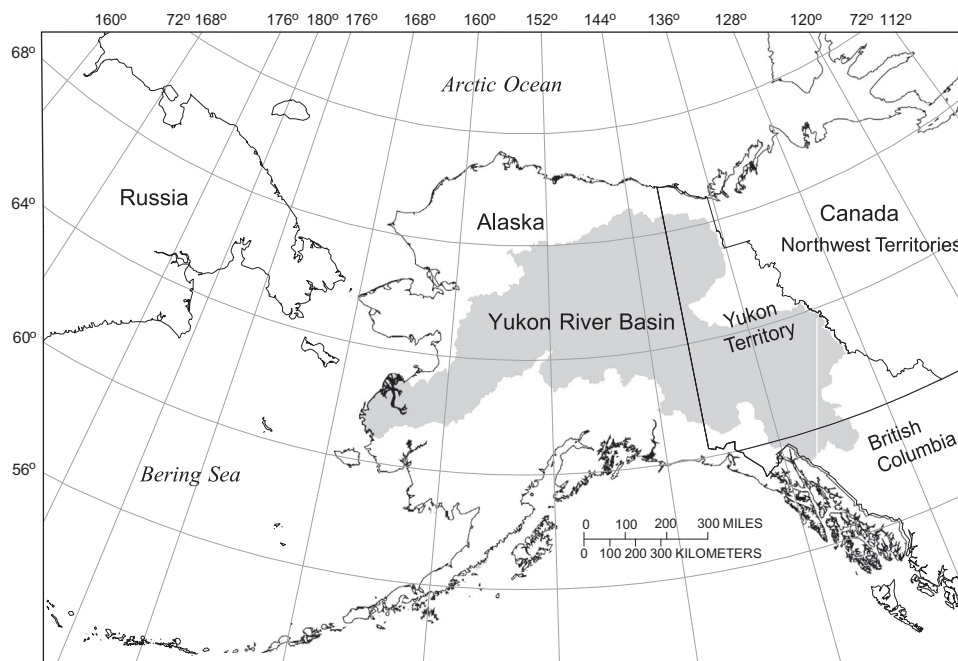


Fig. 1. Location of the Yukon River Basin in Canada and Alaska. (U.S. Geological Survey Water-Resources Investigations Report 99-4204, Anchorage, Alaska, 2000).

pulse of Chinook on the Yukon River was closed entirely to fishing in 2009, as managers attempted to allow more fish to cross into Canada to spawn in order to make up for years of declining runs. Subsistence, commercial, and sport fishing were all precluded from targeting the first pulse of Chinook, as a rolling closure followed the fish up river into Canada [17].

The Yukon River commercial harvest in 2009 totaled 316 Chinook, all of which were harvested from the Lower Yukon River outside of the rolling closure, and which were incidentally caught during a fishery targeting other species. This was a 99% decrease from the 10-year (1999–2008) average of 35,000 commercially harvested Chinook. Other salmon species commercially harvested that year included 8000 coho and 195,000 chum salmon. Two buyer-processors operated in the Lower Yukon Area and two in the Upper Yukon Area, which paid US\$0.50 per pound for summer chum in the lower river and US \$0.24 per pound for summer chum in the upper river. The average income for fishers in the Lower Yukon Area was US\$1,425 in 2009, compared to US\$1,857 for Upper Yukon Area fishers [17]. In this context, the story of a US\$15,000–\$40,000 truck bought from the sale of subsistence-caught Chinook generated considerable anger among fishers from the lower river. Some lower Yukon River fishers perceived sales of subsistence-caught Chinook from the middle and upper reaches of the Yukon as directly competing with their commercial interests, and they sought to curtail the practice.

By commercial standards, the subsistence fishery targeting Chinook salmon on the Yukon River and its tributaries is minor. In discussions of customary trade, the scale of harvest should be kept forefront. Measured in pounds, subsistence harvests of fish and game comprise about 1.1% of total harvests of wild resources in Alaska. Commercial fisheries account for 98.3% of wild resource harvest, while sport hunting and fishing account for 0.6% [18]. The scale of human population should also be kept forefront: in Alaska, about 12,000 people live in small villages along the Yukon and its tributaries. Another 100,000 live along the Tanana River, the second largest drainage of the Yukon after the Porcupine River [19]. Most of these people live in Fairbanks Northstar Borough, the second largest population center in Alaska after Anchorage. Under federal rules, those who live in Fairbanks are ineligible for the federal subsistence priority, but can hunt and fish under state rules.

## 2.2. Subsistence laws and regulations

Federal and state laws in Alaska governing the sale of fish caught for subsistence are contradictory and, in any case, are largely ignored in practice. Prominent among the contradictory laws are the 1980 Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) and its implementing regulations, which allow for the sale of subsistence-caught fish, and State of Alaska regulations, which do not, with two minor exceptions [20].<sup>1</sup>

ANILCA designated 217 million acres of federal lands in Alaska as “conservation system units.” These units included vast parks, preserves and refuges, totaling some 60% of the state. Title VIII of ANILCA uniquely provided rural peoples the opportunity to continue subsistence hunting, fishing and gathering on federal public lands. Congress wrote that “the continuation of the opportunity for subsistence uses by rural residents of Alaska, including both Natives and non-Natives, on the public lands and by Alaska Natives on Native lands is essential to Native physical, economic, traditional, and cultural existence and to non-Native physical, economic, traditional, and social existence” (Title VIII Sec. 801 (1)). Congress did not explain why it included the term “cultural” in reference to native existence but not in reference to non-native existence. Perhaps Congress recognized a unique native cultural relationship to federal public lands which more recent immigrants to Alaska did not have.

This recognition of native culture, and the development of Title VIII in ANILCA, fulfilled a congressional promise from a prior act, the 1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA), which extinguished aboriginal title, abolished all native hunting and fishing rights, and substituted corporation for tribal ownership to 45 million acres of land—in effect, imposing a corporate, profit-oriented structure onto native-owned lands [21]. In ANCSA, Congress left unresolved hunting, fishing, and other subsistence activities of native peoples, but anticipated addressing the issue

<sup>1</sup> Title 5 Chapter 01.717 of the Alaska Administrative Code allows the sale of subsistence-harvested herring roe on kelp in Southeast Alaska, and Title 5 Chapter 01.188 allows the sale of subsistence-harvested finfish in the Norton Sound-Port Clarence area.

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