

An Indigenous Forward

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The question or issue of Indigenous presence in the management of resources on a broad social-economic basis has haunted the planet for all of the so-called civilized era. In the other writings in this study it is referred to as “Deep Time.” Here the intent is to illustrate the spiritual and deeply respectful approaches Indigenous Science brings to the equation while directly intersecting with resources such as Salmon, or relatives as we like to refer to them. Alaska Natives have a deep relationship with Salmon, dating back 10,000 plus years. Stories from our parents, elders, and ancestors resound with stories of Salmon people relationships and reciprocities; from songs sung to greet the arrival of Salmon on the Yukon River to strict rules regarding appropriate behavior to ensure the Salmon would return on the Copper River. Each year the salmon returned. This timeless relationship wove itself into deep connections predicated on spirituality, respect, and reciprocity. Indeed this relationship did and continues to exist between humans and the land, animals, water, and other nonhuman relatives as well, yet the story of this profound relationship with Salmon is the focus in the State of Alaska Salmon and People (SASAP) project. The reasons for this are many, but of particular need is to tell the important story of salmon and people in Alaska before it's too late. The overall well-being of salmon in Alaska is threatened by a host of factors including climate change, changing habitats, and inadequate management. In particular, Alaska Natives, despite their long-term relationship with Salmon, have been largely left out of any decisions related to Salmon management. This is unfortunate for the Salmon, for Salmon people, and for the State of Alaska who depends on Salmon as a pillar of the state economy. The forces of colonization have been hostile to Alaska Native people and have led to our current situation, where we find ourselves in a position where our deepest relationships and expressions of spirituality are at times severed by limited or zero openings to live our way of life through the timeless exercise of fishing for Salmon.

Alaska Natives have tried extensively to share our unique and collective knowledge systems in ways that would save Alaska's salmon; tirelessly testifying, speaking to policymakers across parties, writing letters and other manifestos, and when all else fails, engaging in heated debates in one last reverent plea to hear our cries. These cries have largely fallen on deaf ears. Alaska's salmon (and other species) management practices in general are competitive to a fault, opening management activities ultimately to a select few who have the means and wherewithal to circumvent whatever practices are agreed to in a public sense. Indigenous communities on the other hand under the dictum of permission and consent look to ceremony, common sense, sharing, and reciprocity as the cornerstone of Indigenous management. This approach often mocked by western science kept the Salmon and the Salmon people in a continuum of surpluses and sharing on a wise territorial basis.

Fundamentally speaking even the concept of time is fluid in the Indigenous sense, allowing decisions to be made in seasonal cycles, which don't follow a year-to-year calendar, but rather when the Salmon feel the time is right, which could mean one year, two years, four years or six years. Yet, each one, two, or six years, the Salmon Boss* knew how much Salmon one person could take, not exactly knowing how many Salmon might be coming following the first few

coming into the stream or river, but leaning on ancestral knowledge and the seasons before. This deeply spiritual relationship was the only real tool that Indigenous scientists utilized and trust was an absolute central component.

This spiritual relationship was also expressed through Clan relationships. For example, my (Wilson's) Aunt Lena who ran a fish wheel at Chistochina for decades, as well as several who have passed on, would speak often times of respecting catch and remembering your relatives. Naturally my reaction was to think of family until my Uncle Paul, who was of a different Clan, spoke to the question. He said, "it's a partnership till the day you die, your wife's family know how to remember your side forever. Don't matter if it's dried fish for starvation times, dried muskrats or moose. That law for married way gives you right to the country and to never go hungry!.." It took me a lot of years to come to grips with the fundamental issue of sharing, gifting, and trade, along with barter when it came to a resource like Salmon. Regardless of what western, European societies and their respective management schemes used to denigrate Indigenous management of resources in its natural state, one inescapable fact stood out: the burden of access, counts, preserving, set asides, and sharing was subject to complex laws designed to mitigate greed, hoarding, and to bring equity into the picture. Marriages across Clans, always arranged, may have been ridiculed and denounced at one time, but the question of equity and just access to the resources held by individual Clans were encapsulated within the context of marriages as part of Governance. As I was told so many times as part of the Story telling Clan narratives, "you have right marriage you have all the law right there" (Bill Joe, late 80s). Salmon then on an equity basis would be shared out by law with partnering Clans even amongst those who may have never caught a Salmon themselves. In essence the Governance component of Salmon management was to serve the entire tribe, not just a lucky few who could get their hands on a permit and a piece of the river.

Wellness and spirituality are rarely seen as components in western fisheries management. Even health as a byproduct of nutritional abundance doesn't surface in western management conversations and decisions. Interconnectivity certainly is not on the average Salmon manager's radar as he or she wrestles with basic allocation schemes that can be siloed into a maximum yield category. And there, in a nutshell, is where we find the gap between Indigenous science and western science. Maximum yield to westerners means how many bodies can you line up in the river or how many boatloads can work the current; all individually-based and all couched in predatory patterns of entitlement. Indigenous Science on the other hand looks to continuous yield with the parameters set on a Tribal basis. Since every Tribe or Clan was assured of access and participation via the rules of marriage, exceptionally sound practices and patterns of use had to be agreed too then adhered to by ceremony, song, and Clan standing. Continuous yield in the Indigenous corner was fixed by the common and sometimes overused term, interconnectivity. Nutrition, distribution, trade, marriage, trails, camps, names, and even Coming of Age Ceremonies were all inextricably linked and bonded by each Tribe who was forsworn to future generations in obedience to past generations. A promise as exemplified by the acceptance of a Covenant to cherish all creatures of the earth was then the thread that entered Indigenous science as interconnectivity. No individual could catch in isolation or single count. Every Salmon caught was: a third for yourself, a third for the winter, and a third for exterior Tribal obligations, including marriages, trade, and potlatches. Maximum yield to westerners meant total entitlement

but to Indigenous peoples, just a share. The deliberate obfuscation of these principles by western science was so thorough that in no meetings ever by Salmon managers was there even a hint that Indigenous science had captured the information needed in deep time to produce a civilized and healthy Spiritual return from all resources within Tribal Jurisdiction. This type of knowledge needs to be brought back into the fold of western management and into society as a whole. The ability to see oneself as part of something greater, an entire body or system of life that is interdependent is good for everyone, especially in this world where we are beyond the tipping point in regards to most resources. This is especially true for certain species of salmon, who are at-risk of being “endangered”.

Salmon play an important role today, as they always have in the lives and cultural foundation of Alaska Native individual, families, and peoples. Children are raised with Salmon as a central presence, another relative, which one must care for, share with, and most of all, respect. This timeless relationship has created a strong foundation, which until more recently children could depend on. Yet, the current management system, which has largely disenfranchised Alaska Native people, has resulted in egregious dispossession of fishing rights and ways of life. Generational knowledge, passed down from grandmas, grandpas, aunties, uncles, and parents are left in the shadows when there are no fish in the net or worse, no net in the river. Salmon give reason and meaning to life in a very foundational sense and teach children how to view the world from the lens of their cultural values. These values bring everyone into the circle and ensure no one is left hungry.

The time to decolonize Salmon management in Alaska is now. Indigenous voices, values, practices, and governance tools are ready to be exercised and shared; paired together with the best of western science. There is no other time. The Salmon need it; the people need it. Indigenous, Alaska Native values have ensured that Salmon, big game animals, and migratory birds returned year after year, generation after generation for thousands of years. When harvested, sharing has never been an issue, given it is a central value shared across Alaska Native cultures. Moreover, the Spiritual relationship that was broken when fishermen could not fish and fish caches were empty needs to be rectified, so this enduring relationship can continue to be and Salmon in Alaska will continue to be pulled from nets, out of fish wheels, and fighting on the end of a line.

*Salmon Boss is the word used to describe a very honorable and temporary position that the Chief or head leader of a Clan would choose for numerous reasons, including training future leaders and future Clan spokespeople and other important obligations of the Clan, including forecasting run timing and protocols around allocation. The writers, by necessity, are reducing thousands of years of teachings and learning regarding this topic into a few, short paragraphs. The term Salmon Boss doesn't exist in the Athabascan language, but rather was used by the writers to express a very essential point.