

THE IMPORTANCE OF FISHING AND FISH HARVESTING TO YUKON FIRST NATIONS PEOPLE

A summary

Information gathered from existing literature as well as interviews conducted with First Nations people in communities across the Yukon Territory



Prepared for the
Yukon Fish and Wildlife Management Board

by Stephanie Muckenheim
August 1998

Report series #1

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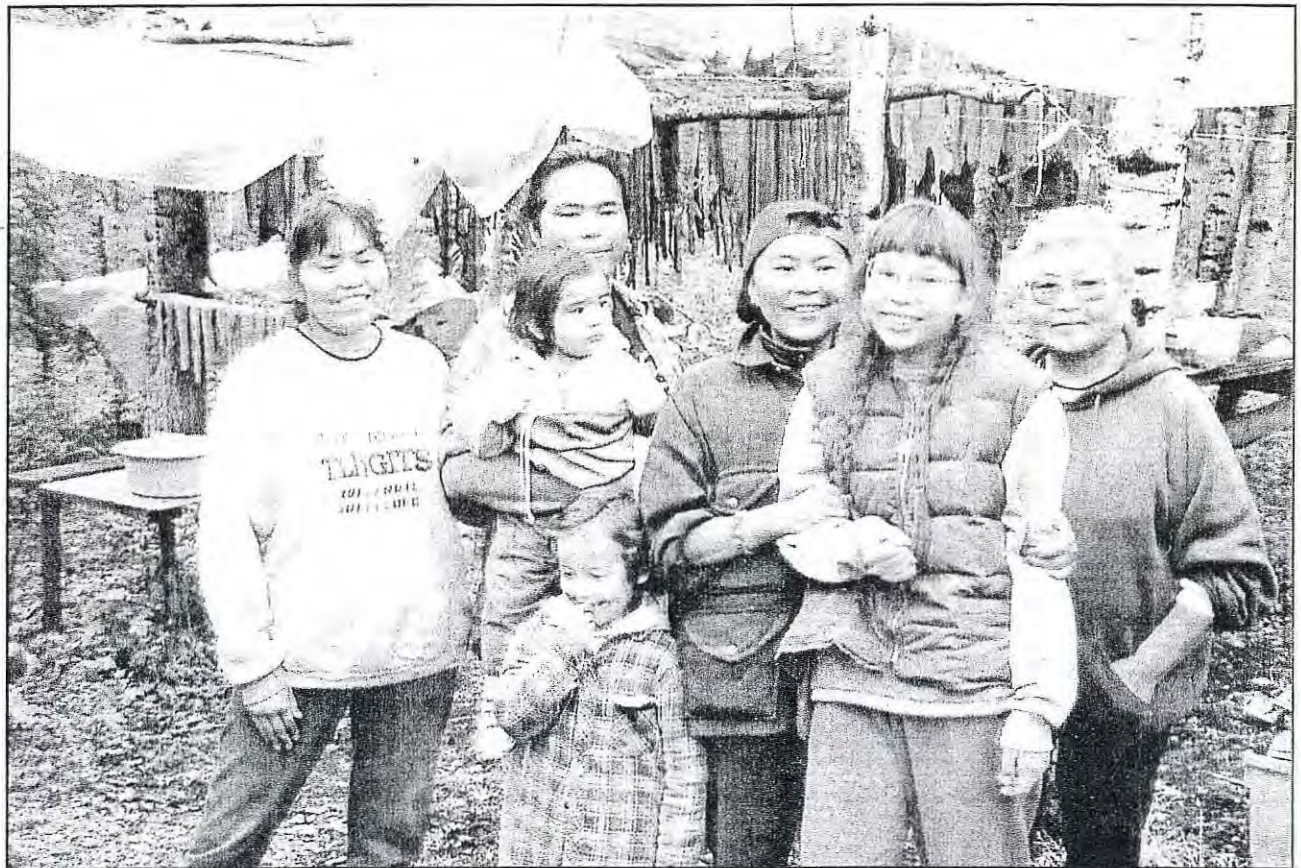
Also available in this series:

An evaluation of hooking mortality resulting from live-release fishing practices, by Laberge Environmental Services, October 1998 (Report series #2)

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Introduction and objectives



The purpose of this report is to provide the Yukon Fish and Wildlife Management Board with information required to understand and appreciate the importance of fishing and fish harvesting to the First Nations people in the Yukon, and their respect for this resource.

The information contained in this report considers aspects of culture, stories, survival and particularly ethics in relation to fish conservation and management, harvesting, and uses. This report also considers First Nations perspectives and opinions on the use of catch and release fishing as a management tool.

The information from this report will be used by the Yukon Fish and Wildlife Management Board in its discussions of catch and release fishing as a management practice in the Yukon.

For more information on methods, see Appendix 1. For more information on project limitations, see Appendix 2. For a map showing Yukon communities and Aboriginal language groups, see Appendix 3.

Summary



In June of 1998, I was commissioned by the Yukon Fish and Wildlife Management Board to gather and present information about the importance of fishing and fish harvesting to Yukon First Nations people. The summary was to include aspects of First Nations people's respect and utilization of the resource, as well as perspectives on conservation and the use of catch and release fishing as a management tool. Art Johns, a Tagish Elder, was also commissioned by the Board to travel with me for ten days and act as a liaison.

Methods

Two methods were used to gather information.

- I began with a background literature search to determine what existing information was available on the subjects.
- I then travelled to First Nations communities across the entire Yukon Territory to interview individuals about the importance of fish harvesting to them and their communities. I also asked what their views were on catch and release fishing and its use as a management tool. Approximately 90 people of mixed age and gender were interviewed, based on convenience and availability. Communities visited included Old Crow, Dawson, Mayo, Stewart Crossing, Pelly Crossing, Carmacks, Whitehorse, Carcross, Teslin, Watson Lake, Ross River, Beaver Creek, Burwash Landing, Haines Junction, and Klukshu Village. Art Johns accompanied me on several of these trips. (See Appendices 1, 2 and 3 for further information.)

Results

Historically, fish harvesting has been an essential part of life for Yukon First Nations people for most of the year. Fishing, fish harvesting and utilization of the resource are still an important part of present-day society for many Yukon First Nations. Many First Nations people still rely on the salmon harvest in the summer to supplement their winter diets with dried, canned or frozen fish. Since much of the resource is shared among families and communities, fish is a very important food source for the Elders and other members of the community. Nutritionally, fish is also very important in the diet of Yukon First Nations people as it provides a large portion of the required daily nutrients. Some Elders also feel that traditional foods such as fish are easier for them to digest than market foods.

Many Yukon First Nations people expressed how fishing, fish harvesting and preparation of the fish for the winter at summer fish camps is a very important time of social gathering for family and friends. Fishing and fish camps provide opportunities for people to engage in traditional activities and for children to learn traditional ways. They provide important gatherings for people to work together side by side, to tell stories and get back out on to the land.

First Nations people in the Yukon have a very strong respect for the land and every living thing.

They feel that, “Mother Earth provides for us and that we must respect all living things.” When asked about the use of catch and release fishing as a management tool, many people echoed the same feelings. “Catch and release fishing goes against the fundamental beliefs of the First Nations people.”

Of the 90 people interviewed, approximately 55 people (61%) said that they were totally against catch and release fishing. They consider catch and release to be “playing with the fish” which is very disrespectful. Most people said that they were taught by their Elders that you only fish for food, that you only take as many as you need, that you never waste any of the fish, and that you never, never play with the animals. You must respect them or they won’t come back.

Many people felt that catching and releasing fish was cruel and hurts the fish. Approximately 30 people (33%) said that they weren’t totally against catch and release fishing, however, they had concerns about the success and mortality rates of catch and release and whether or not it was ethical. Many of these people said that they would not personally practice catch and release fishing, but if it had to be used as a management tool then they would accept it. Three people (3%) said that they practice catch and release fishing themselves and see nothing wrong with its use as a management tool.

Conclusion

When First Nations people were asked if they had any suggestions or further comments for the Yukon Fish and Wildlife Management Board, there were a few comments that were consistently expressed.

- People felt that there should be more research done to determine the success and mortality rates of catch and release fishing. “Nobody really knows how many live and how many die.” These results should be made public.
- A comment that was expressed many times was that people should be more educated on how to practice catch and release fishing properly without damaging the fish. It was suggested that, “people should have to watch a video when they buy their fishing license.”

- People also expressed the view that there should be stricter limits, with more First Nations monitors or conservation officers patrolling lakes and rivers. It was recommended that “you catch your limit, then you quit.”

In closing, all of the people that I talked to expressed a concern for the resource and felt that we all have to take care of it. Even though some people said that they would accept catch and release fishing as a management tool, the overall consensus was that there had to be a better way.

Most people said that they were pleased that the Board is looking into this matter.

Background and literature search



The importance of fishing and fish harvesting to Yukon First Nations people is a topic that has been relatively well documented. One only has to look at the list of references (page 13), which is a small example of the information available, to recognize that it is a fairly well studied subject.

Historically, fish have been an integral food source for First Nations people almost everywhere in the Yukon for much of the year (McClellan 1987). When game was scarce, people relied on fish as their main source of food, as it always seemed to be abundant. Yukon First Nations people depended largely on the seasonal cycles of the fish and animal life (Cruikshank 1975).

The most intense fishing took place in the summer along the Alsek and Yukon rivers and

their tributaries when the salmon were running (coming back up river to spawn) (McClellan 1987). July and August were times of intense activity with people harvesting and preserving salmon for the winter. (See Appendix 4.)

Socially, this was a very important time, as many families and relations would gather at the fish camps to harvest and prepare the salmon. This was also a time for children to learn how to clean and preserve the fish. The abundance of this resource allowed for widespread sharing among First Nations communities.

Several species of salmon were harvested in the Yukon. They include king or chinook salmon, chum salmon (locally known as dog salmon), coho salmon and sockeye salmon. Fresh water fish were harvested year-round and people always tried to

make sure that they stayed near good fishing lakes in the winter so they could add to their stores of fish (McClellan 1987).

Fresh water species harvested include two species of whitefish, lake trout, arctic grayling, jackfish (pike), inconnu, burbot (freshwater cod or ling cod or loche), dolly varden, suckers and kokanee.

There were many methods used for catching fish. Some of the common methods of catching salmon included gill nets, fish traps, weirs, gaffs, spears and handlines (Joe 1990). In the winter and spring, nets were set under the ice for freshwater species such as whitefish, lake trout, suckers, dolly varden and arctic grayling. Fish were caught in well known spawning and feeding areas, usually at the inlet or outlets of lakes.

Traditional foods harvested by First Nations people, especially fish, are extremely important in their diets, providing a large portion of daily nutrient requirements. These include over half the daily requirement of protein, zinc, iron, riboflavin, niacin, and vitamin B12. Traditional foods such as fish are extremely important in the northern communities of the Yukon where market foods are very expensive, and limited in variety and availability (Wein 1994). Many Elders rely on gifts of fish to sustain them over the winter. Their bodies may also tolerate this familiar food source better than non-traditional market foods.

Historically, chum or dog salmon, as well as other fish species, were fed to the dogs, and this is still practised in some families, especially in the northern communities where market dog food is very expensive.

As with every other living thing, fish were highly respected by the First Nations people. Fish were considered a gift from Mother Earth for the use of the people and must be properly treated and respected if the supply was to continue (McClellan 1975). Fish were not to be played with, and it was bad luck if children touched the eyes of a fish. In one story, "Moldy (Mouldy) Head," told by Tagish/Tlingit Elder Angela Sidney (see Appendix 5), a young boy has insulted "Fish" by calling a piece of fish moldy and throwing it away. The boy is subsequently taken away by the Salmon People and taught to respect the Salmon World. When he is returned to human form he is able to tell his people how salmon like to be greeted and treated (Cruikshank 1990).

Yukon First Nations people believe that you should only fish for food, and only take as many as you need. When a fish is harvested no part of it should be wasted (Sport Fishing Regulations and Summary 1998-99). What is not consumed by people is often fed to the dogs or put back into the water or on the land for other animals to eat.

I couldn't find much published information regarding First Nation's perspectives on catch and release fishing. There were a few comments published in the Sport Fishing Regulations and Summary (Yukon Renewable Resources) (Appendix 6). There is also a pamphlet available from the Little Salmon/Carmacks First Nation outlining their beliefs about fishing and fish harvesting (Appendix 7). My final source was the conference, Two Eyes: One Vision, Traditional Knowledge, sponsored by the Yukon Fish and

Wildlife Management Board in April 1998. Based on my findings these themes are very strong and clear.

- You only fish for food and you only fish when you need it.
- Only take as many as you need (or your legal limit), then stop fishing.
- To catch a fish and release it disrespects the fish, hurts it, and takes the “life” out of that fish.
- Catch and release fishing goes against the First Nations fundamental belief that fish and game are to be used for food and not for sport (from “A Message from the Little Salmon/Carmacks First Nation...on fishing”).

Interview comments and responses



Part A

The importance of fishing, fish harvesting and utilization to First Nations individuals and communities

Before recorded history, fish harvesting and utilization were an integral part of Yukon First Nation's diet and culture.

Based on my interviews and discussions with First Nations people in communities across the Yukon, fishing, fish harvesting and utilization of fish are still very important parts of present day life for most Yukon First Nations people. As I visited each community, themes arose which were consistent among all of the Yukon First Nations.

One major theme was that fish that are harvested are always shared with other family members, friends, and members of the community. Elders are always the first to receive fish, as they have the greatest needs. Then the members of the community who may be financially stressed are taken care of.

Many First Nations people still rely on dried, canned and frozen fish harvested in the summer, for supplements to their winter diet. Over and over again I was told how fish and other resources were given to the Elders and shared within the communities. I was told that only enough fish were harvested to meet the needs of family

members, and if there were extra fish caught they were given away — never wasted!

We set nets for whitefish in the summer and winter. In the winter, we catch 20 to 30 fish which last a long time for food. The fish are shared with the Elders and the community.

George Bob
Ross River

We catch salmon to eat for the winter, prepare it and store it for the winter. We give some of it away, too.

Peter Josie
Old Crow

Some people fish because they need fish for subsistence. Elders need wild foods, they're not used to store-bought foods; it's hard to digest for them.

Diane Strand
Haines Junction

Another theme was the importance today of summer fish camps to Yukon First Nations people, especially for children and youth. Such camps are still important for social gatherings, and provide good opportunities for families to get together in a more traditional way to teach children and grandchildren traditional fish harvesting, cutting and preserving for the winter. These camps are also an opportunity for First Nations people to get back out on to the land that they love and respect so much.

Fish camps are passed down from generation, from grandparents down to the kids. We bring young people into our camp to teach them how to cut fish.

Kathy Sam
at Roger Alfred's Fish Camp, Pelly Crossing

Fish camps mean togetherness, they're a method of communication. Everybody gets together, tells stories, and has a job to do. Everyone works together — it's an important social event.

Ed Shultz
Carmacks

Some people expressed concern that the young people are losing some of their traditional ways.

Younger people aren't eating as much food off the land anymore, not like the older people do.

Stephen Frost
Old Crow

Although fish harvesting may not be integral to the survival of First Nations individuals and communities today, it's still a very important source of healthy food and provides opportunities for important social gatherings within the First Nations communities.

Part B

First Nations perspectives on catch and release fishing as a management tool

Catch and release fishing was a very important topic to Yukon First Nations people in every community across the territory. Once mentioned, people expressed strong feelings about the issue of catch and release fishing and it was difficult to talk about other aspects of fishing and fish harvesting.

I interviewed approximately 90 people, of mixed ages and genders. Approximately 55 people (61%) said that they were totally against catch and release fishing. Approximately 30 people (33%) said that they would not practice catch and release themselves but were not totally against its use as a

Interview comments and responses

management tool. Three people (3%) said that they themselves do practice catch and release and are not at all against using it as a management tool. A couple of people (2%) didn't say one way or the other whether or not they were for or against catch and release.

No. of people	%	Opinion
55	61%	Against catch and release
30	33%	Willing to accept catch and release as a management tool
3	3%	Practice catch and release themselves
2	2%	Not sure

There were no patterns shown for whether certain communities or areas were more for or against catch and release fishing. There was a slight pattern showing that younger First Nations people as opposed to older people, were more open to the concept of using catch and release fishing as a management tool. The three people who did say that they practised catch and release fishing, and were not against its use, were all younger females. Two were from Teslin and one was from Burwash Landing.

The same comments were echoed over and over again from those who were adamantly opposed to catch and release fishing. The main theme that I noticed was that these people seemed to view catch and release only as a sport, not as a management tool. Some of the viewpoints expressed were:

"The only time we fish is for food."

"We were taught by the Elders never to play with our food."

"Fish are to eat, not to play with."

"It's cruel and hurts the fish."

"Once the fish is hooked it will just die anyway."

"The fish are disappearing because people are playing with them too much."

"I see it on TV. And I hate it."

"The mortality rate is too high. Fish populations can't handle catch and release."

"Would you put a piece of meat on a hook and throw it to your dog?"

"How do we know that fish don't suffer — they can't talk."

Summary

"How would you like it if someone put a hook in your mouth and pulled you around for a while then let you go?"

"Catch and release fishing goes against the fundamental beliefs of First Nations people."

"Food from the land is sacred."

"Catch and release is just another way for the government to collect money from people by selling licenses."

"Catch and release is a big problem down south because many of the salmon don't make it to the spawning ground."

"Our people never release fish; everything we catch we have to eat."

"We don't play with our food."

"Catching and releasing the fish is disrespectful to the fish."

The following are examples of some of the comments expressed by people who weren't totally opposed to the use of catch and release fishing as a management tool.

"Catch and release to a minimum could be practised in designated creeks and rivers."

"Catch and release has to be done properly; use barbless hooks; don't handle the fish or take it out of the water for pictures; no dip nets."

"Let the big ones go for spawning and keep the smaller ones to eat."

"There has to be more research done to determine the survival rate."

"Catch and release can be done in stocked lakes, but leave the natural populations alone."

"Do catch and release outside where the water is already polluted."

"There has to be more education to teach people how to catch and release properly without causing too much damage to the fish."

"Tourists in the summer will catch and release in the river (Porcupine); they eat some fish too. There's nothing wrong with that."

"If the fish survive then catch and release is OK, especially if they're carrying eggs."

"I won't practice catch and release myself, but I don't mind if it's used for management."

The three people who said that they practice catch and release and were not opposed to it being used as a management tool also stressed that it had to be done properly to be successful.

Part C

Suggestions and comments for the Yukon Fish and Wildlife Management Board

During the interviews and discussions about fishing, fish harvesting, utilization, and catch and release fishing some interesting suggestions, comments and concerns were made. I have included the ones that I felt were most relevant

"Too many waters are contaminated; it's more important to check the water and fish for contaminants; it's a big problem."

"Managing fish and wildlife is the wrong terminology; you just think you're managing it. The Creator manages it."

"Have one specific lake for catch and release; leave the other lakes alone."

"Let people catch and release and sport fish only in stocked lakes, and leave the natural populations of fish alone."

"Change or rotate areas of sport fishing from year to year to give lakes and rivers time to regenerate."

"Make barbless hooks more available to purchase for fly fishing. I couldn't find any in Whitehorse."

"Outlaw down riggers and fish finders in inland lakes — too much technology."

"Cut down on the amount of commercial fishing on Teslin Lake."

"I would recommend that a study be done to find out the survival rate; more research has to be done."

"People need to be educated on how to catch and release properly and which fish to put back and which fish to keep. Sports fishers have to be educated so fish can be cleanly released with minimal damage. Encourage the use of single barbless hooks."

"Stop people from tethering fish to the shore while they keep fishing for bigger fish."

"One problem is pulling trout up from really deep water; you might as well keep them because they're going to die anyway."

"On the Taku River I have seen fish caught with hooks inside them and line hanging out of their mouth."

"Have seen dead pike floating belly-up after they have been caught and released."

"There should be strict limits on number of fish caught. Also give out a certain number of permits for fishing on certain lakes; when those permits are gone then they're gone. People would have to go to the local Renewable Resources Councils in those areas to get the permits. People should have to make an effort to get permits."

"In the Tagish/Carcross area there should be a closed season on fishing for two to three weeks in September when the fish are spawning."

"There should be more monitors on the lakes and rivers to make sure people aren't taking more than the limits. Should be First Nations monitors in every area [community] to monitor the lakes."

"Should be more First Nations conservation officers."

"Don't want some white conservation officer telling me what to do."

"Could make people watch a video and get a pamphlet on how to catch and release when they buy their fishing licenses."

"Find out what sport fishers 'get out of fishing.' Maybe we could meet their needs without hurting the fish."

"It's good that the Fish and Wildlife Management Board is doing this survey."

"It's good that the Board is exploring the pros and cons of catch and release."

"It would be nice to see the government and the First Nations working side by side together to respect the land, the wildlife, everything!"

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Sport Fishing Regulations Summary. 1998-99, Yukon Department of Renewable Resources.

Two Eyes: One Vision - Traditional Knowledge Conference, April 1998. Hosted by the Yukon Fish and Wildlife Management Board.

Appendix 1

Methods

Two methods were used to gather information illustrating the importance of fishing and fish harvesting to Yukon First Nations people, and their respect for this resource, as well as, their perspectives on ethics, conservation, harvesting, utilization and the use of catch and release fishing as a management tool.

- A literature search was completed to determine what existing information was published and available on the above topics.
- Informal interviews and discussions were conducted with First Nations people in communities across the Yukon Territory by Stephanie Muckenheim, assisted by Art Johns.

Communities visited by both Stephanie and Art included Old Crow, Dawson, Mayo, Stewart Crossing, Pelly Crossing, Carmacks, Whitehorse, Teslin and Ross River. Two annual General Assemblies were attended, that of the Kaska Dena at Coffee Lake, as well as the CYFN General Assembly at Airport Lake.

Communities visited by Stephanie alone included Beaver Creek, Burwash Landing, Haines Junction, Klukshu Village,

Carcross, Tagish, and Watson Lake. The White River First Nation General Assembly in Beaver Creek and the Carcross/Tagish General Assembly in Carcross were also attended.

Approximately 90 people were interviewed. People were selected based on convenience and availability. People of mixed ages and genders were randomly selected.

Most people were interviewed on an individual basis, however, there were also some group discussions in which two or more people expressed their views.

Questionnaire

No formal questionnaire was used, although I did have a set of questions which I used as a guide. Based on this guide, people were asked very similar questions, though every interview was different according to the circumstances.

Here is an example of some of the questions from the guide questionnaire. (Note that not every question was asked in every interview due to time constraints and other circumstances. As well, questions were not necessarily asked in this order.)

- Do you fish?
- How do you fish, what do you use? i.e. fishing rod, set net, gaff, ice fish, trap etc.
- When do you fish? i.e. time of year.
- Where do you fish?
- Do you always keep all of the fish that you catch?
- Do you ever let any go?
- Do you know of anyone now or historically (in the past) who has ever let fish go?
- If you did let fish go, why?
- What do you do with the fish that you catch? Do you preserve, freeze or feed them to the dogs?
- How do you feel about catch and release fishing being used as a management tool?
- Do you think this type of fishing affects the lakes and rivers in your area?
- If fish are under pressure, what would you like to see done about it?
- Do you know if historically the First Nations people in your community practised conservation or management?
- Do have any suggestions or comments to direct to the Fish and Wildlife Management Board?

Appendix 2

Limitations of this project

- This was a convenience sampling based on the availability of people. Age, gender and First Nations groups may not be equally represented. Some First Nations groups may have better numerical representation than others due to availability of people and time constraints.

Plans and scheduling often had to be changed due to unforeseen circumstances such as deaths in the community, forest fire threats, illnesses of contact people, or simply because members of the community were absent or too busy working.

Several people told me that summertime was a bad time to catch people at home. "Everyone goes away in the summer. During the winter would be a better time to do a survey like this because people would be more likely to be at home with nothing else to do."

- There were time constraints in the process. I had approximately eight weeks to do the preliminary research, travel to every community, and complete my preliminary report. This made for a very hectic summer schedule which was constantly changing due to unforeseen circumstances. I feel that if I had had a little more time to spend in each community, the interview process would have been more successful with longer, more in-depth interviews, and more people around to interview. I observed that in the communities where I spent a little more time, people were more comfortable speaking with me. Overall, I felt pressed for time in completing my tasks.

- I would have benefited from Art John's assistance for the whole period of the interview process, in all of the communities. People seemed to be more comfortable speaking with both of us, rather than just myself.
- Art Johns is a well known and well respected person in the Yukon. Art's beliefs and perspectives about fish and wildlife uses and conservation are also well known. This may or may not have influenced some people's opinions and comments during the interviews.
- Art Johns is a First Nations Elder. This may have led to an under representation of younger First Nations people's opinions in this survey.
- I am a younger, non-First Nation female. This may or may not have been a limitation.

Appendix 3

Map of Yukon communities and Aboriginal languages



Used with permission from The Yukon Native Language Centre and CYFN

Appendix 4:

Description of a typical fish camp by a Tutchone woman

One of the most complete descriptions of fish camp life comes from a Tutchone woman in her seventies as she remembers it in a village on the Yukon River. Although she is talking about a period roughly around 1910, it is more a description of what she considers important (and perhaps ideal) than a description of any specific camp at any specific time period.

This is how the Indians used to live before they depended on government.

In spring, they go out after spring trapping. They hunt around for what they can eat, dry meat. Then come back to headquarters place. They've all got their own houses there. They cut plenty of wood.

Government spoils people by making them depend. Never do that those days.

When people trap sometimes they make \$3,000 a year. Summertime they don't work. Just have time to lay around. Live on that money they make from trapping. They buy grub from the trader there. In July they begin to fish for salmon, King Salmon.

From the tenth of July to the thirty-first of August, they stay in fish camp. Nice and clean those fish camps. No fish smell.

Fish net made of sinew. They twist together sinew and it never comes undone. I'm not sure how they do it. For sinew net, have to stick it in water, soak it, pull out to dry, then use it. Sometimes they make net with handles on both sides.

People fish all in a line. No family owns any area. Each people (family) have their own rack for drying. Fish camp is very clean. You might think it's a mess but it's not. You wouldn't believe how clean. After work is done, people take water in special pail and wash out the area.

They set net, catch 15-30 fish a day in a net. Men bring it home. Women cut and scrape them. They save guts for dogs to make them fat. Then they put up salmon, hang it in strips. Cut them up, dry them. To hang those fish, first you scrub off pole, then hang fleshside down. After that skin dry a bit on top, turn over and cut them. If you cut right away, it's too hard — they're slippery and slide around. Then put new willow leaves like paper under fish when cut them.

With fish head, you strip teeth and cut head open. Then smoke in the middle of campfire.

They put canvas over fish rack. Everybody got their own fishrack.

If there's a poor family, they share with them. Others give to them.

What gets dry first, they take home with them. Fish camp is three miles from our headquarters.

Fish eggs you can dry, or you can mix eggs with high bush cranberries. They make special willow net to hang eggs to dry. When dry right through, put in moose stomach which is stretched and dried like plastic.


You can cook fish meat and dry fish in water and drink the juice.

Between fishing times people go out and hunt gopher in summer. Catch, skin, cut up. Then sew flesh of gophers together. Hang and dry. That's good for winter.

Rabbit net is made of sinew too. They make spring snare. Long loop of sinew with one end tied to long pole. That rabbit puts neck in loop, springs snare and chokes.

Gopher snare is the same as rabbit except you can use eagle feather. Take feather, split stem in three long pieces, set it up. That loop springs, pulls up on gopher neck and chokes him.

After August 31, go back to main camp. Put away food and stuff. Make moccasins. Make fish and grease mix for winter. Pick up



blueberries and put in birch basket. They freeze basket in cache. Also we pick low bush cranberries and high bush cranberries. Those berries, they never spoil.

Then go out in fall and dry meat. Maybe dry four-five moose for winter. Some people go up Pelly River. Some walk straight back into

bush. Then later get fresh meat and freeze. Women go too. Got to go along to make moccasins. Kids, everyone go. I used to like that when I'm a kid.

People bring in dry meat at end of September. Then take dry meat, fish, out to traplines. Then men go trapping—go snare lynx and fox.

Every family have their own cache. You could get meat anywhere though, snare anywhere. Indians are good to each other those days. When they kill moose, they divide it. Then each family dry meat themselves.

People come to post for Christmas and don't go back 'till after New Years. Lots of fun those days.

Appendix 5

The story of Moldy Head, as told by Angela Sidney, Teslin/Tlingit Elder

Moldy Head-Shaatláax

One time there was a little boy who lived with his mother and father. People dry fish — that's how they rustle for food. If they do that, they don't have much hard time in winter when it's hard to rustle for game.

And so this little boy always cried for food in the evening, Before he goes to bed his mother always gives him dry salmon, head part. Here he tells his mother, "How come it's always moldy?" He gets disappointed, throws it away. "It's moldy." Anyway, his mother gave him another one again, always. Every now and then, like that, it's moldy.

But he said something wrong against the fish spirit.

So the next year, they go to the same place — That's where they dry fish. They were there again. Here, his mother was cutting fish. And you know how seagulls want fishguts all the time? Here he set out a snare for that seagull. Set out a snare to catch him.

Anyway, that toggle wasn't very strong or very big or very heavy. And seagull started to drag it out. That little boy started running after it. He ran in the water to try to catch it. Pretty soon, he fell in a hole. He caught it, I guess, but they couldn't save him.

And here right away the fish spirit grabbed him — they saved him. And when the fish went back to the ocean, they took him. But for that boy, it seemed like right away he was amongst people.

They got a big boat, and they took him with them down to the fish country. They came to a big city, big town— Oh, lots of people run around, kids playing around.

One time they're playing outside and the little boys see fish eggs. He starts to eat some. He doesn't know what those people eat — he never sees them eat anything. Here, he starts to eat fish eggs.

Here, someone called out Shaatláax, "Moldy Head." They call him that because he used to call fish moldy.

"Moldy Head eats someone's poop," they said. Here it was fish eggs. Oh, by gosh, right away he gets shamed! When the kids come home, they tell older people about it: "Moldy Head eats people's poop."

Next morning, adults tell them, "Why don't you kids go play around that point, play ball. While you play, you catch fish. But when you eat it and when you cook it Don't let anything fall in the hole, that cooking stick hole, where they put the stick in to roast fish."

So they make fire and one lady sees fish and clubs it and cooks it for him. Now and then when he gets hungry, they do that for him. In the evening when they come home, Here that boy never came home until last.

They told him, "Throw the bone and skin and everything into the water, But don't let anything fall in the cooking stick hole." He threw everything in the water except that one eye. It fell in the cooking stick hole.

They didn't see it — the lost eye.
So when they came home, that boy
has got one eye missing.
He came back to life again, and
he's missing one eye.

The parents tell him to go back —
look in that cooking stick hole,
See if there's anything there.

So they went to the playground,
And sure enough there is fish eye
there.
He picked it up and he threw it in
the water.
And when he came back, all of a
sudden
That boy has got both of his eyes
back.

Finally, springtime started to come.
Everybody started to get ready to
go up the river again.
That boy stays with those people
that adopted him first and they all
go up the river again.

They come to that same place —
“Hee hut, hee hut,” they pole
upriver.
That's how come they know where
to go:
They say when the fish go up the
river
Their great-great-grandmother is at
the head of the creek.
And that's why they go up to visit
the great-great-grandmother, that
fish —
They come back to the same place.

Here he sees his human mother —
His mother is cutting fish.
He goes close to his mother

Just the same, his mother never
paid any attention to him —
It was just a fish to her.
I don't know how many times she
tried to club that fish
But it always takes off.

So finally, she tells her husband
about it.
“How come that one fish always
comes to me and just stays right
there all the time?
But after when I go back to see
him, that fish is always gone.
Why is that?”

“I don't know why that is.
Let's try to kill it,” he said.
“You know we lost our son last
year.
Could be something. Must be
something.
Let's try to catch it, okay?”
So they did. Anyway, they got it.

And here she started to cut that
fish.
And here that fish had copper
around his neck
Just like the one that boy used to
wear all the time.
And that's the one when that lady
started to cut his head off.
She couldn't cut the head off.
So she looked at it good.
Here she saw this copper ring on
his head.
So she told her husband right away,
“Look at that. What's this here?”

And her husband said,
“Well, you know, our son used to
wear a copper ring all the time
around his neck.”
Yes, they remembered that.

So they washed it good.

And then they took it home.
There's an Indian doctor there, too.
And the Indian doctor said,
“Put it in a nice clean white skin.”
Old people used to have lots of
that.
They put it in a nice clean skin,
Covered it with down feathers.

Then they tie it way up to where
the smoke goes up,
Smokehole.
That Indian doctor told them to go
fast for eight days.

So people fasted for eight days.
That Indian doctor said,
“If you see feathers blow up,
Then you take it down quick.”

So they put the body up there,
Fasted for eight days.
That Indian doctor sang all the
time.
They were singing, too, I guess —
Got to help the doctor sing.

Finally, on the eighth day, here they
see the feathers blow up.
They take it down quick.
Here that little boy comes to life
again, in human's body.
They brought him back to life.

That's how they know about fish.
That's why kids are told not to
insult fish.
And kids are not to play with
seagull because that happened.

Appendix 6

Sport fishing regulations summary, Yukon Renewable Resources

Recreational fishing: A First Nation view

Everything has a spirit: animals, the vegetation, minerals. And you've got to respect them.

Pete Sidney
Teslin Tlingit First Nation

Indian people have been fishing in Yukon waters since the glaciers retreated a few thousand years ago. Throughout their long relationship with this land and its resources, Yukon First Nations have followed three rules of traditional fish and wildlife management:

1. Respect the animal.
2. Take only what you need.
3. Use everything you take.

Those of us who arrived in the Yukon more recently brought with us the attitudes and practices of our own cultures. One of those practices is live-release fishing.

Live-release fishing

You may be surprised to learn that many Yukon Indian people don't feel good about live-release fishing. This practice is helping us conserve fish stocks and build a sustainable fishery, right? So what's the problem?

The problem, from a First Nation perspective, is respect for the fish. In practice, this means you take the fish you need for food and then stop fishing. It means you don't play with fish and then let them go. Here's what some Yukon Indian people have said about recreational fishing and live-release.

It (recreational fishing) is a spiritual quest. People are trying to fulfil their spiritual needs, and that's good. The value is in getting out there in nature's creation. It's not in the fish.

Mark Wedge
Carcross-Tagish First Nation

I watch these fishermen on TV. They catch a big lake trout and lift him up out of the water. Then they measure him and take a picture and horse around with him. They take the hook out and let him go. Then they catch him again. How do you think that fish feels?

Jessie Scarff
Kwanlin Dun First Nation

It's hard to put into words.

Underlying (our view) is respect.

Respect for animals. Respect for fish.

David Dickson
Liard First Nation

The fish comes to you as a gift. It's offering its life to you. And if you don't accept it, that's an insult. Sooner or later the fish will stop coming to you.

Mark Wedge
Carcross-Tagish First Nation

The foundation of our thinking is respect. And that's what we carry to you. Respect. For humans, animals, trees and all life... (The earth) belongs to all of us, and we are all part of it. And we have to make sure it's still here for our children.

Millie Pauls
Ross River Dene Council

Bridging the culture gap

How can we bridge the gap between cultural views? First, we have to understand that when it comes to fishing, both cultures, in their own way, are simply trying to maintain their relationship with Mother Earth. And second, we have to listen to each other. And when you listen to Yukon Indian people speak about fishing, the one word you hear over and over again is “respect.” Think about it.

*White men have to learn our ways,
we have to learn their ways. In order
to live in harmony we have to work
together.*

Virginia Smarch
Teslin Tlingit First Nation

The real value of live-release fishing

The real value of live-release fishing is that it lets you choose the fish you are going to kill and eat. It lets you release the large, valuable spawners and make a healthy, fresh meal out of the smaller fish.

Guidelines for ethical live-release fishing

1. Keep the small fish. Let the big ones go. They are the most important spawners.
2. Keep any fish that is bleeding or injured, where legal.
3. Limit your live release totals to no more than 10 fish of a species in one day. When you reach this level, switch to another species or stop fishing
4. Do not practice live-release fishing in schools of spawning fish that are already under stress.
5. Do not keep a fish alive on a stringer while trying to replace it with a larger fish or another species.
6. Stop fishing for a species after you have caught and kept the limit for that species.

Appendix 7

A message from the Little Salmon/Carmacks First Nation...on fishing

Welcome to the land of the Northern Tutchone

Since prehistoric times we have lived and travelled throughout this country enjoying the beauty and bounty of this wonderful land. We hope you have a safe and enjoyable visit to our territory.

Our people say...

In the First Nations culture, to fish was to live. Fish was the mainstay of the Northern Tutchone people for thousands of years. When game disappeared for one reason or another there was still fish. There are a number of lakes and places along the Yukon River system which were noted for their abundance of fish and it was to these spots that our ancestors moved, to survive. Yukon First Nation people still fish today to supplement their diet.

The Little Salmon/Carmacks First Nation Elders ask that if you are not hungry then do not fish. To fish and then release the fish goes against the fundamental belief that fish and game is to be used for food

and not sport. Travellers through our land that wish to fish should have the legal fishing licenses which can be obtained at many stores and government agencies. At different times of the summer and fall you may find nets in the river. These nets are mainly nets of First Nations people and represent an ancient fishing tradition.

The salmon caught is cleaned, cut, then smoked and dried for use throughout the remainder of the year. This is an important food source for our First Nation's members so we request that you leave the nets alone. It is illegal to buy or sell fish without a commercial license or to interfere with nets.

Along the banks of the Yukon River are standing log structures with poles across them. These are drying racks for fish. Please do not camp in these spots nor use the poles or other items in the camp. If you find log buildings along the river it is okay to look at them, but since these are either homes or historic sites, they should be left alone.

Be careful!

In late July and August, grizzly or black bears come to the banks of the rivers and creeks to eat the dead or dying salmon which, after spawning, have completed their life cycle. These bears can be dangerous and we recommend that if you see one, then just move on and leave it alone. They are eating as much as they can to build up fat for their winter hibernation. In early spring the grizzly bear may come to the banks of the river looking for moose calves which are born near water at this time of year. When cleaning fish, do not leave the head or the waste part of fish to rot since this attracts bears.

Fish, animals and humans all use rivers and lakes so we ask that you do not pollute these waters in any way.

*Sponsored by the
Department of Fisheries and Oceans*



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