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THE OTHER SIDE OF THE SALMON COIN: FISHERMAN'S PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The goal of the conservation-minded government official is to preserve and increase salmon as a natural resource. The goal of the commercial fisherman is to cash in on that resource during his own career. These goals are sometimes at odds, with hostility between the groups an unfortunate by-product. In this paper, I take the fisherman's point of view and isolate a few concrete sources of his antagonisms, some seemingly irresolvable, but others that could be dampened. My points concern southeast Alaska's salmon seine fishery. Hopefully, the information may be of use in furthering cooperation between this industry and its governmental regulating agency.

As constituted, the salmon seine fishery in Southeast Alaska involves three distinct groups of people: the fishermen, the fish-buyers and processors, and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G). I expect at a conference such as this that there are several people here from the ADF&G and maybe even a few from the fish-processing industry. But, I wonder how many fishermen are attending. As a consequence of this understandable audience and participant bias, a major component of the Alaskan salmon fisheries — that is, the fishermen themselves — are seldom heard by the scientific community. In what follows, I hope to do two separate things: (1) describe the fishery as seen from the vantage point of the seine fishermen; and (2) outline several sorts of data that are needed for a more enlightened consideration of how the ADF&G should regulate and deal with their charge as regards the seine fishery.

Before beginning, however, let me say that I have been a purse seiner myself for the past three seasons, and I hope you will pardon me if I do not always distinguish between what I think as a social scientist and what I feel as a purse seiner. Also, I should mention that my comments below derive from qualitative data and not from the results of attitudinal surveys, that is, I speak from personal immersion in the business of fishing and from conversations with fellow fishermen.

The first point to notice about the salmon seine fishery is that it is a seasonal undertaking and does not provide employment for the seiners throughout the year. Thus, it makes ideal "summer work" for a variety of people, but not necessarily a life-time career. Many crew members on the boats attend colleges during the rest of the year. Many others go home to other jobs at the end of the salmon season. Some stay busy fishing most of the year by engaging in other fisheries (e.g., herring seining or king crabbing). And, some try to make the salmon seine season last them through the winter and spring until they can begin their annual cycle all over again. The personnel on the boats come from literally all around the United States, though, of course, there is a higher percentage from the Northwest states. The upshot of this seasonality is that seiners see the relatively short season as an opportunity to make lots of money in a hurry and, also, they resent any obstructions which cut into their fishing time. This is true of skippers and crew members alike.

Another general point concerning the seiners is that they are not in any formal organization which resembles the labor unions so prevalent in seemingly all other sectors of Alaska's work force. There is a Purse Seiner's Association, but far and away the bulk of the membership are skippers with only a few crew members involved. This general absence of intra-group

organization is quite compatible with the fact that each seine boat is operated after the fashion of a small independent business venture.

With these overarching comments in mind, I should now like to describe the employment relations on seine boats, for this is of some consequence as regards the flow of information between purse seiners and the ADF&G.

There are three structural positions on the boats with respect to their economic organization. The first of these is the *owner* of the capital goods. The second is the *skipper* – the executive manager of the operation. The third position is *crew member*. There is but one skipper on each boat at any one time. The crew (here referring to all but the skipper who actually work on the boat) consists of from four to seven people, but almost always five or six. The capital goods owner is frequently the same person as the skipper, but often one of the fish-buying companies or an individual investor may own the boat and other equipment.

The general set up is that the owner hires a skipper (possibly himself) to run the boat during the seining season. Skippers must own their own gear, minimally a seine, and frequently they will have liability insurance. Their position on a boat is contractual, extending for the duration of the seining season.

The skipper hires and fires the crew. The crew “works for” the skipper; he is the “boss.” Each crew member receives one “share” of the monetary value of the catch, rather than remuneration through wages or salary. There is no formal agreement with respect to how long a crew member will hold his job nor exactly what his job will be. The closest equivalent to a formal signing occurs when the skipper has the crew sign and fill out their Federal W-2 forms for income tax and fill out the application for a commercial fishing license, but this may happen after some work has already been done. Hiring consists in an asking for a job on the part of the crew member and an approval on the part of the skipper. It is a verbal understanding. The directionality may be reversed – a skipper may ask a person if he would like to work on the skipper’s boat – and the situation is thus not a verbal ritual. The point is that the process is governed by very informal and moral principles rather than by intricate specification and contract.

As mentioned, remuneration on a seine boat is on a “share” system. Relative to this there are but two categories: capital goods and labor. The skipper and his crew comprise the labor, and the capital goods owner receives payment in shares for his hardware. Typically, there are from ten to twelve shares on a boat. Each crew member receives one of these shares, the skipper receives from one to one and a half shares for his labor and from one to two shares for his seine, and the remainder goes to the owner of the boat, power skiff, and power block. Boats vary in the details of their systems, but all boats pay in terms of percentages of the collective catch rather than establishing fixed rates or salaries. The circuitous upshot of the share system is that there is a great emphasis upon teamwork with everyone trying to do his full share of the work in order to maximize the possible returns. Thus, although dealing in a high conflict-potential relation (*i.e.*, employer-employee), explicit confrontation is counter-productive for everyone concerned, and even subdued confrontation (*e.g.*, back-biting) is approved by no one.

Even from this short sketch of the basic economic structure of a seine boat, it should be clear that the skipper and his crew are tied together in a relationship of reciprocal trust rather than legalities. Furthermore, they work together, both in the sense of close spatial proximity and in the sense that each person’s work benefits the whole team. Also, it should be clear that while the skipper deals directly with the fish-buyers, the crew members of seine boats do so only indirectly insofar as they are employed by a skipper. This latter point is reflected in the accounting practices of the fish-buyers and in the legal fact that a boat’s catch records are considered the skipper’s confidential property. So, from the crew’s viewpoint, the skipper is their connection with the canneries, the ADF&G, businesses in port where boat supplies are purchased, and even other seine boats. Of course, the crew may establish connections of their own during a season and over the years, but these are personal relations and do not implicate their boat as a whole.

Given that each boat acts as a separate unit of production, that is, boats do not pool their catches and receive money for an average poundage, the extent of a skipper's connections are a factor in the *a priori* prediction of his boat's catch relative to other boats. This follows from the fact that one of the principal functions of skippers is to decide where their respective boats will fish. Some skippers poll their crew's opinions; many simply hand down their decisions by decree. However the decision is reached, the skipper has the last word and it is "his" decision.

This burden of responsibility can be seen on skippers' faces the day or two before the beginning of a seine opening. They walk up to other boats as if by accident, and after a few minutes of shooting the breeze in a casual way, they probe the other skipper's plans in the most roundabout manners. Some skippers seemingly hold court as a day-long parade of less experienced skippers come over first to pay homage and then to compare estimates and plans. Also, the cannery offices are a favorite hang-out for the skippers as they try to gather all the information they can. A few skippers, mostly full-time Alaska residents, know troll fishermen, and since trollers cruise around a lot, these skippers can tap into yet another information source. Only rarely, and then only within the confines of a long-term personal relationship (e.g., kin, neighbor, or boyhood friend), do skippers honestly and completely reveal their decision about where they plan to fish to other skippers. Frequently, they do not know themselves until they have finished scouting the open areas just before the opening begins. Some few skippers charter airplanes and scout for salmon jumps in this way.

While the skipper of a boat is going through the mental turmoil of gleaning information from poker-faced colleagues, his crew are frolicking ashore. About the first thing seiners do when they come into port after an opening is head for the showers. Next on the agenda are the bars. After the first onslaught has passed and the booze stops tasting so good, the seiners can be seen loafing in a goodly variety of spots, just taking life easy. They have small patch up work to do around their boats, such as sewing seine, replacing worn lines, and other maintenance work, but the days in port are leisurely in the extreme compared to the seiner's days during an opening. Then, he will rise at the crack of dawn to the tune of the boat's diesel engine, work his back sore all day, and after the sun sets, jump into a mess of fish and blood and slime to pitch the day's catch to a cannery tender boat. All in all, a workday may easily last eighteen hours or more, and the seiners are not sitting behind desks either. The work is physically demanding, somewhat dangerous, and made uncomfortable by the heat inside raingear and the jellyfish flapping about in the breeze as the seine goes up and over the power block.

Nonetheless, if the catch is good, the crew smile at each other, joke with the skipper, and remark that indeed seining is "easy money." On the other hand, if the catch is poor, the crew will not feel so jubilant. It is the same work whether the catch is large or small; only the pay changes. If all the boats have done poorly, then the frustration is likely to be directed at nature, the long-term policies of the ADF&G, or just allowed to dissipate with time. If other boats have done relatively well, however, then the crew will feel that their skipper's decision of where to fish was not so good. Depending on how long they have fished with the skipper, how well he has done in the past, and several other factors, the crew will either write off the day as insignificant or begin doubting their skipper's seining abilities. In either case, a poor catch may be attributed either to luck or an amorphous constellation of causal factors which a good skipper would understand better. Given the intensity of the work, physically, temporally, and psychologically, luck is not a very satisfying answer, hence seiners will search for a reason they have not done at least as well as the average of the fleet.

Not all seiners harbor a deep-seated resentment of the ADF&G. Most fishermen concur with the long range goal of restoring the salmon runs through conservation measures, and many trust that the ADF&G knows the best ways to achieve this common goal. On the other hand, the seiners depend on the season to pay grocery bills, tuitions, buy that new car, and enjoy the good life, so they want to do well each and every season. Some frustration is part of the game, but the social structure of a seine boat makes it very easy to lay the blame for recurrent poor catches on the practices of the fish and game people.

I have already mentioned the fact that the relationship between a skipper and his crew is based on mutual trust and confidence. Each time the boat has a good opening, the crew's confidence in their skipper increases. And, as a skipper builds up his reputation, he can attract and keep good crews. Thus, the "high-liners" of the fleet are comparatively stable as regards crew composition over the years. An occasional poor opening does not jeopardize the crew's faith in their skipper. But, at least half the fleet does below average, and in these ranks, it is very easy to place blame for the relatively poor catches on the ADF&G's "mismanagement," both the long range policies and the immediate tactics. Rather than letting poor catches erode the relation between himself and his crew, a skipper may tell his crew that it is the fish and game people's fault because they did not open enough areas or they waited too long and let all the fish get upstream or that they purposively opened only those areas where there were relatively few fish. The crew, who almost always have access to less information than the skipper, can either buy this line of thinking out of respect for the skipper, see it as simple scapegoating, or believe it on the basis of their own observations. Thus, the boat's social structure, in addition to the fact that the skipper is an information bottleneck, is a definite factor maintaining a certain level of hostility and resentment between the fisherman and the ADF&G.

The only way to lower the level of such resentment is to break the information bottleneck by publicizing more effectively the basic data from which the ADF&G makes its decisions. In doing this, however, the ADF&G will have to recognize that they are not dealing simply with "seiners." Rather, there are skippers, rookies, and experienced crew members, and in this last category, some are future skippers, some career crew members, some are just seining for a couple of years until they begin their career doing something else, and a few are studying marine biology in colleges. Each sub-grouping of seiners can be expected to have different motivations as regards their involvement in the seine fishery, and these should be recognized by the ADF&G. For example, a career crew member may well agree with the goal of conservation, but he may believe that the ADF&G's information is not as good as that of a well-connected skipper who taps into the troller's grapevine, that the ADF&G escapement goals are causing poor runs by over-crowding certain streams, that openings should be at the beginning and end of a run rather than in the middle, and that the ADF&G decisions are "all political" anyway. A rookie may either go along with his skipper's views or be completely behind the ADF&G, in either case his feelings are based not so much on facts as on his general orientations to public versus private "authorities."

Without simply running off a string of seiner's complaints, each of which may be accurate or trumped-up, I think it is important to realize that the fishermen are not in principle against the goals of the ADF&G. In fact, almost all would at least minimally agree that it would be good to have strong salmon runs again. The divergence begins when specific tactical implementations are imposed. Sometimes, from the fisherman's viewpoint, it is not so clear that the ADF&G is completely committed to their own policies, but can be cajoled, bullied, or manipulated if the fish-processing industry wants its way.

Another unflattering suspicion is that the ADF&G does not really know the best ways to restore the salmon runs, but is hiding this from the fishermen and basing its claim to authority on impressive credentials and political support.

I would suggest that the best way to overcome such impediments between the fishermen and the ADF&G and to promote cooperation is to treat the fishermen as if they too know something about the fish they catch. That is, the ADF&G needs to reach out to the fishermen and explain how it is that the measures now in use are going to see concrete results in x number of years. And, I would also suggest that this communication effort be aimed at all seiners, not just the skippers who attend the meetings at the local fish and game offices. Furthermore, the ADF&G should make every effort to evaluate fishermen's suggestions and in general try to get the fishermen actively involved in deciding how conservation measures should be implemented. Here, the ADF&G and seiners share a common goal. The problem is very

complex if contemplated seriously — there are so many social, economic, and political factors in addition to the basic ecological problems — but to the extent that the ADF&G has as their charge the regulation of the fisheries for the benefit of the general public, fishermen's opinions and knowledge should not be ignored because it is the fishermen who make salmon a real natural resource instead of just fish swimming in the water.

Up until now in this paper, I have been concerned with characterizing the essential social structure on seine boats and how this fosters a certain level of hostility toward the ADF&G as a natural consequence of the fact that roughly half the fleet will do below average. I have also mentioned that some fishermen disagree with most aspects of the ADF&G's tactical solutions on observational grounds. Essentially, I feel the level of animosity could be greatly reduced by an effective public relations campaign on the part of the ADF&G, one which properly recognizes the basic social milieu of the seiners and takes the variety of their motivations into account. And, as a step in this direction, I have tried to synoptically describe the seiner's situation. In what follows, I want to call attention to certain kinds of information that need to be gathered before any such public relations effort should be seriously undertaken.

First, we need to know how many seine fishermen there are in Southeast Alaska. The figures available from the Department of Revenue Fish and Game License Section are totals from the whole state. If one estimates the number of seine fishermen by multiplying the number of purse seine gear licenses by six (average crew size), then between the years 1961 and 1975 there have been from 6,882 to 8,232 seiners in the State of Alaska. Since the personal commercial license does not specify which fishery the license is for (it is all purpose), it is impossible to calculate how many of the seine fishermen are residents of Alaska and how many are coming up just for the fishing season. I would guess that about half are residents and half are from down south.

Second, after we know how many seiners there are, we should find out the basic characteristics of that population as regards number of years involved in the fishery. That is, we need a simple histogram of seiners in terms of their years of experience. To my knowledge, this is completely unknown and there is not even enough information to make estimates.

And third, we should get some idea of how the seiners regard the ADF&G as well as how much they know of its policies, and these should be related to variables such as the number of years the seiner has worked in the fishery, his status as resident or non-resident, his status on the boats (e.g., skipper, career crew member, future skipper, etc.), and the percentage of his annual income derived from seining.

The second and third kinds of information could be obtained by the administration of a survey to a sample of the subject population. It would be a single project and a simple one, but nonetheless valuable. For example, if it should be the case that relatively inexperienced seiners are the most hostile to the fish and game people, it could be interpreted that these fishermen are merely frustrated in their get-rich-quick hopes and not really informed and long-term animosities. Or again, if skippers and career seiners are the most hostile sub-group, then it is possible that they just want a return to the good old days of exploitation or that they genuinely disagree with the ADF&G's specific policies.

I was rather appalled three years ago when I first discovered that no one seemed to know anything about the basic demographics of the fishermen and the only indication of their opinions was what occasionally found its way into the newspaper. I think it is peculiar and sad that we seem to know more about the fish than the men and women who catch them.