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The *King of Fish* “Book Drop”: Generating Conversation and Shared Values about Salmon in Alaska

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Effective advocacy is rarely the stuff of bumper stickers and bullhorns. People are more willing to consider new perspectives when they're not force-fed; persuasion is most enduring when people are empowered to make their own conclusions. Fisheries advocates who face the task of building consensus around controversial issues should consider tools that help create community discussion where shared values can emerge. Youth education, art, and cuisine are examples of tools that can help us play the “long game” in advocacy. One group in Alaska recently experimented with another tool, the “Book Drop,” where many copies of a thought-provoking book were freely distributed in hopes of sparking discussion about one of Alaska's most unifying and divisive topics: salmon.

“If salmon are resilient enough to withstand extreme events like massive landslides, volcanic mudflows, and glaciations, then why are they going extinct across much of their ranges today?” asks author and professor David Montgomery in the book *King of Fish: The Thousand Year Run of Salmon*. Thirteen hundred copies of *King of Fish*, which chronicles the history of salmon and their relationship with people around the world over the past millennium, were given away by the nonprofit group The Salmon Project throughout Alaska as part of their “Book Drop” project. *King of Fish* is notable in that it contains very little information about Alaska, widely considered one of the world's last great strongholds for wild salmon. What relevance would such a book have for Alaskans, then? The book should make Alaskans ask themselves how they want their chapter in history to be written, say organizers at The Salmon Project.

Alaskans love their salmon. In a recent statewide survey, 90% of Alaskans responded that wild salmon are important and 75% responded that they felt connected to wild salmon in some way (The Salmon Project 2013). While Alaska's salmon populations and the ecosystems that support them are healthy compared to

those in other parts of the world, Alaska is also at a crossroads for making decisions that will have lasting impacts on salmon and the communities linked to them. Increasing population size, urbanization, and climate change are long-term current and future challenges. As Alaskans navigate the often polarizing topics of harvest allocation, habitat management, and others, it is pertinent to ask, “What can we learn from history?”

Though Alaskans today share widespread consensus about their love of abundant salmon, the abundance can also distract us from the same trends and actions that led to the “death by a thousand cuts” fates of other salmon populations around the world.

In addition to distributing the books, The Salmon Project followed up by supporting local book discussion events where readers shared their ideas and experiences. These events serve as a forum where people from different backgrounds can share discussion about complex issues, using the book as a common frame of reference. At the discussion events, readers are asked their suggestions for the absent “Alaska chapter” in *King of Fish*. There



Miriam Roberts distributes free copies of *King of Fish* at the Backdoor Café in Sitka, Alaska. Photo credit: The Salmon Project.

has been no shortage of ideas, with present-day subsistence and native Alaskan fishing issues, habitat protection, and public participation in management voiced with particular significance. At the book discussion events and elsewhere, Alaskans emphasize the great abundance of salmon statewide, especially compared to other regions of the world where populations have dwindled or gone extinct. Alaska may have exceptional salmon populations today, but by considering stories ranging from medieval England to the American Revolutionary War to the California gold rush days—all places and times where people once had a relationship with salmon not unlike Alaskans do today—*King of Fish* forces Alaskans to ask themselves whether their actions set them on the same trajectory seen throughout history or a brighter one.

King of Fish also reminds us that despite incredible advances in fisheries science and management techniques, people have long understood something about what wild salmon need in order to persist. For example, in medieval England, a 12th-century legal statute known as the King’s Gap declared that rivers shall be kept free of obstructions such that “a well-fed three year old pig” could stand sideways in the stream without touching either side. Though it was centuries later before scientists understood that salmon migrate between freshwater and the ocean to complete their life cycle, the too-often ignored mandate was intended to allow adult salmon to reach their spawning grounds. The expansion of small-scale water mills across Europe, most of them lacking fish passage gaps, is thought to have reduced salmon populations by as much as 90% even prior to 1600 A.D. (Lenders et al. 2016).

Though Alaskans today share widespread consensus about their love of abundant salmon, the abundance can also distract us from the same trends and actions that led to the “death by a thousand cuts” fates of other salmon populations around the world. On the accumulation of small losses of salmon habitat over many years, Montgomery writes, “Perhaps the biggest problem lies in the way that individual decisions accumulate into big effects: how land use gradually changed river basins into regions inhospitable

to salmon over time spans far longer than social and political processes last” (Montgomery 2004:9). By considering the weight of today’s choices in the context of history outlined in *King of Fish*, we are reminded that our decisions today matter, even if the outcomes are beyond our own lifetimes.

The concept of a book drop could be adapted to help generate discussion about other fisheries issues in your area. The idea is simple: choose a good book with layman’s appeal about an issue that could benefit from community discussion and then get it in the hands of as many people in your target audience. Collecting e-mails as the books are distributed is one way to keep in touch with readers and invite them to a later follow-up event.

The management and regulatory regimes for fisheries are important, but of equal or greater import is the knowledge held by the communities that use the managed resources. The perspective of history can help individual Alaskans—and individuals in other areas—understand the cumulative impacts of their choices on the larger trajectory of resource decline—or future abundance.

More information about the *King of Fish* Book Drop:

<http://salmonproject.org/our-projects/king-of-fish-book-drop>

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