

# Supporting Indigenous-Led Approaches to Protecting Marine Resources in the Bering Sea

December 2022



FIRST NATIONS  
DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE

Alaska Native communities have been faced with, at best, exclusion from fishery decision-making processes, and at worse, the direct criminalization of their traditional subsistence practices. But Indigenous communities and Native-led organizations in the Bering Sea are taking action to advocate for their rights. Here, we explore how Alaska Native communities are asserting their tribal sovereignty, ensuring their representation at decision-making tables, uplifting Native voices, and carrying out coalition-based approaches to counteract these injustices. Further, we underscore the importance of Indigenous knowledge in addressing climate change and implementing stewardship practices that are – and always have been – proven and sustainable.

## WHAT'S HAPPENING IN THE BERING SEA

The visible effects of climate change are plain to see in the Bering Sea of Alaska. News headlines in October 2022 heralded that for the first time in history the Alaska Department of Fish and Game cancelled the winter snow-crab season in the Bering Sea due to falling numbers. It stated that “an estimated one billion crabs have mysteriously disappeared in two years,” marking a 90% drop in their population (Vigliotti, 2022). As Bering Sea fisheries are the largest and most valuable in the United States, this development is particularly devastating. Regional fisheries in Alaska support a \$5 billion USD fishing industry, nearly half of which is Bering Sea groundfish harvest (2018) (ibid). Further, fisheries are extremely important for national and global food security (Stram et al., 2021).

Unfortunately, it is just one of the most recent examples of a larger pattern of ongoing declines in fisheries in the Bering Sea (Hotakainen, 2022). Although there are several factors contributing to these declines, the most often noted is the significant impact of climate change (Whitehouse et al., 2021). In recent years, changes in the duration and coverage of seasonal sea-ice, warming water temperatures, and a decrease in the size of the cold pool in the Bering Sea has had profound effects across the ecosystem and food web (ibid). And, both the frequency and intensity of marine heatwaves and extreme events in the region are only predicted to increase in the coming decades (Stram et al., 2021).

To address these changes, the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council (NPFMC), the organizing body that manages federal fisheries in Alaska<sup>1</sup>, is developing a Climate Change Action Module as part of the Bering Sea Fishery Ecosystem Plan in an effort to “work toward climate-ready fisheries management that helps ensure both short-term and long-term resilience for the interconnected ecological and human communities of the Bering Sea” (ibid, p. 4). NPFMC also notes that its Community Engagement Committee is developing ways to enhance the two-way engagement between NPFMC and Alaska

---

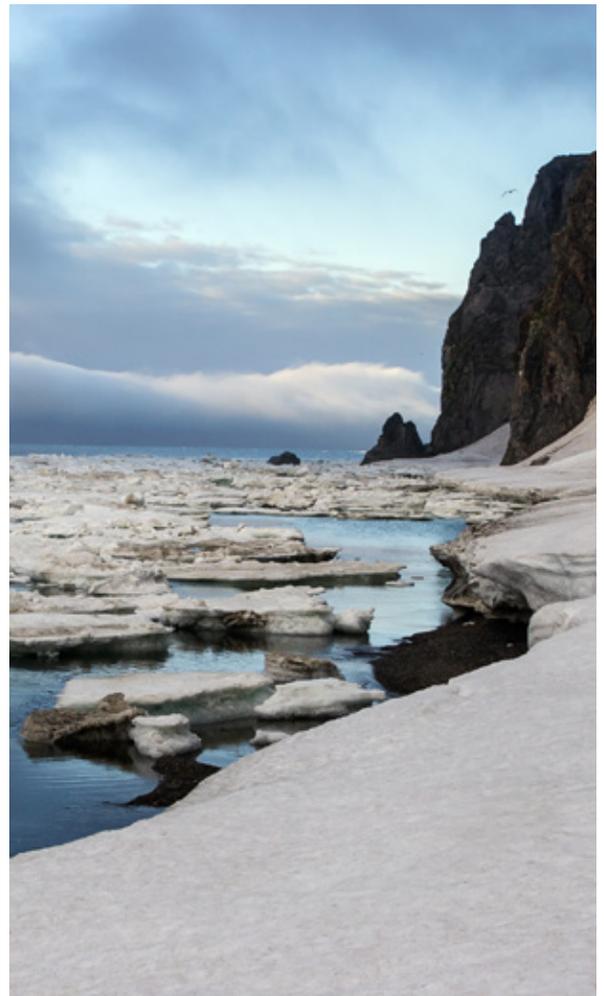
<sup>1</sup> “The NPFMC manages federal fisheries in Alaska for valuable fish and shellfish through the application of a polycentric decision-making system founded on an ecosystem approach to management of groundfish resources that is informed by a Fisheries Ecosystem Plan” (Whitehouse et al., 2021, p. 2).

Native communities. This is a step in the right direction, but more is needed to ensure that Indigenous perspectives and knowledge are considered and incorporated in the management of fisheries in the region.

## VALUING INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

Despite the fact that Indigenous people, who make up less than 5% of the global population and currently protect 80% of the world's biodiversity, Indigenous knowledge is, in most cases, glossed over, and Native peoples are seldom given a seat at the table at management bodies like the NPFMC. Alaska Native communities have sustainably stewarded the Bering Sea and its marine resources since time immemorial. Yet, Indigenous knowledge is often “drowned out, marginalized and worse, forgotten” because it is misperceived as being “unquantifiable/unreliable, nonsystematic, and idealized” (Reid et al., 2021, p. 721). Indigenous stewardship systems for salmon management, for example, are based on the ideas of respect, reciprocity, and distributional equity. It has been shown that these systems employ sophisticated approaches, such as territorial control, innovative sustainable harvesting, sex-selective harvesting, habitat management, predator control, stock enhancement, and temporal management (Carothers et al., 2021, p.16).

In contrast, management concepts such as the tragedy of the commons and maximum sustained yield used by the NPFMC are based on Eurocentric worldviews that center on the domination of humans over other species (Carothers et al., 2021). These concepts have led to the systematic regulation of how Alaskan Natives fish, calling for them to deviate significantly from their traditional ways of fishing, and thus seriously affecting their livelihoods (Tran and Divine, 2021, p. 8). After just one generation of the regulations, there has been a considerable decline in access to salmon fishing, with an 85% decrease in the number of young people who have rights to fish for salmon commercially (Carothers et al., 2021, p. 16). Researchers note this decrease is due, in part, to the direct criminalization and regulation of traditional ways of fishing and the significant loss of Indigenous commercial fishing rights (ibid). Further, management concepts also actively reduce the ability and viability of Indigenous people to pursue traditional subsistence activities.



## **SUPPORTING INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES TO PROTECT NATIVE LIFEWAYS**

Recognizing the need to provide direct support to Alaska Native communities to advocate for and steward their fishery resources, First Nations began the Protecting Bering Sea Marine Resources pilot initiative in 2022. First Nations targeted grant funds to groups working synergistically on specific issues so that they can be tackled with complementary strategies for maximum impact. One of these issues is representation and ensuring that voices of tribal governments and Native communities are heard at the NPFMC. This year, four tribes and Native-led organizations were provided grant funding to support efforts to have a seat at the table at the NPFMC:

### **ASSERTING TRIBAL SOVEREIGNTY — ALEUT COMMUNITY OF ST. PAUL ISLAND**

*Our people have subsistence-fished for halibut long before the Russian expedition sailed to Alaska in 1741, and also long before the United States purchased Alaska from Russia. This heritage explains why the halibut fishery has irreplaceable social and cultural value. It is not just what we do, but who we are (Tran and Divine, 2021, p. 5).*

Halibut fishing is a way of life in the Aleut Community of St. Paul Island, the largest of the Pribilof Islands located in the Bering Sea between the United States and Russia. They are one of the few federally recognized tribes that are providing oral and written testimony at the NPFMC's frequent meetings in an effort to assert their tribal sovereignty. The tribe is championing more meaningful integration of Alaska Natives' perspectives in management decisions. They are also advocating for their tribe's fishing rights by collaborating with state and federal institutions and representatives, environmental organizations, the fishing industry, and other relevant groups working in the Bering Sea. The tribe also continues to highlight the myriad of negative impacts of large-scale industrial commercial trawlers on habitats and other critical marine resources.

### **ENSURING REPRESENTATION AT THE NPFMC — BERING SEA ELDERS GROUP**

The Bering Sea Elders Group (BSEG), an association of elders appointed by 38 tribes in the Yukon-Kuskokwim and Bering Strait Regions, currently serves as a member of the North Pacific Fishery Management Council Advisory Council. In this capacity, BSEG advocates for

tribes in the region to protect fishery resources, such as halibut, that are important for their subsistence and culture. BSEG is especially concerned about the rapid loss of summer sea ice due to climate change, which is opening new global shipping routes throughout the region. This new ship traffic increases the risk of shipping vessels colliding, grounding, or causing oil spills. It also creates added threats of water contamination, noise disturbances, and danger to smaller fishing vessels (Bering Sea Elders Group, 2022). With support from First Nations, the organization is building their internal capacity through increased staffing, to continue to research and to advocate at the NPFMC to preserve fishery resources, and in turn, the ways of life of the many communities they represent.

### **UPLIFTING COMMUNITY VOICES — KAWERAK, INC.**

As a regional nonprofit that serves residents in the Bering Strait Region, including Alaskan Natives and their tribal governing bodies, Kawerak, Inc. is taking a community-based approach to ensuring that Indigenous voices are heard at the NPFMC. The organization is using First Nations funding to ensure that Indigenous community members are able to attend NPFMC meetings to provide written and oral testimony that can be considered and incorporated into federal fisheries decision-making and planning processes that directly affect the ability of Indigenous people to access traditional resources, as well as the health and sustainability of the ecosystem that they are both a part of and rely on. Kawerak, Inc. is also partnering with other regional organizations to host trainings for Bering Strait tribal members to learn about the NPFMC processes and prepare them to participate in the NPFMC's regularly held meetings.

### **CARRYING OUT A COALITION-BASED APPROACH TO ADVOCACY — ARCTIC-YUKON-KUSKOKWIM TRIBAL CONSORTIUM**

Coalitions have also been staunch advocates of Alaska Native fishing rights in the Bering Sea Region. The Arctic-Yukon-Kuskokwim Tribal Consortium (AYKTC), another First Nations community partner, is working as a coalition to restore, maintain, and conserve the health and biodiversity of the Bering Sea ecosystems, including wild salmon returns for future generations. The organization is part of the Sustainable Salmon Initiative and is working with partners to improve federal-tribal cooperative management relationships. AYKTC is using First Nations' support to develop a comprehensive communications plan, train community residents in federal decision-making processes, and expand community-based harvest monitoring.



## **MOVING FORWARD TOWARD SUSTAINABLE STEWARDSHIP**

As an organization that has provided resources to Indian Country for over 42 years, First Nations is investing in Indigenous communities in the Bering Sea region and supporting efforts to protect the marine resources that these communities have depended on and sustainably stewarded for millennia. As we tackle global challenges like climate change, support must be given directly to Indigenous communities in the form of flexible funding, technical assistance to build long-term organizational capacity, and uplifted coalitions collaborating toward shared goals.

If we are serious about 30x30, and Justice40, and other initiatives that are meant to promote climate resiliency, protect our lands and waters, and tackle larger social injustices and inequities, we must consider how our waters are currently being managed and the important alternative that Indigenous knowledge has to offer. In more tangible terms, more funding needs to be directed to Alaska Native communities, not only to have a seat at the table at the NPFMC, but to uphold their right to self-determination so that they may steward and manage resources in their communities in accordance with their specific traditions and customs. If we lose their Indigenous knowledge before we even understand it, we very well may lose the one hope we have to tackle climate change and adopt time-honored, proven, and sustainable stewardship practices moving forward.



## EMILIE ELLIS

Senior Program Officer  
First Nations Development Institute

## REFERENCES

Bering Sea Elders Group 38 tribes in Yukon & Bering Strait Regions. (2022, October 17). Bering Sea Elders Group. <https://beringseaelders.org/>

Carothers, C., J. Black, S. J. Langdon, R. Donkersloot, D. Ringer, J. Coleman, E. R. Gavenus, W. Justin, M. Williams, F. Christiansen, C. Stevens, B. Woods, S. Clark, P. M. Clay, L. Mack, J. Raymond-Yakoubian, A. Akall'eq Sanders, B. L. Stevens, and A. Whiting. 2021. Indigenous peoples and salmon stewardship: a critical relationship. *Ecology and Society* 26(1):16. <https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-11972-260116>

Stram, D., Holsman, K., Raymond-Yakoubian, B., Divine, L., LeVine, M., Goodman, S., Sterling, J., Krieger, J., Martell, S., & Loomis, T. (2021). Supporting climate-resilient fisheries through understanding climate change impacts and adaptation responses. In North Pacific Fishery Management Council. North Pacific Fishery Management Council. [https://www.npfmc.org/wp-content/PDFdocuments/membership/CCTF/ClimateChangeActionModFinalWorkplan\\_2021.pdf](https://www.npfmc.org/wp-content/PDFdocuments/membership/CCTF/ClimateChangeActionModFinalWorkplan_2021.pdf)

Hotakainen, R. (2022, September 21). Alaska Democrat's arrival signals change in fisheries debate. *E&E News*. <https://www.eenews.net/articles/alaska-democrats-arrival-signals-change-in-fisheries-debate/>

Reid, A. J., Young, N., Hinch, S. G., & Cooke, S. J. (2022). Learning from Indigenous knowledge holders on the state and future of wild Pacific salmon. *FACETS*, 7, 718–740. <https://doi.org/10.1139/facets-2021-0089>

Tran and Divine. 2021. Community connections to chagix (Pacific halibut, *Hippoglossus stenolepis*) and other marine resources on St. Paul Island, Alaska. Report to the North Pacific Fishery Management Council, March 2021. 14 pp. [https://www.aleut.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Halibut-ABM-white-paper\\_FINAL\\_10Mar21.pdf](https://www.aleut.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Halibut-ABM-white-paper_FINAL_10Mar21.pdf)

Vigliotti, J. (2022, November 16). Alaska snow crab season canceled as officials investigate disappearance of an estimated 1 billion crabs. *CBS News*. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/fishing-alaska-snow-crab-season-canceled-investigation-climate-change/>

Whitehouse, G. A., Aydin, K. Y., Hollowed, A. B., Holsman, K. K., Cheng, W., Faig, A., Haynie, A. C., Hermann, A. J., Kearney, K. A., Punt, A. E., & Essington, T. E. (2021). Bottom-up impacts of forecasted climate change on the Eastern Bering Sea food web. *Frontiers in Marine Science*, 8. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fmars.2021.624301>