

Permit Out-Migration and Local Access to Fisheries

Joe Nelson

Alaska Federation of Natives

Rachel Donkersloot, PhD

Coastal Cultures Research

Courtney Carothers, PhD

University of Alaska Fairbanks



Legislative Lunch and Learn, Juneau, AK
April 1, 2026

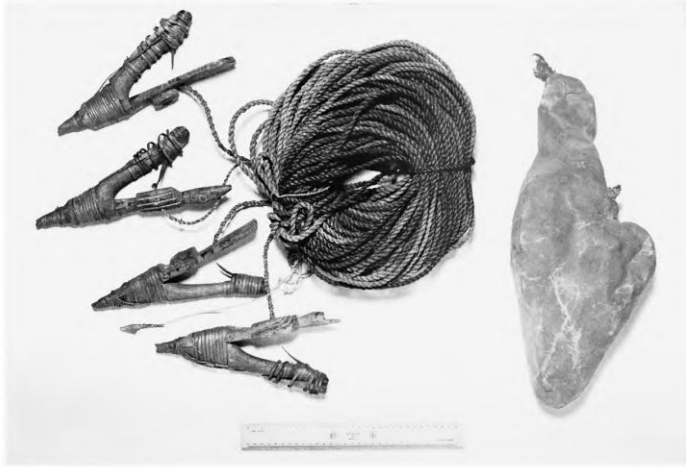


PLATE 115
Halibut fishing gear. Seal bladder float, spruce root line held up as bentwood rope, and four carved hooks with iron hubs. Collected by George T. Emmons at Yakutat before 1888. Scale in centimeters and inches (AMNH E/2291).



PLATE 111
Gaff hook carved and painted (with black, white and blue-green commercial paints) to represent a killerwhale. The human face in the blowhole probably represents its spirit (qwan). Made by Harry K. Bremner in 1954. (Scale in centimeters. Photograph by Karl Dimler, Bryn Mawr College.)

Pre-statehood
Pre-limited entry
Yakutat

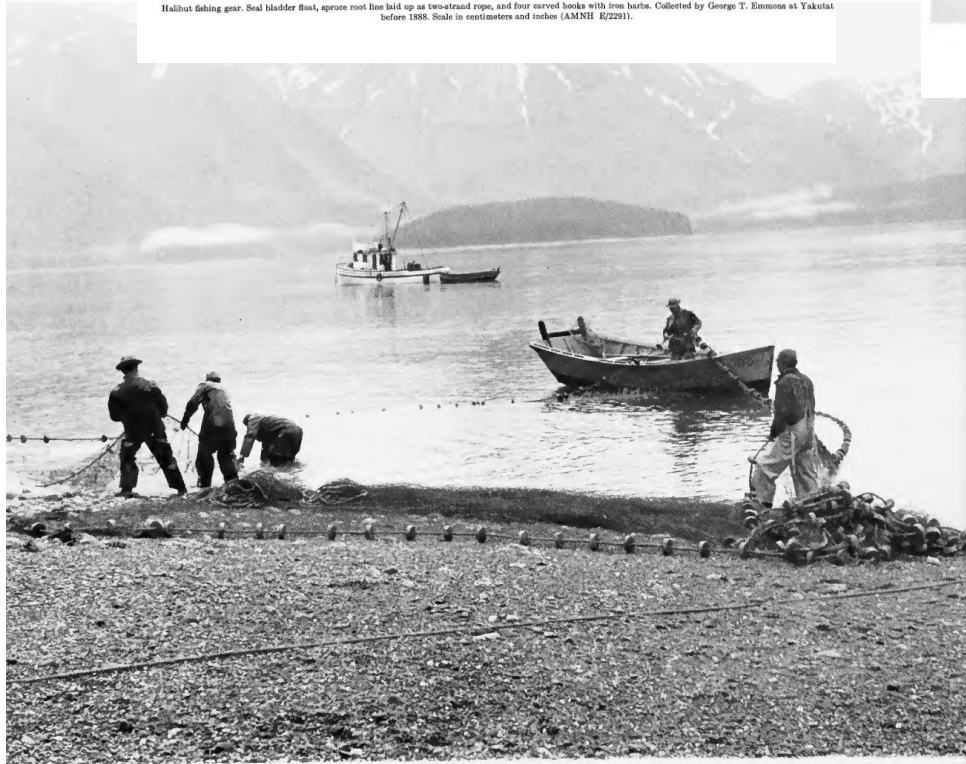


PLATE 103
The crew of the *Mt. Fairweather* seining salmon on the south shore of Knight Island, August 1952. Eleanor Island is behind the gasbo

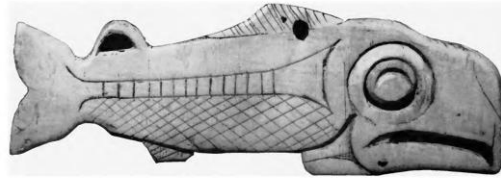
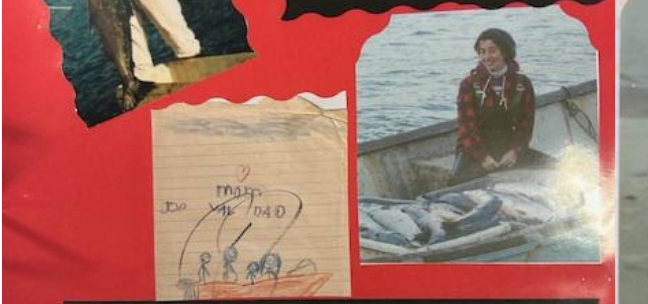
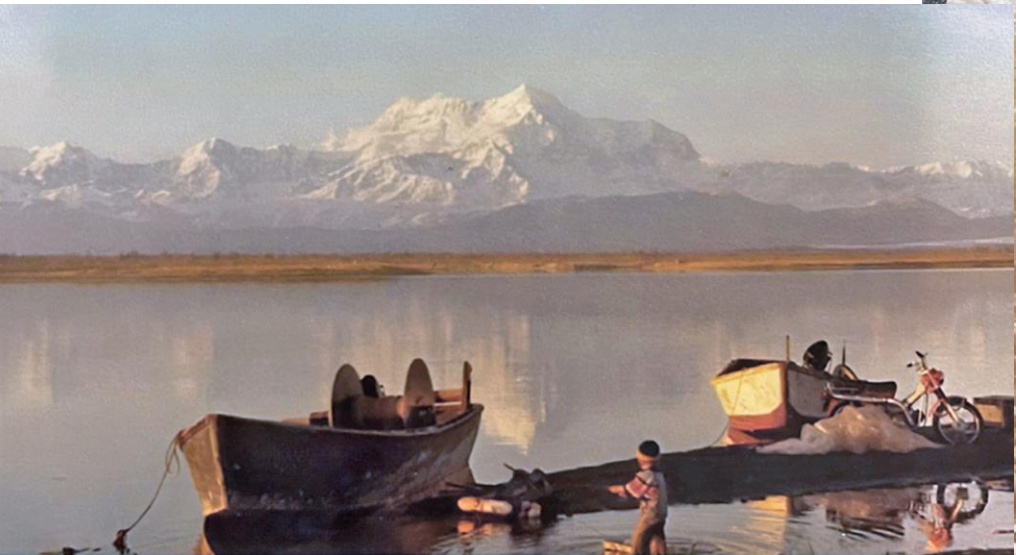


PLATE 182
Ivory and bone charms of unknown Yakutat shamans, collected by George T. Emmons. Top, Ivory charm, 4 1/2 inches long, representing a shaman's spirit; a double-headed monster eating small human figures; on the side is the Sun spirit (7) (MAI/EF 4/1871). Bottom, A bone charm, 4 inches long, representing a fish (MAI/EF 4/1866).



PLATE 102
William Thomas (1911-) fishing with gill net at the mouth of Lost River, July 1952.

1970s, 1990s
Yakutat Bay,
Yahtse, Icy Bay,
Manby, Situk,





Recommendations for Legislative Review

After 50 years of implementing the Limited Entry Act, the Commission supports a review of the Act to examine potential amendments to address ongoing issues. Principle concerns with Alaska's permitting system include an outmigration of permits from rural fishing communities, and an aging of the fleet.

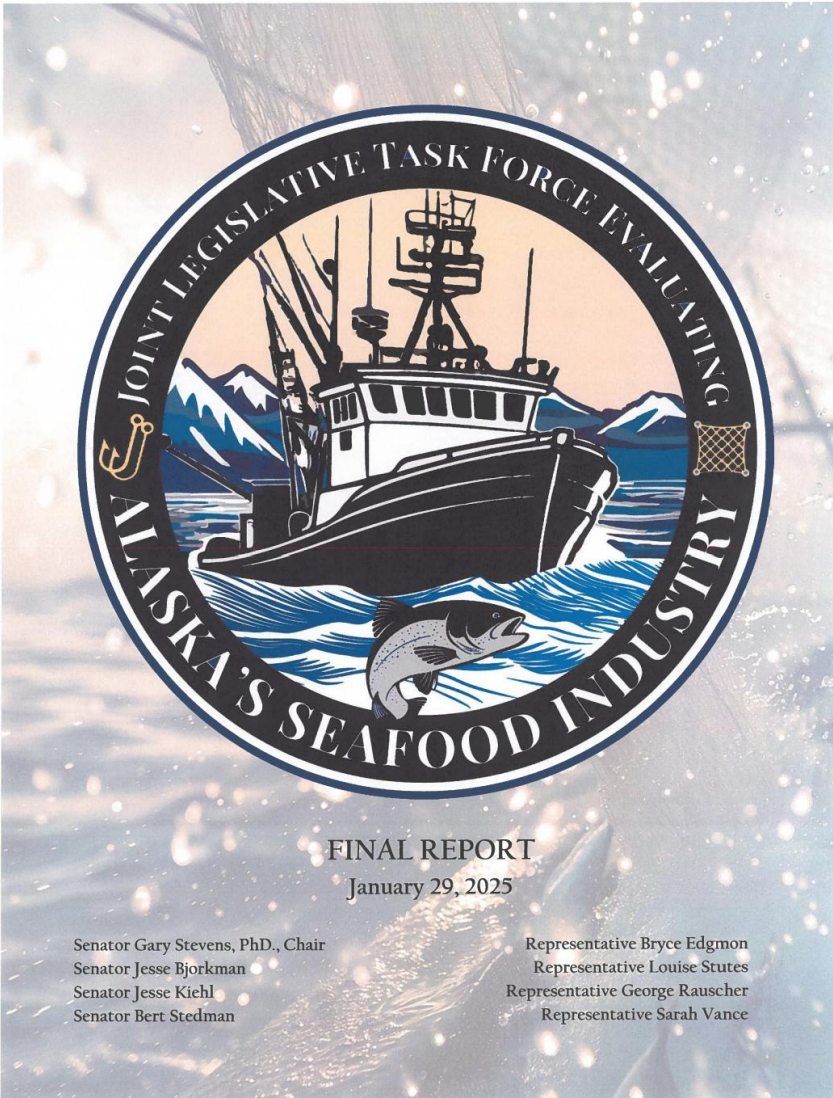
While change is sought in many corners, concern persists among long-time permit holders that large changes to limited entry could undo the program or otherwise materially impact its effectiveness. Any review of potential change should include strong legal review and public vetting. While it may be possible for revisions to pass public and legal muster, the impact of those changes should be carefully monitored to determine effectiveness.

Aging of the Fleet. From 2000 to 2024, the mean age of limited entry permit holders grew from 46.4 to 53.0 years of age. In no year since 1983 has the average age declined. Long time commercial fishermen indicate increasing difficulties finding able crew.

While workforce development is a multi-agency and organization issue, changes to the Act's transfer provisions might improve the ability of retiring fishermen to sell their operations to up-and-coming young fishermen. Certain concepts proposed include allowing for transfers for multiple years based on either a contractual relation to buy and sell or through an apprentice model, and allowing a permit holder to self-finance a permit.

The Act also anticipated youth development through the establishment of Educational Permits under AS 16.43.340. However, this permit – or opportunity – has not been as widely utilized as perhaps envisioned. Efforts to make education permits more vital to fleet development may provide promise in the future.

Rural Alaska Communities Permit Outmigration. From 2000 to 2023, the number of limited entry permits held in fisheries dependent coastal communities with populations of 500 or less fell from 2,412 to 1,612 (33%), while coastal communities with populations between 501 and 1000 witnessed their limited entry permits fall from 2,218 to 1,766 (20%). The original limited entry program was designed to ensure Alaska's coastal fishing communities maintained their fishing culture. Given that limited entry permits are freely transferrable they tend to follow money, and given the lack of capital in these small communities permits eventually migrate away. Potential opportunities include creating a location-based permit or establishing regional organizations to facilitate permit transfers.



Alaska Seafood Industry Task Force Recommendations

- 3) Alaska's unique limited entry program, administered by the Commercial Fisheries Entry Commission (CFEC) requires continuous management. CFEC is required to conduct optimum number studies and to ensure the limited entry system does not create an exclusive privilege in Alaskan fisheries. CFEC may establish voluntary buyback programs when necessary to correct market optimum numbers.
 - a) Action Point: Amend AS 16.43 or establish uncodified law encouraging the CFEC to proactively study and report on fiscally challenged fisheries in the state, including a report on the optimum number of permits, and voluntary buyback program(s).

Mid-Term (2026-27)

- 4) Modernize existing vessel, gear, and permit regulations, including the Limited Entry Permit System administered by the Commercial Fisheries Entry Commission (CFEC), with the express goal of reducing costs, improving quality, and ensuring "maximum benefit" for the people of Alaska. Potential changes include modifications of vessel length and gear restrictions; permit stacking; permit leasing; cooperative ownership; permit collateralization; and permit buyback programs, among other reforms.
 - a) Action Point: Senate / House Bill amending AS 16.43 to effect regulatory changes such as limiting vessel lengths and modifications, gear restrictions, permit types and permit flexibility.



ALASKA FEDERATION OF NATIVES
2025 ANNUAL CONVENTION

RESOLUTION 25-04

AFN
Resolution

TITLE: MODERNIZING THE LIMITED ENTRY PROGRAM TO INCREASE FISHERIES ACCESS TO RURAL COMMUNITIES

WHEREAS: The Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN) is the largest statewide Native organization in Alaska, and its membership includes 176 federally recognized tribes, 143 village corporations, 11 regional corporations, and 11 regional nonprofit and tribal consortiums that contract and compact to run federal and state programs; and

WHEREAS: The mission of AFN is to enhance and promote the cultural, economic, and political voice of the entire Alaska Native community; and

WHEREAS: Alaska Natives have fished and stewarded our waters since time immemorial, ensuring optimal harvest, sustainability, and the protection of a way of life; and

WHEREAS: Alaska Native people and communities today depend on access to fisheries for their basic welfare and well-being; and

WHEREAS: The intent of Limited Entry in Alaska was to keep fishing rights in the hands of people who depend on fisheries, especially rural Alaskans with limited economic alternatives; and

WHEREAS: The designers of Alaska's limited entry program intended for the program to support a stable economic base in the relatively remote Alaskan fishing communities where fisheries occur; and

WHEREAS: Many historic and largely Indigenous fishing communities have experienced significant loss of locally held permits since the implementation of Limited Entry, including a 48% decline in local permit holdings in Alaska Peninsula salmon fisheries, a 56% decline in Bristol Bay salmon fisheries, a 63% decline in Kodiak villages, and a 38% decline in Southeast salmon fisheries, with some communities experiencing over 90% loss; and

WHEREAS: Limited Entry permit loss is experienced at the highest rates in Alaska Native villages and is impacting Alaska Native fishing communities, families, and livelihoods; and

WHEREAS: Research demonstrates that income and jobs generated by Alaska fisheries accrue most significantly in the home communities of permit holders; and

WHEREAS: It is well-documented that transferable permits can undermine rural community sustainability and negatively impact rural, small-scale, low-income, and young fishermen through the creation of high barriers to entry and greater pressure to sell; and

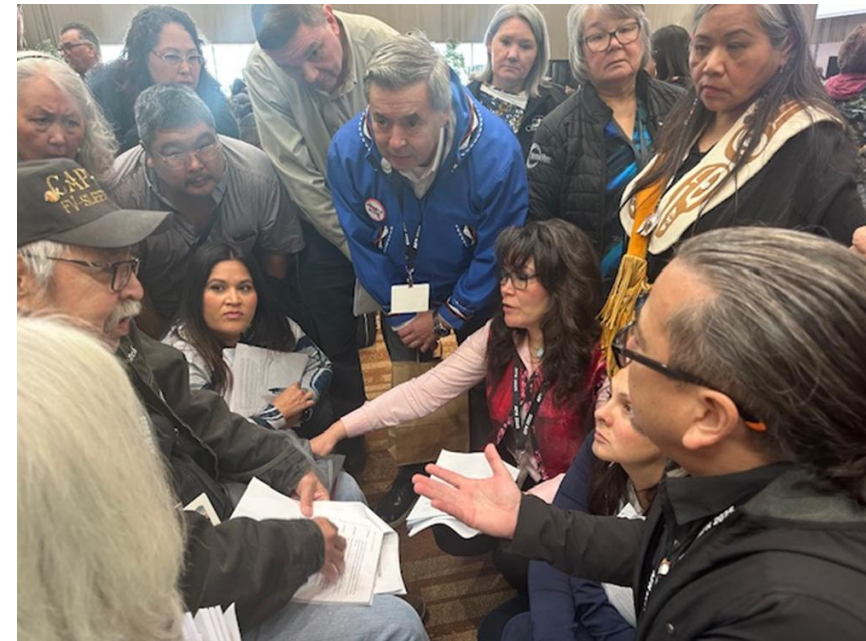
WHEREAS: The graying of the fleet in Alaska fisheries continues unabated, with the median age of all transferable permit holders increasing from 40 years of age in 1980 to 55 years of age in 2023; and

WHEREAS: The 2025 Legislature's Seafood Industry Task Force identified Limited Entry Permitting modernization as a 2026-2027 priority, specifically to reduce costs and maximize the benefit of Alaska fisheries to the people of Alaska; and

WHEREAS: Loss of access and economic opportunity in fisheries has contributed to outmigration from fishing communities throughout Alaska.

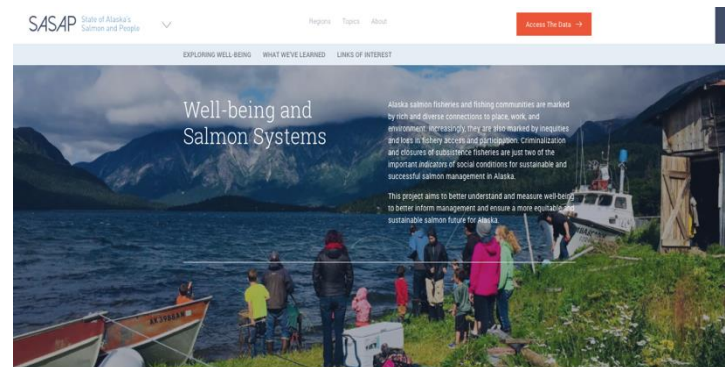
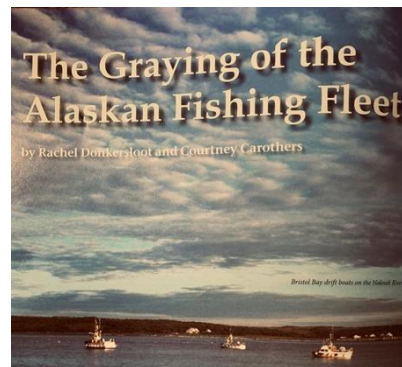
NOW THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the delegates of the 2025 Annual Convention of the Alaska Federation of Natives encourage the Alaska Legislature and Governor to take the appropriate actions necessary to address the outmigration of commercial fishing permits from rural Alaska and the aging of the fleet, while protecting the value of existing permits.

SUBMITTED BY: SEALASKA, CURYUNG TRIBAL COUNCIL, BRISTOL BAY NATIVE CORPORATION
COMMITTEE ACTION: DO PASS
BOARD ACTION: DO PASS
CONVENTION ACTION: PASSED



RECENT RESEARCH & REPORTS

- Graying of the Fleet in Alaska Fisheries, 2014-2017
- State of Alaska Salmon and People (SASAP) Project, 2016-2019
- Fishing Livelihoods & Community Well-Being in AK, 2020-2025
- Righting the Ship Report, 2021
- Gulf of Alaska Fisheries Limitation Study, 2025



LIMITING ENTRY INTO AK FISHERIES

No Exclusive Right of Fishery - Article VIII, Section 15 (amended 1972)

*"No exclusive right or special privilege of fishery shall be created or authorized in the natural waters of the State. This section does not restrict the power of the State to limit entry into any fishery for purposes of resource conservation, **to prevent economic distress among fishermen and those dependent upon them for a livelihood** and to promote the efficient development of aquaculture in the State."*

LIMITED ENTRY PURPOSE

Alaska Statute 16.43.010.

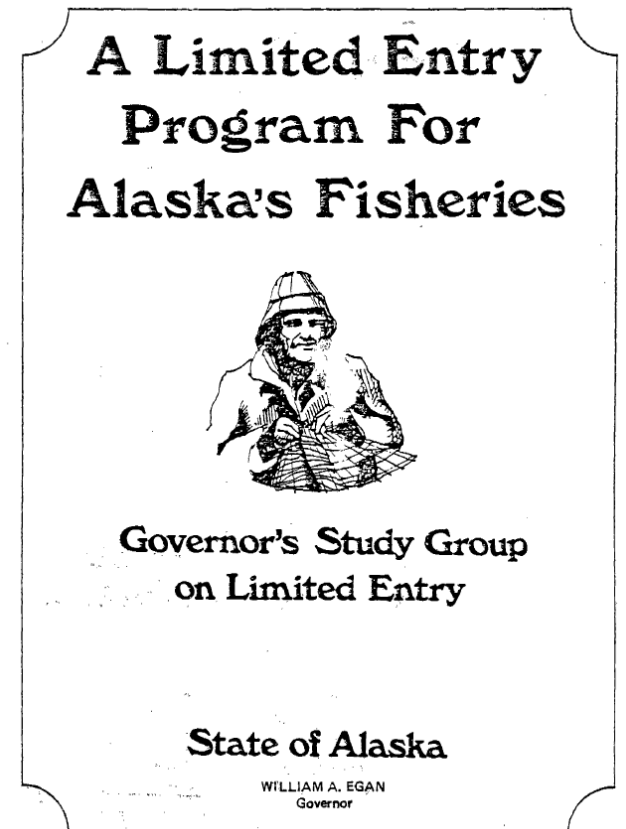
(a) ... to promote the conservation and the sustained yield management of Alaska's fishery resource and the economic health and stability of commercial fishing in Alaska **by regulating and controlling entry of participants into the commercial fisheries in the public interest and without unjust discrimination**



ALASKA'S LIMITED ENTRY PROGRAM

- Key objective: keep fishing rights in the hands of people dependent on fisheries
- Concern: how transferable permits might impact new entrants, and local fishing communities and livelihoods

See: CFEC 1975, Fraser 1979, Langdon 1980, Rodgers and Kreinder 1980



ALASKAN NATIVES
and
LIMITED FISHERIES OF ALASKA:

A study of changes in the distribution of
permit ownership amongst Alaskan Natives, 1975-1983.

Dr. Nasser Kamali

CFEC Report Number 84-8
Alaska Commercial Fisheries Entry Commission
Pouch KB
Juneau, Alaska 99811

September 1984

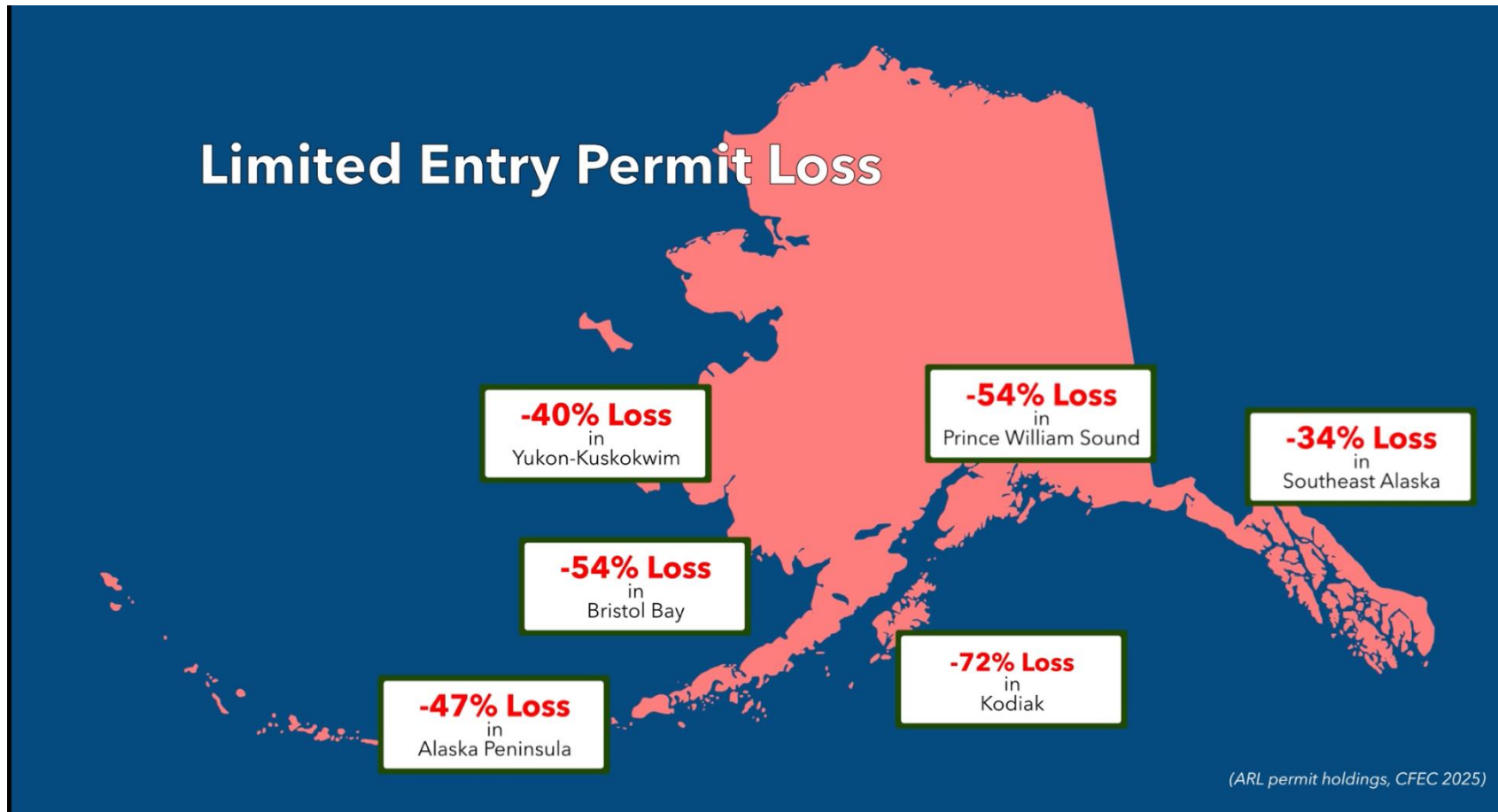
TRANSFERABLE PERMITS

Create high barriers to entry and greater pressure to sell, especially for:

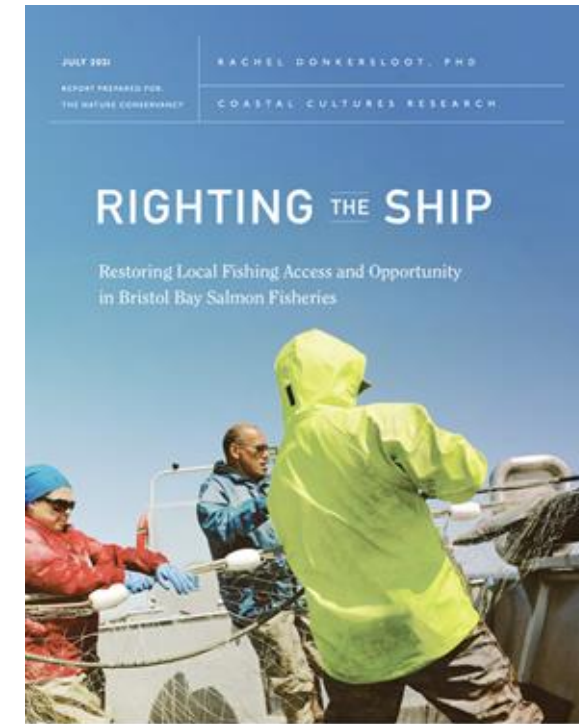
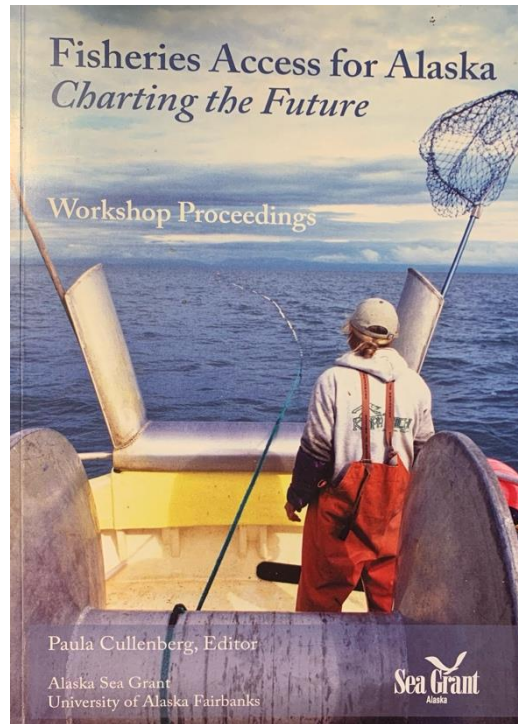
- Young/new fishermen,
- Rural,
- low-income,
- small-scale, &
- Alaska Native fishermen

(Koslow 1986, Langdon 1985, 1990, 2019, Petterson 1984, Reedy 2007, 2008)

PEOPLE WHO DEPEND ON FISH

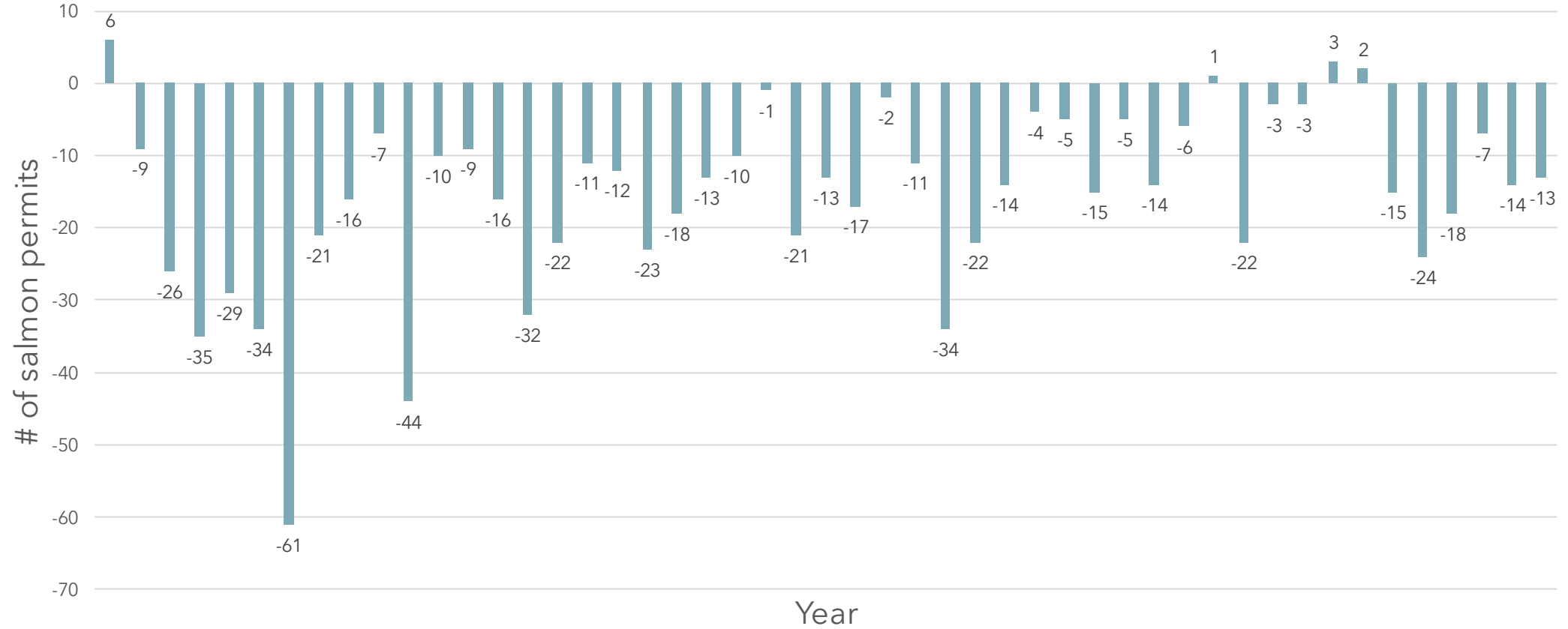


GLOBAL FISHERIES ACCESS RESEARCH AND DATA

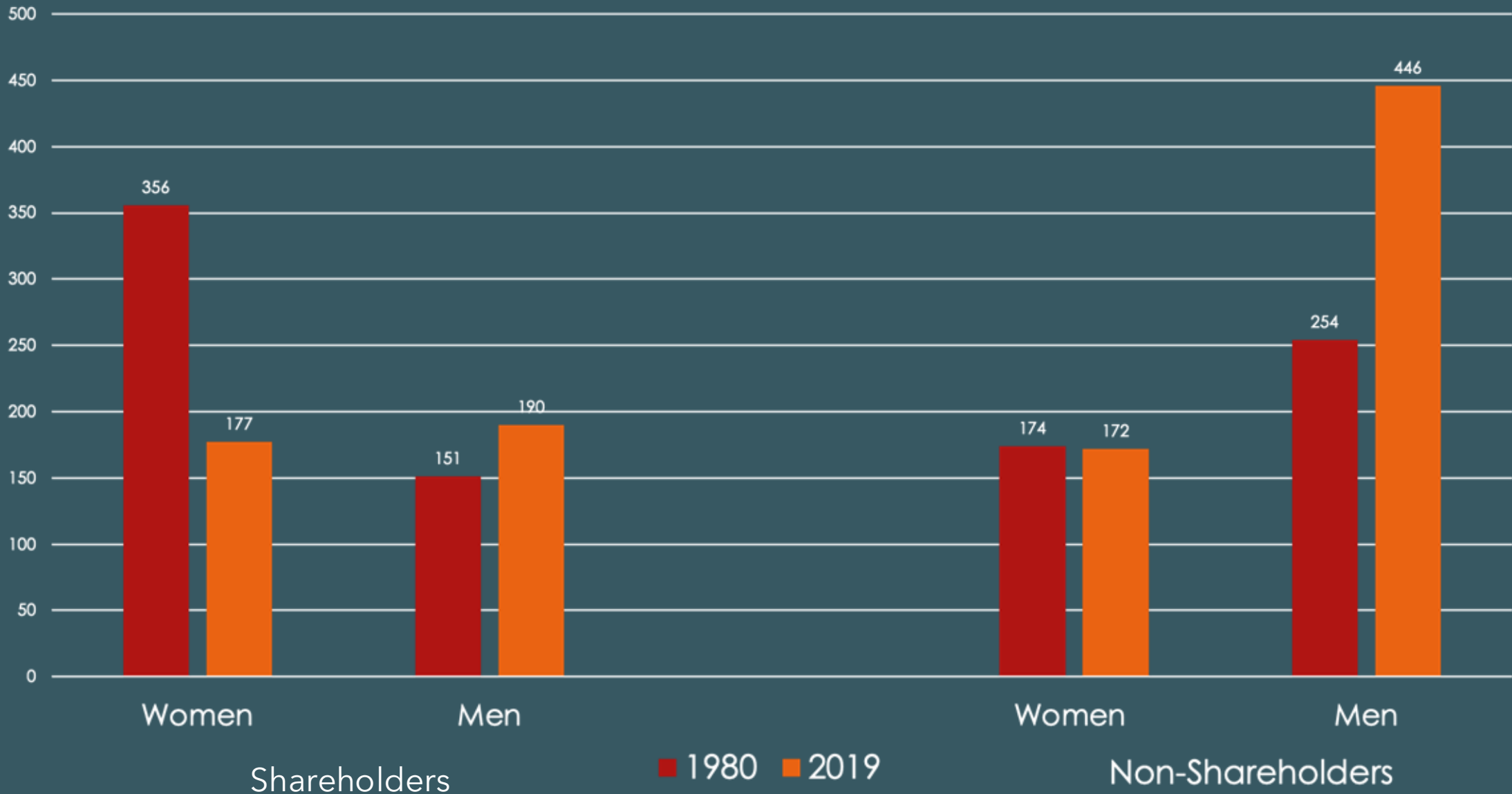


E.G., CAROTHERS AND CHAMBERS 2012; CAROTHERS 2015; DONKERSLOOT, 2021; DONKERSLOOT & CAROTHERS 2016, NASEM, 2021, 2024; KAMALI 1984; KOSLOW 1986; LANGDON 1980, 1985; MCCORMACK 2017; PETTERSON 1984; NASEM, 2024; OLSON, 2011; PINKERTON AND DAVIS, 2015; REEDY 2007; RINGER ET AL. 2024; STEINKRUGER AND SZYMKOWIAK, 2023; YOUNG ET AL. 2018;

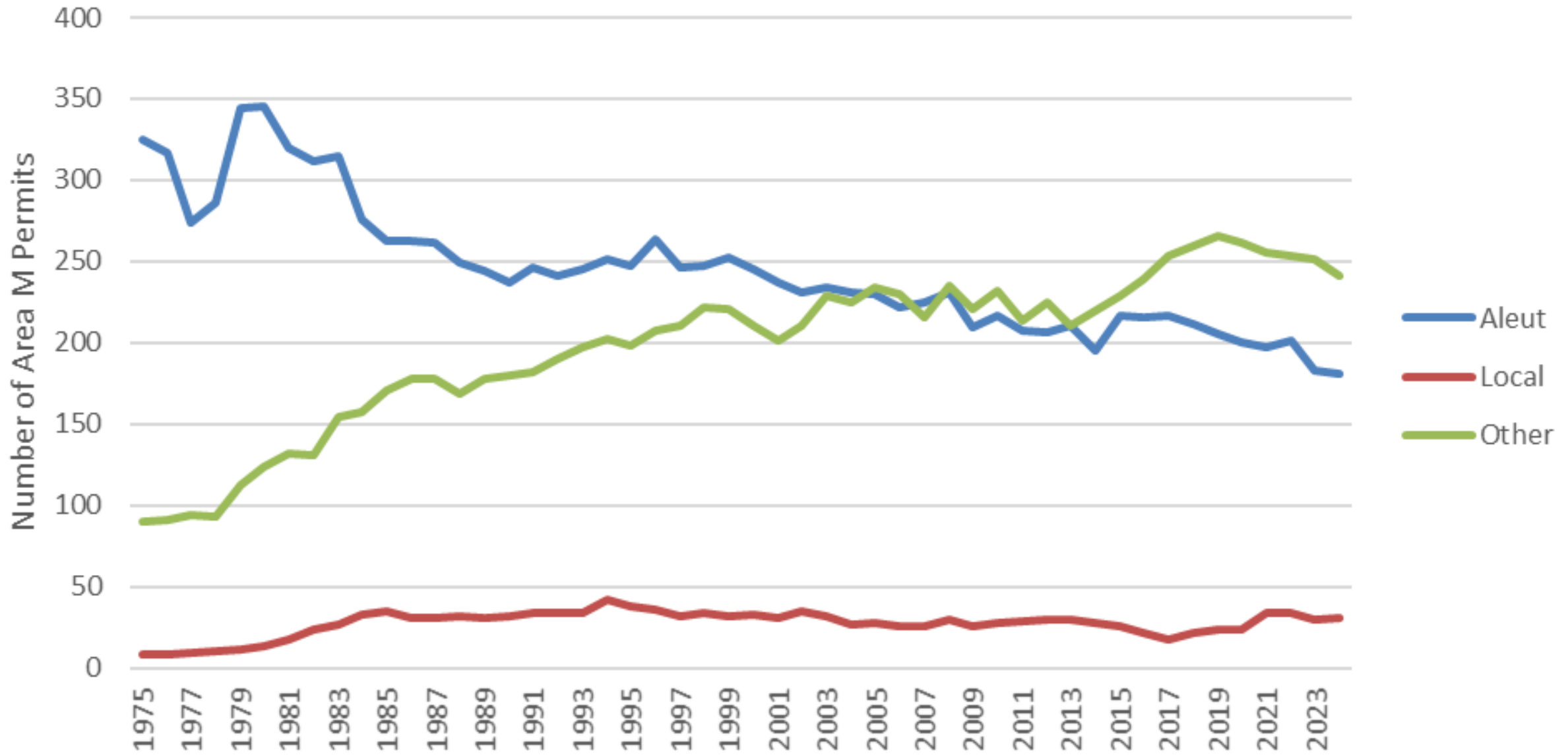
Net Change in Local Salmon Permit Holdings in Bristol Bay 1976-2024



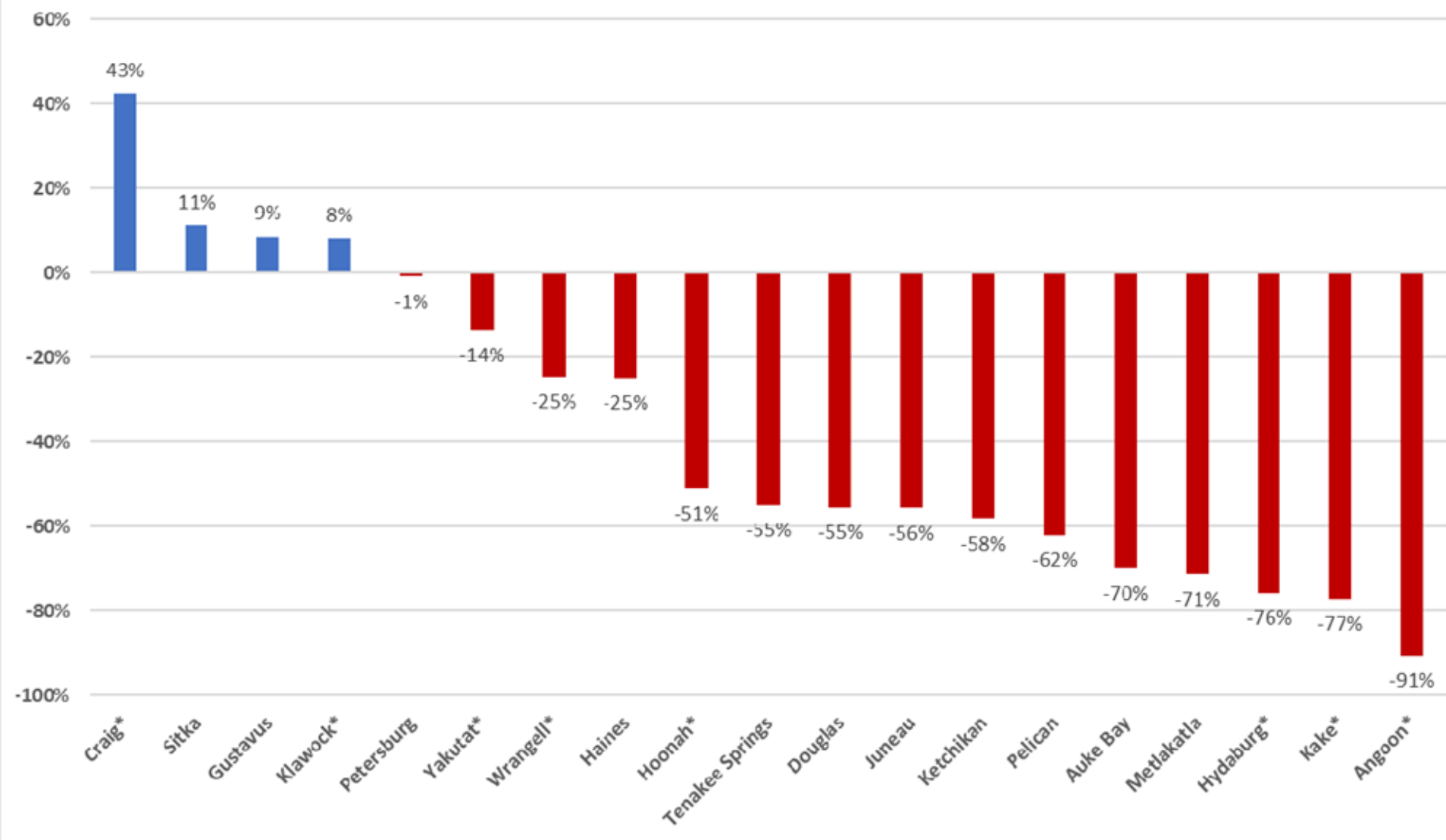
Gender and Permit Holdings in Bristol Bay **Setnet** Fishery, 1980-2019



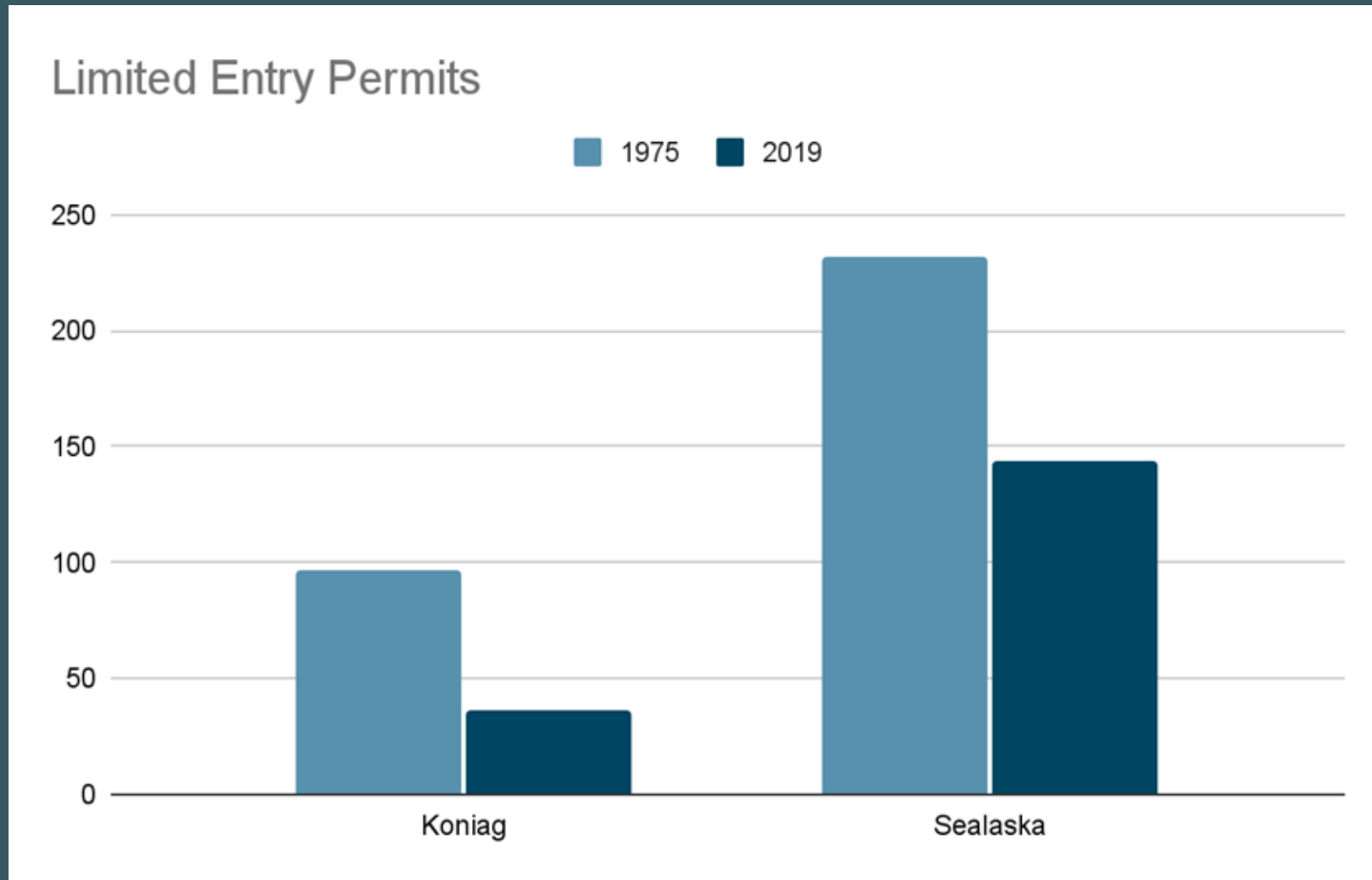
Changes in Area M Salmon Permit Ownership, 1975-2024

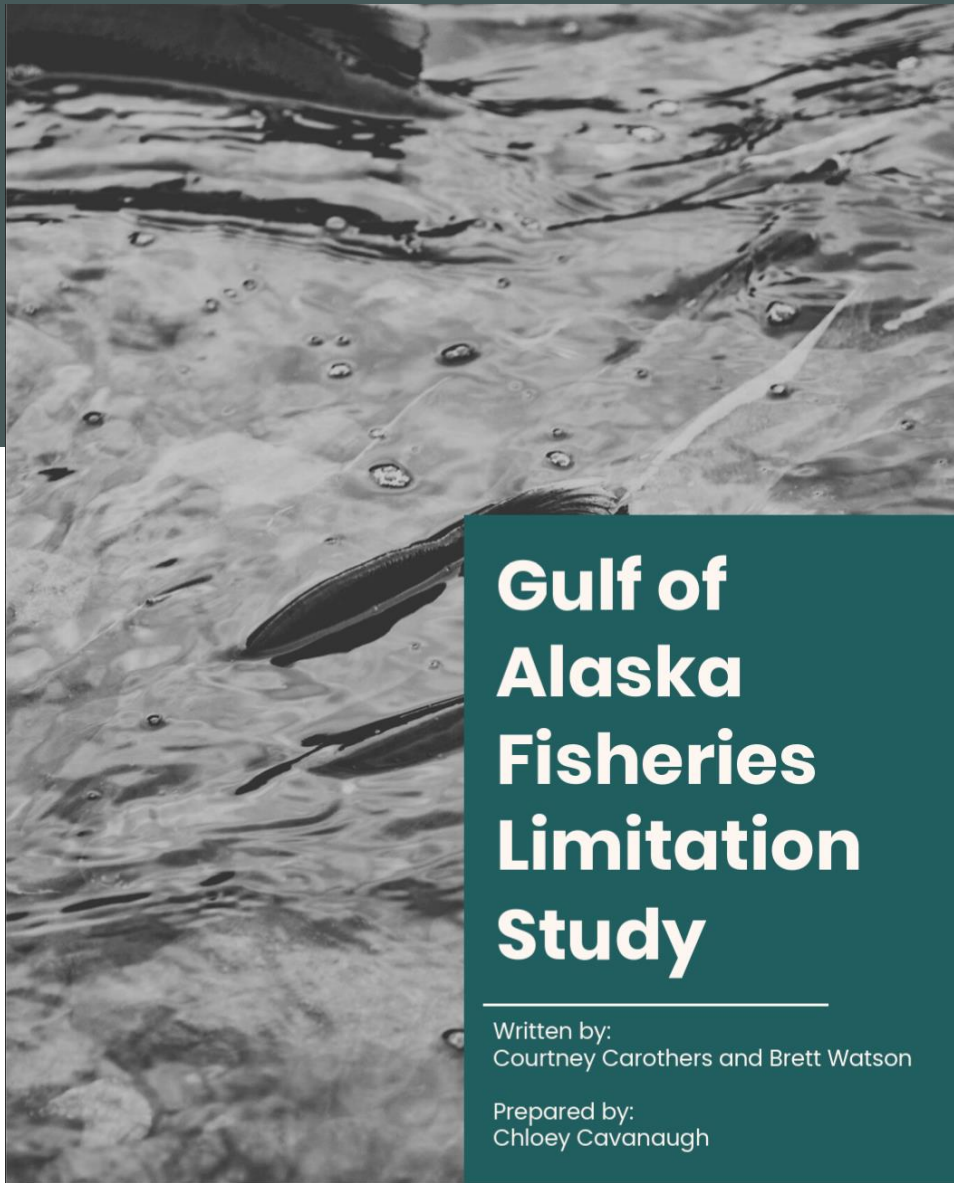


CFEC Salmon Permits Held by Southeast Alaska Residents, grouped by borough and city, 1980-2020. Includes all salmon permits anywhere in Alaska



PERMIT HOLDINGS IN KODIAK AND SOUTHEAST





Gulf of Alaska Fisheries Limitation Study

Written by:
Courtney Carothers and Brett Watson

Prepared by:
Chloey Cavanaugh

The last skipper in Ouzinkie

How some Alaska Natives lost their right to fish commercially



Nick Katsinoff learned to fish from his father, and he says his first paycheck as a fisherman came when he turned 8 years old. Now 76, pictured aboard his boat, the ME L, he's the last skipper running a commercial fishing vessel from his home village of Ouzinkie, on an island just north of Kodiak. • Nathaniel Gray / Northern Journal

https://www.nature.org/content/dam/tnc/nature/en/documents/Gulf_ofAlaskaFisheriesStudy2025.pdf?ref=northernjournal.com

<https://www.northernjournal.com/the-last-skipper-in-ouzinkie-how-gulf-of-alaska-villages-lost-their-native-fishing-fleets/>

KONIAG & SEALASKA FISHING LIMITATION SURVEY

2024 SURVEY OF SHAREHOLDERS AND DESCENDANTS

KONIAG, INC. (N=1,320 RESPONDENTS; 30% RESPONSE RATE)

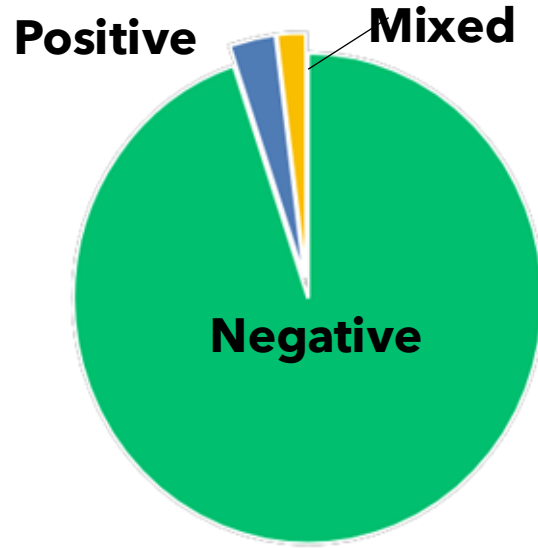
SEALASKA CORPORATION (N=3,024 RESPONDENTS; 15% RESPONSE RATE)

- 98% agree that fishing is an important part of traditional culture.
- 90% agree that village survival depends on access to fisheries.
- Over 80% agree villages are in crisis because of lost access.
- Only 12-13% currently participate in commercial fishing.
- Only 11% agree that the future looks good for young people who stay in regional villages.

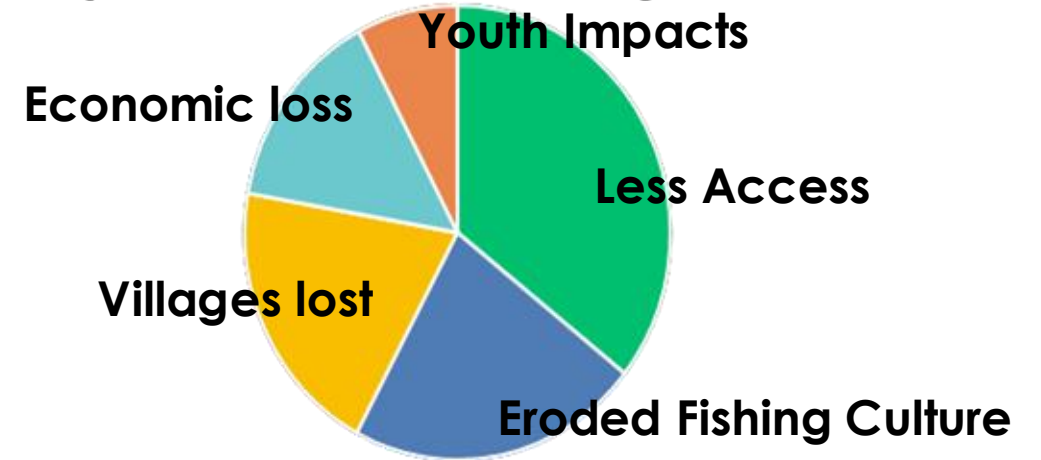
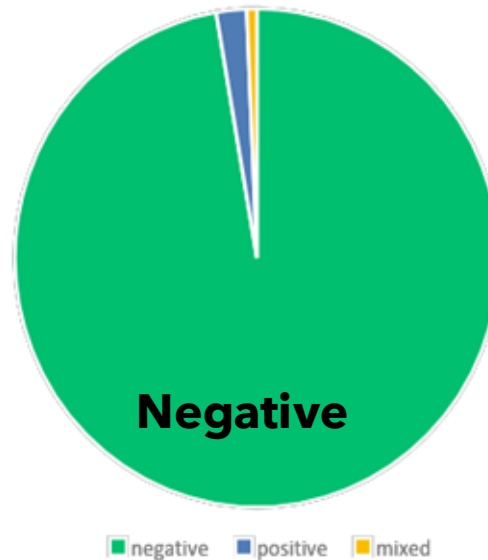
Available at: <https://scholarworks.alaska.edu/handle/11122/15721>

Effects of limited entry on villages?

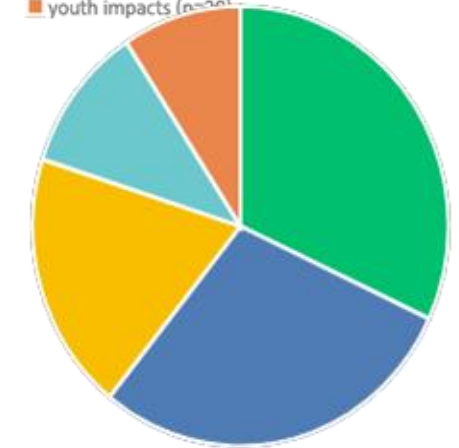
Koniag



Sealaska

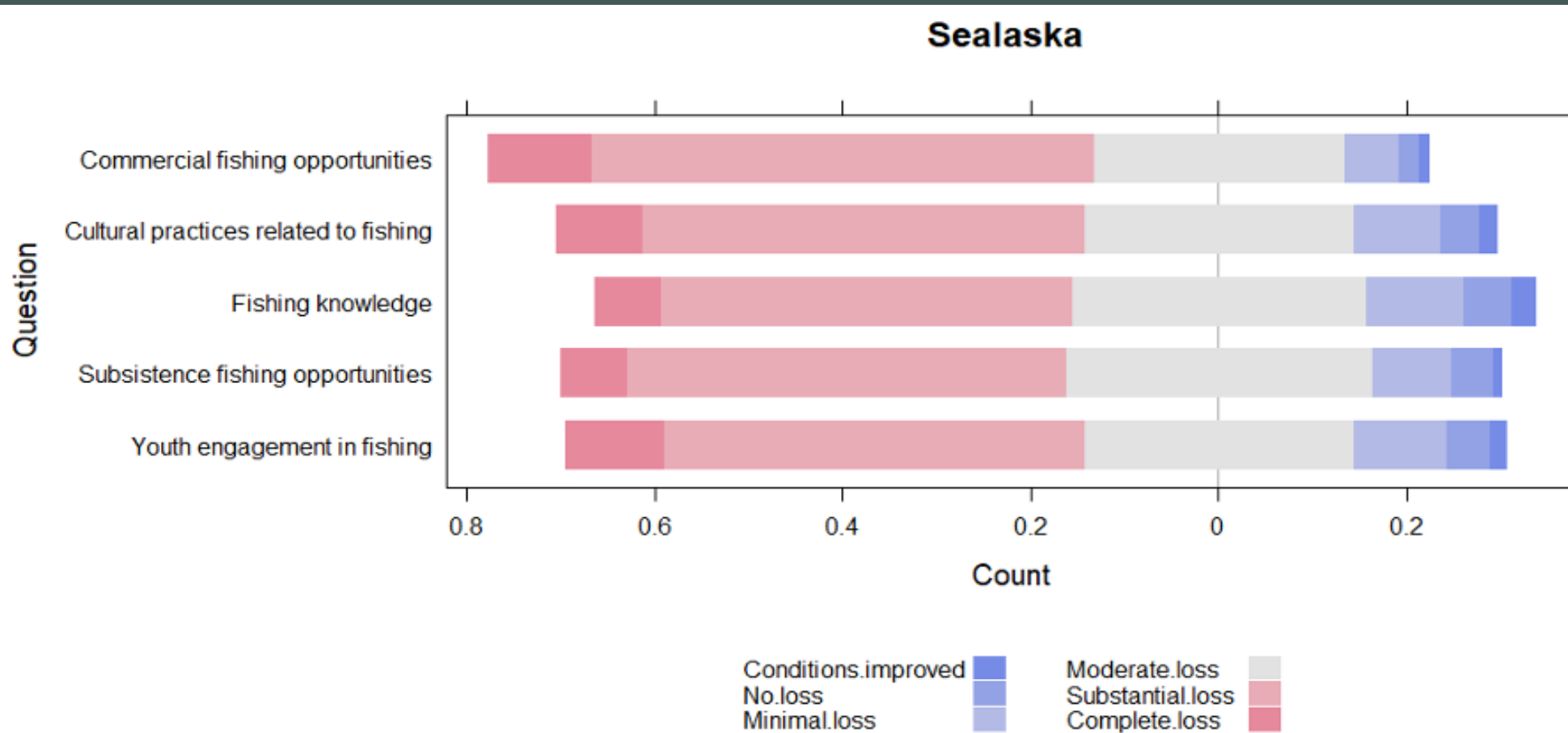


- less access (n=93)
- eroded fishing livelihood & culture (n=58)
- villages lost fishing, people, and in crisis (n=52)
- economic impacts (n=38)
- youth impacts (n=26)

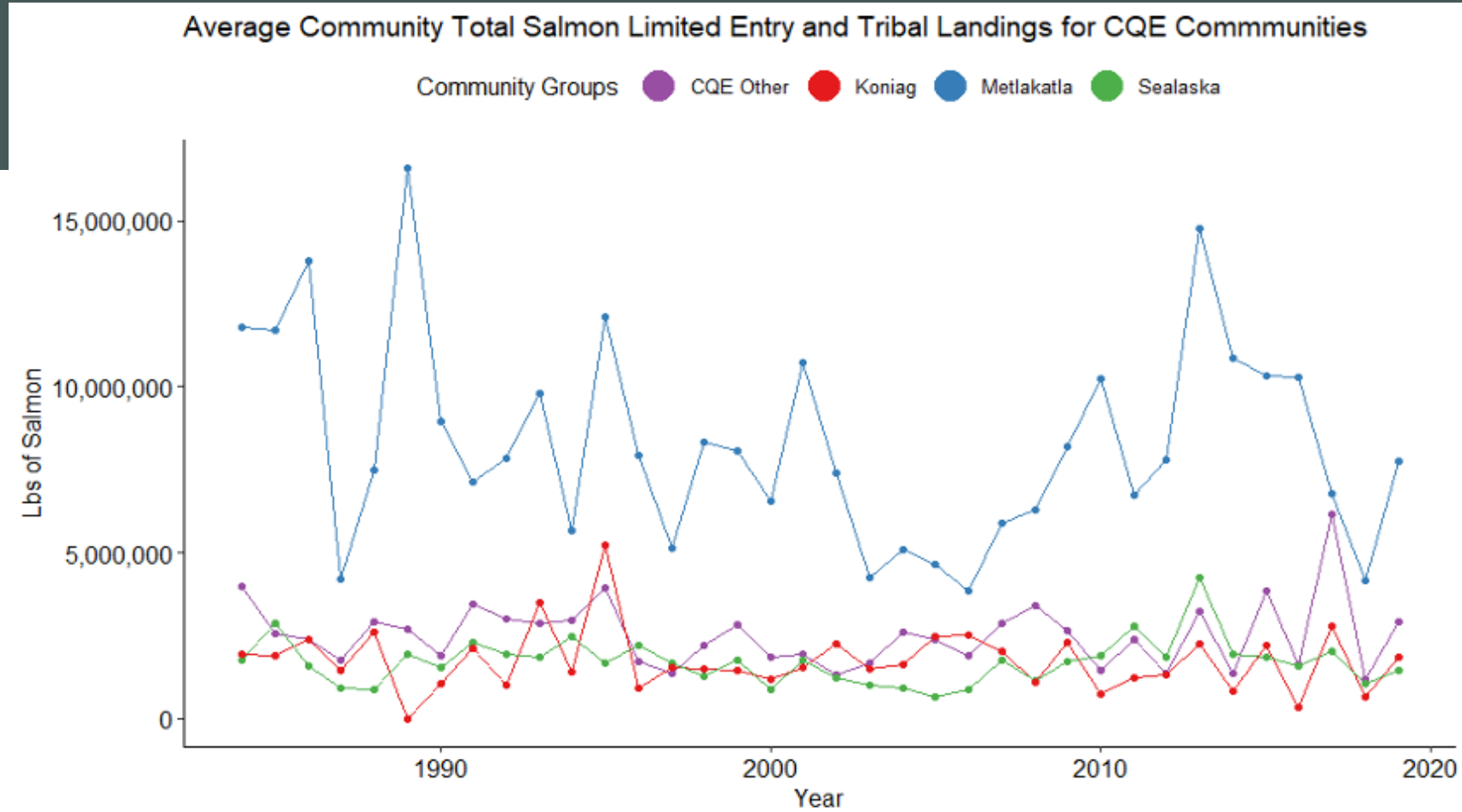


- less access (n=159)
- eroded fishing livelihood & culture (n=144)
- villages lost fishing, people, and in crisis (n=95)
- economic impacts (n=54)
- youth impacts (n=46)

LOSS OF FISHING ECONOMY & CULTURE



WHAT MAKES METLAKATLA DIFFERENT?



Source: Commercial Fisheries Entry Commission, Department of Fish and Wildlife, Metlakatla Indian Community

This figure shows salmon landings over time for Annette Island and Limited Entry from 1984 to 2019 for all CQE Communities. The x-axis shows years and the y-axis shows average community landings from limited entry salmon and Annette Island tribal fishing, for Metlakatla only. We estimate Metlakatla tribal landings for each year by multiplying average species weight by the total fish landed.

RESEARCH TAKEAWAYS

- Fishing is a foundational component of culture, livelihood, economy of coastal Alaska.
- Pronounced loss of fishing access has interrupted the continuity of fishing livelihoods; eroded social infrastructure.
- Until very recently, most families were engaged in commercial fisheries.
- Most have multigenerational ties to commercial fishing; only a very small percentage (12-13%) have any current engagement in commercial fishing.

RESEARCH TAKEAWAYS

- Very strong agreement:
 - Lack of fishing opportunities has been a major driver of village outmigration;
 - Communities are in a crisis and survival depends on fisheries access,
 - Communities have suffered many losses of commercial fishing access, cultural fishing practices, fishing knowledge, subsistence fishing, and youth engagement in fishing

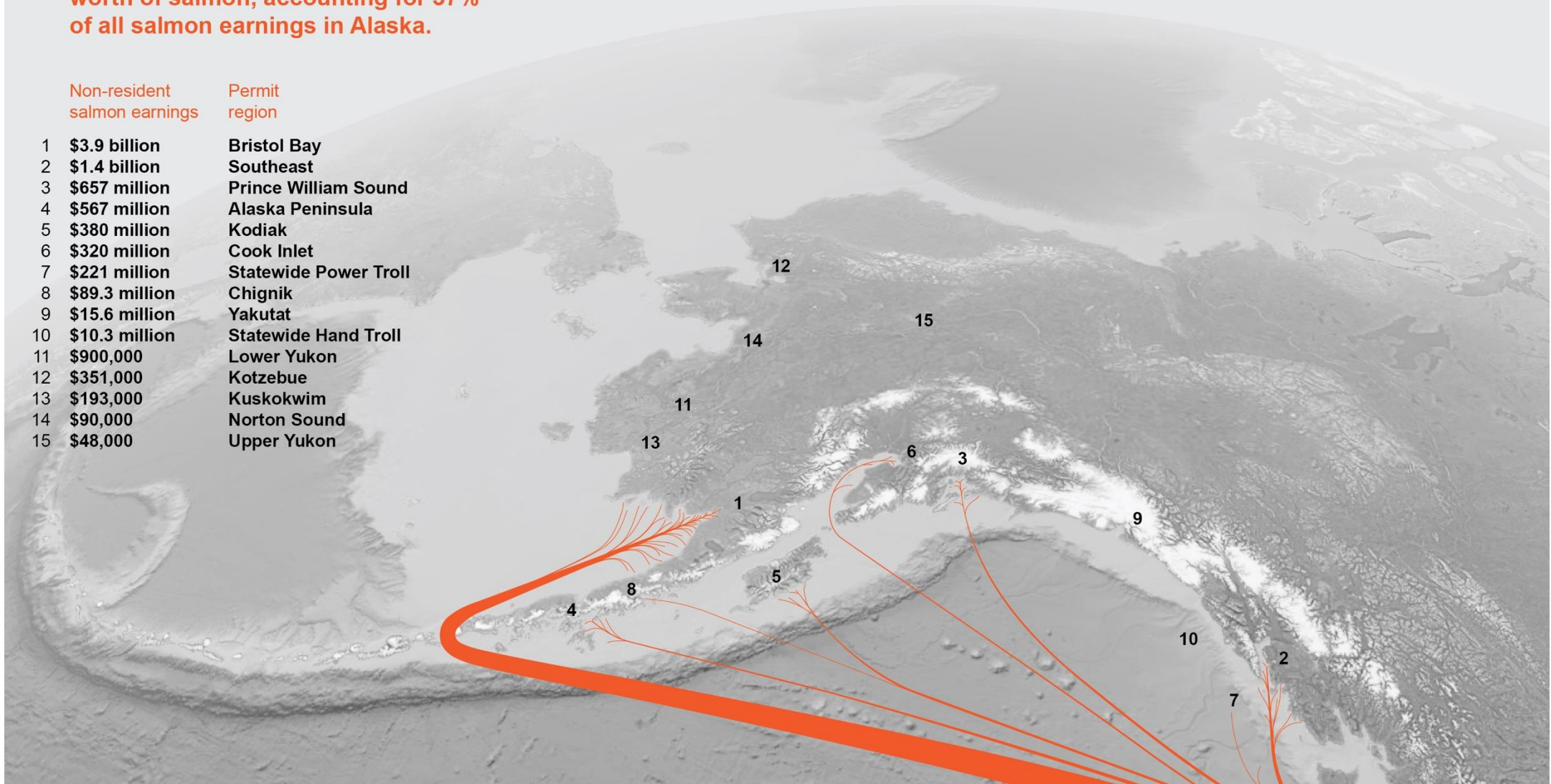
From 1975 to 2023, the total gross estimate earnings for all salmon caught was \$20.4 billion. Over that same period, non-resident salmon permit holders caught

\$7.5 billion

worth of salmon, accounting for 37% of all salmon earnings in Alaska.

Non-resident salmon earnings Permit region

1	\$3.9 billion	Bristol Bay
2	\$1.4 billion	Southeast
3	\$657 million	Prince William Sound
4	\$567 million	Alaska Peninsula
5	\$380 million	Kodiak
6	\$320 million	Cook Inlet
7	\$221 million	Statewide Power Troll
8	\$89.3 million	Chignik
9	\$15.6 million	Yakutat
10	\$10.3 million	Statewide Hand Troll
11	\$900,000	Lower Yukon
12	\$351,000	Kotzebue
13	\$193,000	Kuskokwim
14	\$90,000	Norton Sound
15	\$48,000	Upper Yukon



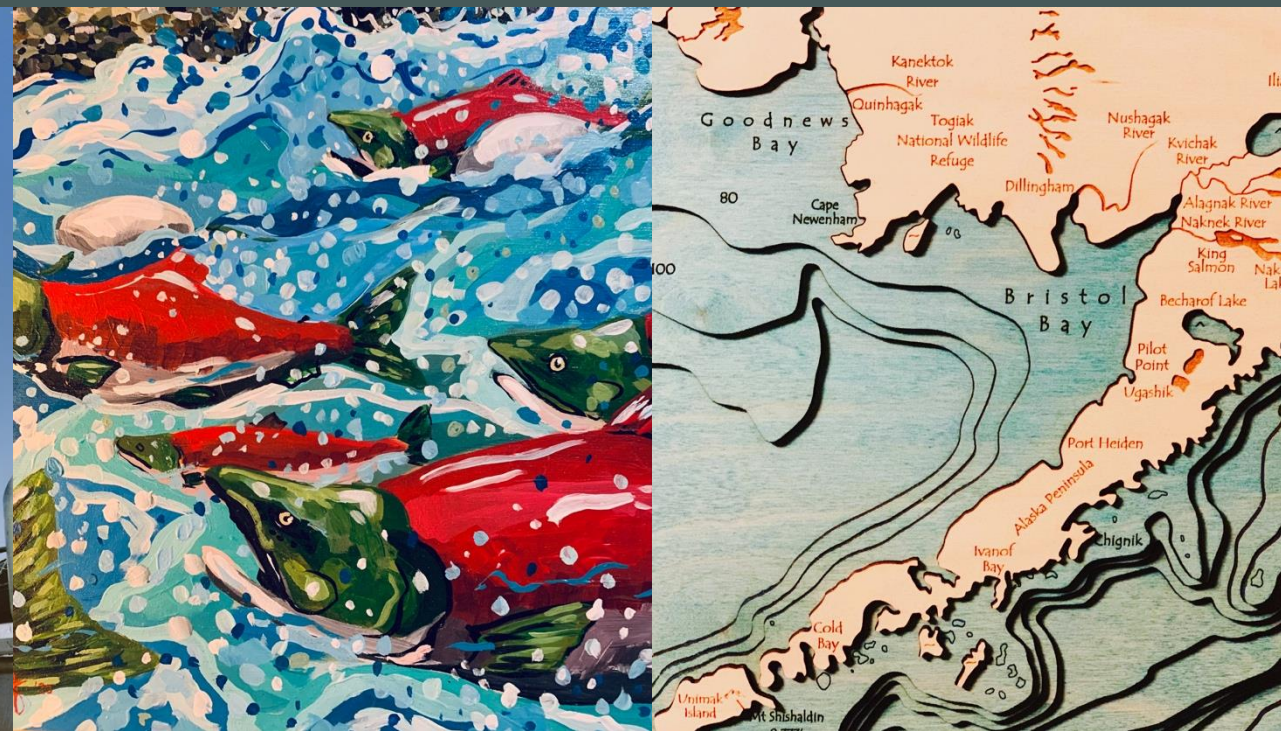
Potential Policy Ideas

Turning the Tide
(Cullenberg et al. 2017)
- 5 recommendations

New class of
nontransferable
permits

Changes to transfer
provisions

Authorizing new/
existing entities to hold
permits 'in trust'



CONTACT INFO

Dr. Rachel Donkersloot, rachel@coastalculturesresearch.com

Dr. Courtney Carothers, ccarothers@alaska.edu

Joe Nelson, joe.nelson@sealaska.com

Acknowledgement of past research funding:

