

TOGIAC DISTRICT HERRING SPAWN-ON-KELP ETHNOGRAPHY

5/25/2011

These notes were provided to the interviewee for review by ADF&G research staff.

Interview with a skiff owner in Togiak prior to going out to try to harvest herring spawn-on-kelp (SOK) in the Togiak area.

- People in the skiff used to go out to harvest split the cost of gas and sometimes people not going might contribute, but usually whoever has money just pays.
- Before heading out this season the key respondent estimated that he would try to harvest about 50 gallons of SOK because it might be distributed between 10-15 households.
- There used to be a commercial SOK fishery, but the amount found has seen a big decline. Now people in Togiak cannot even get enough to fill their own freezers, let alone harvest excess for sale.
- The best place to harvest SOK is shoreline with more rocks than sand. With the decline of spawn commercial harvesters were forced to pick from poor locations where the eggs were sandy (the sand doesn't wash out). With the lower quality spawn, tenders stopped buying spawn-on-kelp and the commercial fishery shut down.
- Traditional harvest locations are checked, these locations line the coast from the village east to Kulukak Bay.
- There used to be eggs at every place, now it's 'lucky' to find them even at one location.
- A good location to harvest SOK is a rocky beach where the tide goes out far enough to expose the SOK so it is dry at low tide. The best quality kelp beds are healthy and tall. Thick, dense spawn on the kelp is desired with not much of the green kelp showing.
- The respondent believed that Anchor Point to Right Hand Point should be off limits to commercial fishing. He said this is the area that gets the most consistent spawn. Rocky Point is easy to access. Around the corner of Right Hand Point the waves get rough, but some areas in Kulukak Bay are good for SOK harvests. The protected area should extend out to Summit Island as well, not just along the coastline. Protecting a large area will be helpful because the herring shift areas variably each year.
- Togiak Bay gets large congregations of herring and is a nursery for the whole marine ecosystem. Lots of other fish, including salmon, marine mammals, and birds congregate in this area.
- The informant emphasized that the commercial fishing of herring needs to be done by locals. High harvesting purse seiners from Washington state and areas other than Togiak have forced locals who cannot compete out of the fishery. He believes that maybe 3 gillnet boats from Togiak and 5-10 Dillingham boats are left in the fishery.
- The locals dropped out of the commercial fishery due to the dropping prices. They could not compete with the mass purse seiners. Their catches were not even covering the cost of gas and they were no longer willing to take the risks.

- The informant intends to harvest spawn-on-kelp for subsistence every year. Some years he has not made it out due to work requirements, bad weather, and whether or not other harvesters are finding spawn-on-kelp. In some years if others are not finding any, it is not worth making a trip.
- Like other subsistence foods most of the harvest of SOK is shared with family and friends within the community. He estimated that 75% of the melucuaq (SOK) is shared. Some is traded up North for muktuk. They trade spawn-on-kelp, herring, salmon, and walrus for muktuk. But most is shared within Togiak and eaten at celebrations like birthdays and holidays.
- The lack of herring roe is affecting the marine mammals and waterfowl as well. Birds used to stay in the area longer, which was better for hunting, but now they are stopping near Manokotak then moving on.
- There has been a drastic decline in the seal population overall, and only some species are showing up regularly. Now hunters only see the same kinds of seals rather than the range of species.
- He said the spawn always varied year to year, both the quality (thickness and sand) and quantity (range of locations), however in recent years both the quality and quantity has been consistently poor.

Togiak resident and spawn-on-kelp harvester interview notes:

- Used to commercial fish for spawn-on-kelp by gillnet, quit in 1998 because his dad got a shaker and he did not like it. He is not sure of all the reasons that he quit but he didn't like the shaker because he liked working with his hands. His father retired, then his brother got a shaker, but his brother is no longer fishing.
- It is hard to find spawn-on-kelp compared to the past, beginning sometime 4-6 years ago and now continually declining.
- Kelp is getting smaller, from a couple feet long to only about a half foot long, from Right Hand Point to the west end of Metervik Bay. Used to be really long when he was a kid. The longer kelp is in the water.
- He does not know why the kelp are getting smaller, but said he used to see people chop the kelp with uluaqs (ulu knives). He picks the kelp by hand instead.
- He makes one big trip per season, but sometimes goes 2 or 3 times on different days.
- Kelp from Right Hand Point west about 2.5 miles (halfway to Bay Point) is getting really small, he doesn't know if there's any kelp left in that area.
- Made a trip, about 60 miles round trip, all the way to Osviak River last year (2010) and found good kelp and spawn. Medium-length kelp with good eggs. He called them 'gold,' no sand. H has one bag left from last year.
- It's real expensive to make the trip when he brings his family \$200-400 with all 3 of his kids.

- Usually goes out to get spawn-on-kelp for the elders and people who can't go out, so he tries to get as much as he can. Fills up a bin or two on his commercial setnet skiff. He works as fast as he can because he's racing the tide to harvest.
- Last year it was a big effort to harvest because of weather and cold. It was windy and wavy while they were out so they couldn't park where the kelp was located. He parked his skiff in a little bay near Osviak River and had to hike the harvest of about 20-30 gallons back down to his boat around ½ mile.
- In other years it was easy because he would rake in the kelp or pull right up to it in his boat.
- He is getting enough to meet his own needs. Enough for his family is about 20 gallons, but he always tries to get more for others.
- Doesn't eat too much because the spawn-on-kelp is used for birthday feasts and other special occasions where a large portion is shared.
- He sends some over to his relatives in Manokotak too.
- Harvest time used to be earlier, now it's later. No longer seeing spawn out near Anchor Point to Right Hand Point.
- Kelp near Bay Point are still longer, so it's a good place to go.
- Tries to go every year, but has to go later. Last year it was late May, used to be early May before the harvest.
- Has got kelp from Summit Island and all over to Kulukak.
- From Stone Lady to the point on Metervik Bay kelp is getting smaller.
- Goes to different places each year, depending on where the herring have gone. Lots of activity usually from Right Hand Point to Metervik Bay, so he plans to check that area this year. It depends on where the biomass releases milt.
- Finds areas by watching the seagulls over the spawn.
- Herring populations have changed, used to be easy to catch around Right Hand Point and schools could be seen all over in the past. Probably due to commercial fishing too early. Depletion of herring populations from overfishing.
- Kelp are shorter now too. The Elders used to say that using an uluaq to chop the kelp makes them take longer to regrow opposed to picking by hand where you don't take the stems or only the top so they can bloom again.
- Used to salt spawn-on-kelp but no longer, now only freezes.
- High quality spawn-on-kelp is thick and gold coloured. The best he has harvested was about 1 ½ inch thick.
- Recommends a closure to commercial fishers from Right Hand Point to Anchor Point because the kelp are good and long in that area, herring could make a recovery.
- Kulukak Bay used to have lots of spawn-on-kelp, but now at minus tide it's all black. It used to be gold when he was a little boy, along the shore from Metervik Bay partway in Kulukak.

RC 105
(Replacing RC 80)

- The kelp itself concerns him more than the herring. They're getting smaller and smaller, and not growing, but not from people picking because he would know if people were out picking, and he usually tells people where to find melucuaq.