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Human dimensions of the Lake Huron salmon fishery crash: Using oral histories to assess the attitudes, values, and beliefs of anglers and non-angler stakeholders in Great Lakes coastal communities

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March 2021

ABSTRACT:

The purpose of this research project was to document the lived, personal experiences of fishery stakeholders who experienced the Lake Huron Chinook salmon collapse from 2002-2005. The goal was to create an oral history collection that would serve as a permanent, scholarly account of the event as experienced by people whose lives and livelihoods were affected by the event, and whose accounts are not essentially already published in the academic literature (i.e., not fishery managers and biologists). As a pilot project, we focused on the Lake Huron coastal community of Rogers City, Michigan, in the northeast Lower Peninsula. Rogers City provided an interesting case study because it received the largest annual stocking of Chinook salmon in all of Lake Huron.

Research objectives for the project were: (1) Document coastal community experiences as related to the Lake Huron Chinook salmon fishery crash via an oral history project, (2) Identify individual and community values, attitudes and beliefs relative to the Lake Huron fishery among angling and non-angling fishery stakeholders in Lake Huron coastal communities before, during, and after the Chinook salmon and alewife crashes through the analysis of oral histories, and (3) Identify and characterize overlap and discrepancies between angling and non-angling stakeholder knowledge (local knowledge), and identify stakeholder information sources among Lake Huron coastal communities regarding the Chinook salmon and alewife crashes, 2002-2005.

Recordings and transcripts of interviews with 19 members of the Rogers City coastal community and two Lake Huron fisheries biologists were assembled into a permanent collection preserved at the Archives of Michigan titled "Oral History of the Rogers City Chinook Salmon Recreational Fishery". Among the 17 non-biologists interviewed, seven were non-anglers and 10 were anglers. All persons interviewed had experiences with respect to the Rogers City Chinook salmon fishery before, during, and after the major fishery decline. Ages of persons interviewed ranged from 51 to 89. The interviews

successfully obtained stories that conveyed participants' values, attitudes, and beliefs regarding the importance of the fishery, with both respect to the major dynamics of the city of Rogers City, as well as at a personal level. Values, attitudes, and beliefs varied widely, even within demographics (e.g., among anglers, among non-anglers). Angler and non-angler information sources largely overlapped due to the high degree of fisheries activism and participation of a few key Rogers City community members in politics. This overlap largely was due to the involvement of Rogers City community members in the negotiations of the 1985 and 2000 Consent Decrees and the communication by those individuals to the local government and general public, which reduced discrepancies. The primary difference between anglers and non-anglers with respect to information sources was anglers having firsthand experience on the water fishing.

Over the course of researching the recreational Chinook salmon fishery out of Rogers City, and performing the interviews and analyzing the data, the two most profound findings revealed by the entire oral history collection are: (1) participants' experiences are localized and have a shared identity: there is a "Rogers City salmon" story that the interview participants describe, as opposed to, say, a "Lake Huron salmon" story, and (2) there was a wide range exhibited among interview participants' values, attitudes, and beliefs with respect to the recreational Chinook salmon fishery.

The interviews recorded and transcribed for this project comprise a collection of personal accounts based on lived experience, memory, opinion, and years of reflection by the participants who were generous in sharing their stories. The investigators worked with care to create a platform for participants to share the aspects of their experience regarding the recreational Chinook salmon fishery in Rogers City, Michigan that were most interesting and important to them. To the greatest extent possible, the investigators tried to facilitate dialog most relevant to the GLFC's Human Dimensions of Great Lakes Fishery Management research theme, but care was taken not to constrain the interaction or create an environment that felt more like an interrogation and less like an engaging, worthwhile conversation on the part of the interviewee. As the investigators, we feel that the vast majority of the 19 hours of recording obtained are relevant to the theme, but this is neither distillable to numerical interpretation in a meaningful way, nor would it be appropriate to treat the stories shared as something like replicates or samples in a scientific manner. With respect to any Great Lakes fishery researcher or manager, the most genuine and objective use of this oral history project is to listen to the audio recordings and hear the personal accounts in their entirety, or to read the long-form transcripts and come to one's own understanding.