

Yukon River Panel
Project CC-02-14

Yukon River Educational Exchange Program
Final Report

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for:

Yukon River Panel

May 2015

A publication of the Yukon River Drainage Fisheries Association,
funded by the Yukon River Panel, Project CC-02-14
The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the views of the funding entity.

Study History: In 1985 the United States (U.S.) and Canada engaged in negotiations to create a long-term agreement for the management of Chinook and fall chum salmon originating within the Canadian portion of the Yukon River drainage in the Yukon Territory. After 16 years of negotiations both countries came to a final agreement on how to share the salmon resource in March 2001. The Yukon River Salmon Agreement (YRSA) represents an international commitment to the conservation and restoration of salmon upon which Yukon River communities in Alaska and Canada depend. Due to the nature of the YRSA and the annual cycle of cooperation that it promotes, it is important for fishing families and residents of the Yukon River drainage to understand its terms, and regional and cultural similarities and differences among the people on both sides of the Yukon River border. The educational exchange program was created as a way to build relationships and to expand knowledge about the importance of conserving and restoring Canadian origin Chinook and fall chum salmon.

Abstract: The purpose of the educational exchange is to provide an opportunity for building cross border understanding between Alaskans and Canadians living along the Yukon River who share the salmon resource. The 2014 trip took place in August. The group included five Canadian participants that were guided by Wayne Jenkins, Deputy Director of the Yukon River Drainage Fisheries Association (YRDFA) and Paige Drobny, Fisheries Biologist with Spearfish Research, contracted by YRDFA. Our Canadian guests traveled from their home communities in Yukon Territory, Canada to Anchorage, Alaska. From there they traveled to the Yukon River villages of Saint Mary's and Galena plus a visit to the Pilot Station sonar site. Some of the group traveled to the small village of Koyukuk from Galena and back by boat. The Canadian participants met with Alaskans, visited the Alaska Native Heritage Center in Anchorage, stayed in villages along the Yukon River, met with Yukon River fishing families and learned about the salmon fisheries and cultures along the Yukon River in Alaska. The education exchange participants also traveled with Russian delegates traveling from Kamchatka to the Yukon River to learn about salmon fisheries, Alaska Native culture, salmon management and current challenges in Alaska and in particular along the Yukon River.

Key Words: Alaska, Canada, Chinook, educational exchange, fall chum, salmon, United States, Yukon River, Yukon River Drainage Fisheries Association (YRDFA), Yukon River Panel, Yukon River Salmon Agreement, Yukon Territory

Citation:

W. Jenkins, J. Klein. 2015. Yukon River Educational Exchange Program. Yukon River Panel Project CC-02- 14 Final Report, Yukon River Panel, Whitehorse, Canada

Executive Summary

An Educational Exchange Program was initiated 12 years ago, soon after the signing of the Yukon River Salmon Agreement (YRSA) between Alaska and Canada. The goal of the education exchange program is to foster community partnerships and relationships focused on Yukon River salmon, with the outcome of a more aware public that will maintain and protect salmon stocks and habitat. The program is conducted with the ultimate purpose of building relationships to sustain Yukon River salmon populations for future generations. This program brings Alaskans and Yukoners (people from Yukon Territory, Canada) to communities, homes, cultural centers and fish camps along the Yukon River to learn first hand about all salmon fisheries along the Yukon River including but not limited to subsistence and aboriginal harvests, commercial efforts for processing fish, conservation efforts, management and research and the cultural significance of salmon to people along the Yukon River.

Participants learned and shared information and experienced different cultures, fishing practices, and saw firsthand the importance of salmon in different areas in the Yukon River drainage. The trip brought together fishing and community leaders from different parts of the river to spend time together, learning about the successes and challenges of the fishery. All of these experiences emphasized the importance of communication between all salmon resource users along the Yukon River. This form of exchange, people to people and face to face is an irreplaceable process that leads to better understanding of people's needs, cultural perspectives, and current conservation imperatives for maintaining fish stocks into the future. Positive civil response to current social challenges brought about by low Canadian origin Chinook salmon returns can only be built on the strength and understanding of people interacting with people with shared concerns.

Introduction

The Yukon River educational exchange program has been in operation since 2002. Based on other exchange models which create people to people exchanges among professionals in similar disciplines from different regions, the Yukon River exchange is a multi-day trip alternating between Alaska and Yukon Territory, Canada with participants also alternating between Alaska and Canada. The trip participants are all from one country and usually represent various fisheries such as subsistence/aboriginal, commercial and/or sport, First Nations, Alaskan tribes and or Tribal Councils, state and federal agencies and non-governmental agencies. This group travels to different communities in the host country and interacts with various stakeholders to meet each other, share information, learn from one another, and see firsthand the way people live along the various regions of the Yukon River. Participants gain deeper understanding of how people use the salmon resource, why it is important to them, local and traditional ecological knowledge, fisheries management and research efforts and efforts to sustain salmon for the future.

The trip is organized and hosted by the Yukon River Drainage Fisheries Association (YRDFA) and funded by the Yukon River Panel in an effort to build relationships and understanding among the people who share the salmon resources with the primary goal of conserving and rebuilding the fishing resource. There was a 16-year history of negotiations to finally reach a Yukon River Salmon Agreement (YRSA) among the U.S./Alaskans and Canadians. The Yukon River is the

longest river in Alaska with headwaters in Yukon Territory, Canada. With a mixed stock fishery and Canadian origin Chinook and fall chum salmon migrating up the Yukon River main stem and Porcupine River to their headwaters. The Yukon River is a complex river system with corresponding varied management depending on what part of the river you live or fish on. Once the YRSA was signed, the Yukon River Panel, a bi-lateral panel of U.S. and Canadians agreed that an exchange trip would help to build understanding and support for the agreement and the actions necessary to conserve and rebuild fish stocks that are so critical to the people living along the Yukon River.

Since its inception, there have been modifications to the exchange design due to changing scheduling of flights, the duration of time participants can be away and the ability of the host villages, state and federal agencies and other organizations to participate in the trip. This education exchange trip was the 12th year of the program and was unique in that a group of Russians from Kamchatka asked to also travel to the Yukon River in an exchange program through the Wild Salmon Center based out of Portland. YRDFA thought this would be a unique opportunity to engage people from Russian, Canada and Alaska together to address salmon conservation concerns. Feedback about this trip can be found in the participant evaluations attached.

Methods

Planning & Preparation

- a) YRDFA developed an itinerary based on past experience of organizing trips and based on where current test fishery projects take place and locations our guests would be most interested in visiting.
- b) YRDFA was in touch with the potential host community Tribal Councils and individual community members to ask for their permission to visit and help in meeting the program goals such as local participation in the program.
- c) The Yukon Salmon Sub-Committee helped to identify and contact interested individuals or forwarded us contact information for getting in touch directly with participants.
- d) YRDFA coordinated all travel from the Yukon to the U.S. and within Alaska including meals, per diem and lodging.

Final Preparation & Trip Execution

- a) YRDFA contracted with and prepared lead trip guide Paige Drobny ahead of the trip and organized to get her supplies and petty cash.
- b) Five participants from five different areas of Yukon were selected. YRDFA spoke with all participants ahead of time to provide them with important information to prepare them for their visit, to provide pertinent details, alleviate concerns, and to clarify expectations about the program.
- c) The group met up with their guides Wayne Jenkins and Paige Drobny in Anchorage. YRDFA executive director Jill Klein also met the group and saw them off at the Anchorage airport. Paige and Wayne traveled with the group to the Yukon River and guided the educational exchange trip through to its completion.

Post-Trip Follow-Up & Reporting

- a) YRDFA discussed during the trip the importance of sharing information with their home communities.
- b) YRDFA staff member Wayne Jenkins e-mailed evaluation questions to participants of the program.
- c) YRDFA staff reviewed the outcomes and feedback from the trip participants for improving futures exchanges.
- d) YRDFA wrote and submitted the final report.

Results

Travel Details: Trip Report from Wayne Jenkins and Paige Drobny

Anchorage

- 7/11 Canadians arrive late in Anchorage, AK and rest up on the 12th for early flight out to Saint Mary's the following day.

St. Mary's

- 7/13: Flight to Saint Mary's through Bethel. Boat ride with Saint Mary's mayor and YRDFA co-chair Bill Alstrom down the Yukon River to Boreal fish processing plant for tour of processing plant with manager Randy Crawford. Participants were impressed to see this operation in a remote location. It was noted that Randy brought a lot of money into the local communities and really helped out, giving young people cheaper gas and jobs, both at the plant and through commercial fishing opportunity the plant makes possible. Beautiful ride on the river but the chum fishery was closed so they did not see the plant in operation on that day.
- 7/14: Boat ride to Alaska Department of Fish and Game's (ADF&G) Pilot Station sonar facility. Informative presentation about the sonar operations and test fishing and how the two are linked and their importance in tracking the fish runs for management guidance. Discussion centered on operations and also the positives and negatives of the sonar. We also discussed improvements that have been made to the accuracy of the operation in recent years. We watched some test fishing and sampling of the salmon caught in the test fishery.
- In the evening we had a community discussion at the City Hall with the local people about the Chinook salmon fishery and how it has impacted their lives and how they feel about being shut down from Chinook salmon fishing this year. Pauline and Don shared a lot of their knowledge with the St. Mary's locals but there was still a lot of resentment in ADF&G's actions and toward the Pollock industry, which inadvertently catches Chinook salmon as they harvest pollock in the Bearing Sea. Local turnout was light due to fishing opener for chum salmon that night.
- 7/15: Plane was late for flight to Galena, so we drove to Boreal chum processing plant to see fish actually getting processed from the previous night's chum opener. Again, participants were impressed with the operation and the amount of fish coming in and the local young people working the fish line.

Galena/Koyukuk

- 7/15 continued: We arrived in Galena too late for the YRDFA teleconference so had box lunches at the city hall and then checked into rooms and went to dinner at the Elders Home in Galena. We listened to native elder Sidney Huntington talk about how there were too many people now living and fishing on the river and how they are so efficient at catching fish now that they need to not fish for at least 7 years for Chinook salmon to recover. He also talked about how the depth of the nets made a difference in which stock you catch with the big, Canadian bound Chinook swimming lower in the water column. So a reduction in net depth would help the situation. Participants talked to other elders individually throughout the evening and were pleased with the conversations. I believe Pauline Frost videoed Mr. Huntington's entire talk.
- 7/16: A meeting with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Koyukuk National Wildlife Refuge Manager Kenton Moos and staff in Galena until lunch. Good questions and conversations about refuge management, subsistence and fish habitat protection. Due to inclement weather, one Canadian decided he did not want to go on the river trip down to Koyukuk and on to Kaltag. Four Canadians and Paige suited up and braved the wind and rain, boating down the Yukon River with local boat captain and YRDFA Board member Fred Huntington and Galena resident John Stamm to Koyukuk and visited with local Elders Benedict and Eliza Jones. Benedict talked a lot about fishing and also talked about the Canadian fish swimming deeper in the water column. Pauline videoed the whole conversation and took pictures. The group spent about 5 hours talking with them about their life in Koyukuk and fishing for themselves and their dog team. The group headed back up-river to Galena after deciding to cancel the Kaltag visit due to inclement weather and arrived around 8pm.

Fairbanks

- 7/17: Morning flight to Fairbanks and arrived in time for hotel check in and lunch at Pikes. The group went to Tanana Chiefs Conference (TCC) to meet with Wildlife and Parks Director Orville Huntington. The Canadian group also met with Reed Morisky of the Board of Fisheries and TCC staff fisheries biologist Brian McKenna and had a very good discussion around Chinook salmon management, subsistence and the future of the salmon resource. The new Yukon River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission, a native consortium pushing for a co-management approach on the Yukon and Kuskokwim Rivers was mentioned and an invitation to discuss issues further with Canadian First Nations was offered.
- 7/18: Morning meeting with ADF&G Yukon River summer season fisheries manager Eric Newland, and USFWS Yukon Subsistence Fisheries Branch Chief Fred Bue. Canadian Pauline Frost departed early for home. Only Canadian Don Toews was available to meet with Eric and Fred and they had a good discussion. Don shared how appreciative the Canadians are for the complete closures on Chinook salmon during the 2014 fishing season and the cooperation and the sacrifice of the Alaskan fishers. He shared views on his experiences so far on the education exchange trip, and how much he learned in Saint Mary's, Galena and Koyukuk about the Alaskan situation. He also discussed the Canadian view that even if we meet the Canadian escapement goals for 2014, that the quality of that escapement is problematic; too few females and small fish size and that we will be a long time working our way back to a truly healthy run of

Chinook salmon. He believes folks need to be prepared to not fish Chinook salmon for at least a full cycle.

Anchorage

- 7/19: Morning flight from Fairbanks and afternoon meetings for the group with ADF&G Regional Supervisor, Division of Commercial Fisheries John Linderman, Regional Research Coordinator Jan Conitz and Fisheries Biologist Stephanie Schmidt. Reporter Rhonda McBride of KTVA got some footage, pre-meeting and more in-depth after the meetings for her Yukon River series “Season of Hope”. This was a fruitful meeting for Canadians with in-depth management discussions led by Don Toews from Canada. Unfortunately, a scheduled visit to the Anchorage Museum for a guided viewing of the outstanding Native Alaskans exhibit was canceled due to lack of time. After the interviews, a bit of rest and a wonderful meal at the Crow’s Nest wrapped up the trip. The group flew home early the following morning.

Evaluation

Participants in YRDFA’s education exchange were asked six evaluation questions as follow-up to their 2014 visit to Alaskan villages along the Yukon River. Three of the six responded. All found deep meaning and value in being able to interact and openly ask questions about Alaskan fishing practices, their connection to salmon and the Yukon River, interactions with management, concerns about low King salmon runs, subsistence harvest, commercial chum harvests, climate change and more. Our Canadian guests appreciated being able to share with Alaskans the fish harvest situation and history of First Nations in Yukon Territory and their concerns about the future of the runs. An especially poignant experience was time spent with the Elders of two communities, the stories and traditional knowledge shared. Visits to the Boreal commercial processing plant near St. Mary’s was instructive as this small operation employs about a dozen youth; an economic plus for their remote village with few income producing opportunities. Two Canadian participants serve on the Yukon River Panel and found the chance to spend time together invaluable for discussing Yukon River salmon and related issues while one of the younger guests related a stronger interest in serving on the Canadian Yukon Salmon Sub-Committee after the exchange. Suggestions for future exchanges include bringing more Traditional Ecological Knowledge into the learning experience and joining fishers at fish-camp. Several attendees mentioned that the conservation message to the communities’ needs to be strengthened and more targeted. Lastly all of our guests, not only returned to their communities with deep and lasting memories of their trip to Yukon River villages, but said they shared what they learned and that the exchange broadened their understanding and informed their continued roles on the Yukon River Panel and in their communities. One participant did not recommend joining other exchanges in the future and thought it should just be the Alaskans and Canadians addressing their unique experiences together.

Measure of Success

As noted in the detailed proposal for this project, there are three measures of success for this program:

1. Strong participants. All participants interacted with their hosts in the communities visited in a most respectful, relaxed and open dialogue. First Nations of Yukon Territory were well represented by Pauline Frost from the village of Old Crow, powerful spokesperson for her Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation, vice-chair of the Yukon Salmon Sub-Committee and Yukon River Panel member. Also Michelle Telep, Deputy Chief of the Ta'an Kwach'an Council, Crow woman and mother of the Southern Tutchone. Franklin Patterson, First Nation member of the Nacho Nyak Dun Northern Tutchone and Don Toews Chief of Fisheries for Yukon Canada, retired, participant in the Yukon River Treaty negotiations, member of the Yukon River Panel and Yukon Salmon Sub-Committee plus a member of the Carcross Tagish Renewable Resources Council.
2. Good interactions in host communities. The discussions that took place were frank and focused on the river, subsistence harvest and needs, Chinook salmon declines and what should be done to address it, the future of Native cultures and economies in both Alaska and Yukon, Canada. Folks from both sides of the shared Alaskan/Canadian border were informed and moved by the conversations, information and stories shared.
3. Sharing at home. All of the participants have active roles in their communities as mentioned above in the section on strong participants. Through their roles they have obligations or responsibilities to share what they learned on their travel during the education exchange trips. A challenging of the program is that once the participants go home it is out of our control to impact their sharing at home. We encourage that through their professional and personal affiliations that sharing takes place.

Financial Statement

The budget was spent out in total. Travel was more expensive than anticipated as was personnel, but contractual, other and supplies were underspent.

CONCLUSION

The educational exchange trip brought together a diverse group of individuals who rely on the salmon resource for food, income and culture. The exchange between Yukoners and Alaskans allowed for people from unique locations to meet each other in a remote trip setting that explores the land and the people that live on it. While traveling to different parts of the Yukon River, participants interacted with people who rely on the salmon fisheries thereby giving both parties the ability to appreciate the needs, concerns, and interests of those involved. Throughout the exchange certain topics, such as the Yukon River Salmon Agreement, factors affecting salmon, management strategies, status of stocks, and the importance of the resource were stressed and discussed in informal settings such as homes, community centers and fish camps.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank the Yukon River Panel for providing funds to make the educational exchange program a reality. We thank the participants for joining us on this trip, taking time away from their families and duties at home and work to expand their worldview and advance their efforts to sustain salmon fisheries.