

Traditional Knowledge of Eklutna Fish Resources

The written record and systematic study prior to the year 2000 of salmon returning to the Eklutna River is limited and inconclusive. However, traditional knowledge attests to healthy salmon runs in the river before passage upstream was blocked, and instream flow drastically diminished by two dams, the first built in 1930.

Native Village of Eklutna Chief, Lee Stephan says that his father, Leo Stephan learned from his teachers/elders: Before the (lower) Eklutna River dam salmon went to Eklutna Lake and spawned in the Eklutna River inflow.

Maria Coleman, current NVE Council Member and Eklutna River Watershed Council Representative listened to the elders in the early '70s, when she was in her 20s. Six elders, now deceased, told her that the Eklutna River used to be “overflowing” with “abundant” fish before the dams. They said that “now” there are (relatively) barely any fish there, and they can't use that river anymore. They told the youth that one day they would be the leaders and should do something about the depletion of the fish runs. Maria also learned that there were several sheep hunting cabins around Eklutna Lake, which they provisioned with fish they caught there. Elder Louis Munson recalled stories of her family fishing for salmon (Łiq'a – the generic Dena'ina term for all salmon species, according to the recognized authority: Dena'ina Topical Dictionary, c 2007 AK Native Language Center and James Kari) at the cabin that was located at the upper end of Eklutna Lake prior to the dams being built. The use of the term Łiq'a likely indicates that multiple species were caught, as each individual species has its own name in the Dena'ina language. This is a consensus of the traditional Eklutna Dena'ina we have asked about it. Stories included a fish rack and smoking of salmon in quantities to bring back to the village (Per. Comm. with Carrie Brophil, 2019).

Max Alex, a recent Eklutna elder, noted that there were plentiful salmon in the Eklutna and all the streams in the area. He says all species of salmon ran in the Eklutna River before the dams. Eklutna elders note that in the 1940s, before that, and in the early '50s salmon of all species were abundant in Eklutna River. Relocation to villages elsewhere is partially responsible for a gap in first-hand accounts about Eklutna salmon before then. Just above the confluence with Thunderbird Creek there was a large beaver dam. (The ends of this dam are still present, now on dry land.) Here people used pews to pitch to land as many fish of all species as they needed, including Red and King Salmon. One Elder, Jim Ezi, recalls taking king salmon in the Eklutna above Thunderbird Creek and below the old dam in the 1940's. The King Salmon no longer run here because the water level is too low with the 100% flow diversions from Eklutna Lake. Other elders (Alberta Stephan) also recount taking salmon from the outflow from the old power plant that the salmon gravitated to as it diverted part of the Eklutna River flow into Knik Arm just North and East of the village.

NVE Chief Executive Officer Lee Stephan remembers an abundance of pink salmon and other species in Eklutna River during his youth in the late 1960's and 1970's. He attributes partial blame for declining fish stocks on sport fishermen who often leave caught pink salmon on the river banks in preference to catching other more desirable species. In Cook Inlet drainages, pink salmon return in large numbers on even numbered years. In the years of strong returns it would not be surprising to see an abundance of pink salmon in the Eklutna River. A small run of pink

salmon currently spawn in the reaches below the diversion dam. Louis Munson mentioned in 2019 that fish were larger in Eklutna River when she was young.

The Divestiture Summary Report – Sale of Eklutna and Snettisham Hydroelectric Projects 1992 P. 9 notes; “During initial reviews of the legislative proposal, one significant problem was identified; namely, loss of a Sockeye salmon run that once spawned in Eklutna Lake. The loss was caused by a small private power development constructed in 1929.” Sockeye salmon are unique among salmonids in that they require lake habitat for their life cycle. Sockeye adults typically spawn in streams that enter the lake. The fry hatch and migrate to the lake where they typically spend from 2 to 4 years feeding on plankton before they migrate to the sea as smolts. However, denied access to their lake habitat for more than seven decades by dams on the Eklutna River, anadromous Eklutna sockeye runs have dwindled to very low numbers, observed spawning in the river.