

History of Cook Inlet Commercial Fishing

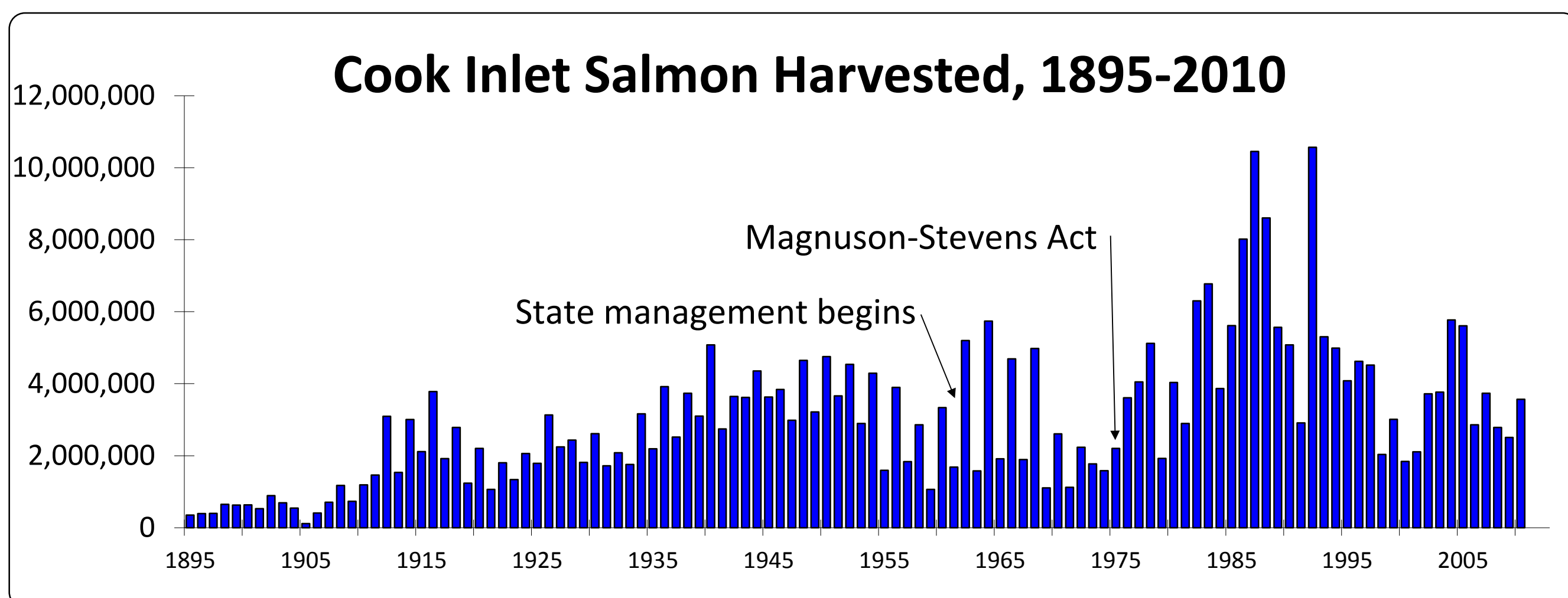
1882 - present



The wild Pacific salmon of Cook Inlet have been sustaining inhabitants of this region for thousands of years. For over 150 years these salmon have been feeding people all over the world. This rich, renewable resource was first exported in the 1840's when ships from America and other nations began fishing in Alaskan waters and delivering salted salmon to ports around the world.

California gold rushers also found salmon. In 1864 a couple of entrepreneurs brought east coast (Atlantic) salmon gill nets and lobster canning technology to the Sacramento River. The salmon canning industry spread up the west coast, reaching Alaska in 1878. The first cannery in Cook Inlet was built at the mouth of the Kasilof River in 1882. Six years later the first salmon cannery was constructed on Kenai River. By 1892, thirty-seven canneries had been built in Alaska.

Salmon was, and still is, a volatile industry with fluctuating supplies and markets and ever-changing technologies. The history shows a roller coaster of ups and downs but with long term sustainability. Six hundred thousand sockeye salmon were harvested in Cook Inlet in 1900. From 1911 through the mid 1960s the annual harvest stayed between 1 and 1.5 million. The following decades had an annual average of 2.5 million sockeye (red) salmon.





Fish traps, adapted from Great Lakes fisheries, came to Cook Inlet in 1885. Cook Inlet fish traps were built along the beaches to take advantage of the salmon's tendency to run along the shoreline. Most of the traps were constructed with large pilings pushed into the sea bottom by steam powered drivers. Winter ice would break any pilings sticking up out of the water so the structures had to be dismantled and rebuilt every year.

These giant contraptions were very expensive and very efficient. They concentrated the profit from the salmon industry in the hands of a few wealthy business owners until the 1960s. Taxes on commercial fishing provided the bulk of territorial revenue until statehood but the industry lobbyists kept those taxes as low as possible and also worked against early statehood efforts. Alaska residents resented the domination of the salmon resource by outsiders. When Alaska finally gained statehood, one of the first acts of the new legislature was to outlaw the use of most fish traps.



Gillnets had been used to some degree in the silty waters of Cook Inlet from the beginning. After fish traps were outlawed, many more fishermen were employed to catch all the salmon for the canneries in gillnets. Gillnets are constructed of mesh “web” (originally linen, now nylon) with openings large enough to allow the salmon’s head to go through just past the gills, which then trap the fish. The web is tied between two lines, one with corks strung on it to provide flotation and the other weighted with lead which sinks, so the nets hang vertically in the water. Except for an occasional cod, flounder or shark, these nets catch only salmon.

Two different styles of gillnetting are used here, “set” and “drift”. Set gillnets are 210 feet long and anchored in place along the shore. Some setnets are right on the beach and go dry at low tide, others are in deeper water. The anchors and bright buoys stay in the water all season; the nets are set out only during open fishing periods.



Set gillnetters (“setnetters”) fish out of open skiffs, mostly from the beaches, launching their boats and returning with their catch in all kinds of weather and conditions. Salmon are picked from the nets every six hours, when the current in the Inlet is at its slowest, just before the tide turns. Most setnetters bring their catch to the beach and transfer the salmon to trucks for the trip to a regional buying station.



Drift gillnets are 900 feet long and 16 feet deep. Drift gillnetters (“drifters”) use larger, 30 to 45 foot long boats and work mostly out of the Kenai and Kasilof Rivers where they can keep their boats anchored between fishing periods. They go offshore to set their nets and then float, or drift, with the current. Periodically the net is pulled back



on board; the fish are picked out of the web and stored in the fish hold. At the end of the day all the boats return to the rivers and wait their turn to sell their catches at the docks or at bigger boats called “tenders”.

Until 1973, anyone could catch and sell salmon in Alaska. This became a problem after oil was discovered here



and the population started booming. The State of Alaska needed to manage the fisheries for sustainability so they capped the number of commercial salmon fishermen in 15 different regions of the state at 1970 levels. The state issued fishing permits to fishermen already engaged in the business and set some rules designed to keep the resource in the hands of the people. The permits can be bought or sold but an individual can only own one or two permits per region and must be physically present when the permit is fished.

Upper Cook Inlet sustains approximately 1300 fishing permits, set and drift combined. Each permit holder is a small business owner purchasing goods and services and providing employment to crewmembers. Statewide, the seafood industry provides the greatest number of private sector jobs.