



The ADF&G Division of Subsistence

Alaska's Economies and Subsistence

The mission and core services of the ADF&G Division of Subsistence center on research about how Alaskans harvest and use subsistence resources. Understanding subsistence resource use means understanding subsistence economies.

An early finding of division research is that contemporary subsistence uses, especially in rural Alaska, take place within a "mixed economy:" there is a subsistence hunting and fishing component and a cash component.

It is a common misconception that no money is involved in traditional subsistence economies. Goods have been traded for thousands of years in Alaska. For example, the commercial fur trade with European markets began about 300 years ago, bringing European currencies and goods into Alaska.

Of course, today's rural households use money in order to purchase fuel oil, electricity, and family goods like clothing and shelter. However, they also use cash to purchase equipment used in subsistence activities, such as guns and ammunition; fishing nets; boats, all-terrain vehicles (ATVs), and snowmachines (and gas and oil for these); rain gear; and more. In other words, money is used to invest in the tools for subsistence hunting, fishing, and gathering.

Rural households live by combining wild resource harvests with commercial-wage employment, if it is available. Cash-paying jobs tend to be few and unstable (temporary or seasonal) in rural Alaska, so cash incomes tend to be small and insecure. Also, economic activity usually takes place in small-scale family groups and economic goals tend to benefit households.

Another common misconception is that subsistence is a welfare system for people with low incomes. However, it takes money to harvest of wild resources. Research by the Division of Subsistence has found that households with the highest incomes in rural communities often produce more wild foods than households with lower incomes. Households that produce more food often share it with low-producing households.

Key Questions:

- Does subsistence involve cash?
- Is subsistence a type of welfare for people with low incomes? Is it based on need?
- What is subsistence customary trade?
- What is subsistence barter?
- Can subsistence products be sold?
- What research on subsistence economies is available?

Relevant statutes and regulations

What the Division of Subsistence does:

A.S. 16.05.094
Duties of section of subsistence hunting and fishing.

Definition of customary trade:

A.S. 16.05.940 (8).

Definition of barter:

A.S. 16.05.940 (2).

Definition of subsistence uses:

A.S. 16.05.940 (33).

Selling subsistence fish and handicrafts from subsistence fish:

5 AAC 01.010 (d).

Barter and sale of game meat:

5 AAC 92.200



Fishing boats in Port Alsworth, Alaska, 2008.

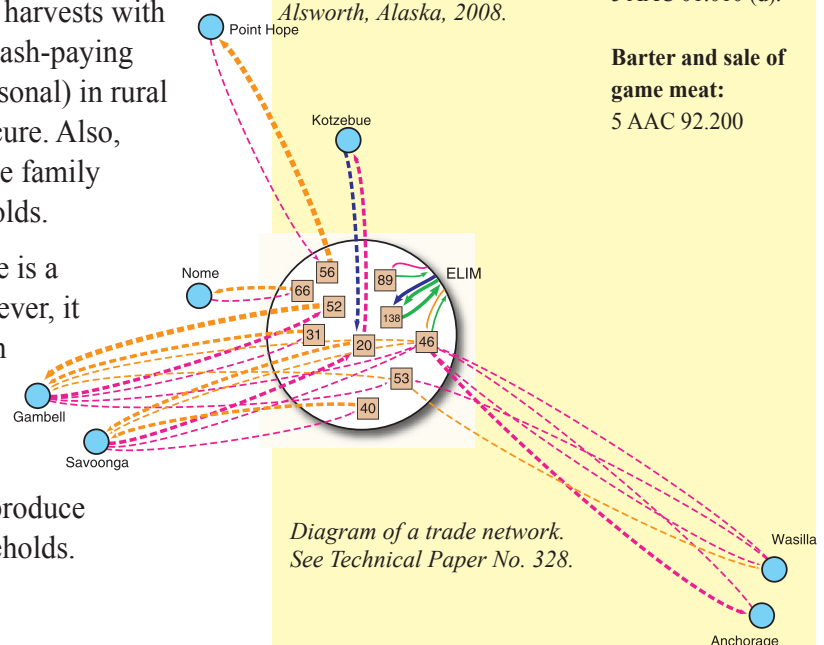


Diagram of a trade network. See Technical Paper No. 328.



Division studies have documented this specialization in subsistence harvests, at least in households that characterize themselves as Alaska Native. It has been referred to as the “30-70 rule”— 30% of the households in a community often produce 70% of the community’s harvest, in terms of usable pounds of subsistence foods.

The high-producing households are usually households with large, mature labor forces fully equipped for hunting and fishing and with higher incomes.

The extra subsistence foods they produce are usually shared with the elderly, single mothers with young dependent children, and young single persons or young couples who are just getting started.

Thus, rural communities would suffer extreme hardship if the taking of subsistence foods were limited to only households with low incomes. This would cut out the most productive households in the community. Division research estimates that while 60% of households in rural Alaska **harvest** wildlife, 86% of households **use** wildlife. Similarly for fish, 83% of rural Alaskan households **harvest** fish, while 95% of households **use** subsistence-caught fish.

In fact, sharing subsistence-caught fish and wildlife is a fundamental characteristic of communities that follow a subsistence way of life, and this system of sharing is protected under Alaska state law.

“Barter” means “the exchange or trade of fish or game, or their parts, taken for subsistence uses (A) for other fish or game or their parts; or (B) for other food or for nonedible items other than money if the exchange is of a limited and noncommercial nature” (AS 16.05.940(2)).

“Customary trade” is defined as the “limited noncommercial exchange, for minimal amounts of cash, as restricted by the

Alaska’s local economies have long included manufacture and trade of handicrafts, such as these dance fans made in Emmonak.

appropriate board, of fish or game resources” (AS 16.05.940(8)).

There are exceptions: “It is unlawful to buy or sell subsistence-taken fish, their parts, or their eggs, except that it is lawful to buy or sell a handicraft made out of the skin or nonedible by-products of fish taken for personal or family consumption” (5 AAC 01.010(d)).

Furthermore, customary trade of fish pertains to whole fish “in the round” or otherwise unprocessed. Any exchange for cash of processed fish, such as smoked or dried strips or portions of fish or canned or jarred fish requires adherence to food safety regulations administered by the Alaska Department of Environment Conservation.

In addition, game meat (except for caribou in Units 22-26, and hares and rabbits) may not be bartered, sold, or purchased [5 AAC 92.200

(b)(8)].

For more information on subsistence economies in Alaska, visit the Division of Subsistence Technical Paper and Special Publications series, now with over 320 titles, posted on-line.

Selected subsistence economic data are also available in the divisions’ on-line Community Subsistence Information System (CSIS). This repository of Alaska community harvest information is updated on a regular basis with economic, demographic, and harvest information for over 200 communities in Alaska.



A mixed subsistence-cash economy factors in the price of fuel for boat motors and other forms of transportation to and from the field.

