

**BACKGROUND: PROPOSED CLOSURE OF UPPER
NAKNEK RIVER TO GILL NET FISHING**

by
Steven R. Behnke
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BACKGROUND

PROPOSED CLOSURE OF UPPER NAKEK RIVER TO GILL NET FISHING

Subsistence Division
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INTRODUCTION

Current regulations, 5AAC 01.325(b), prohibit taking salmon upriver from Savonaski on the Naknek River.

Proposal #41 would change this to prohibit the use of gill nets in this area. The proposal is intended to protect rainbow trout, grayling, and char by restricting the use of nets.

This report provides information about subsistence fishing in the upper Naknek River and Naknek Lake which may be of use to the Board in considering this proposal. This information was gathered in discussions with Department biologists and local residents. It is not a complete history of subsistence uses of the area.

CURRENT AND TRADITIONAL USES

Gillnet fishing has occurred in the Naknek Lake area as long as the oldest residents of the area remember. Two types of fishing have continued in the area during the last two decades - for freshwater species, and for salmon.

“Redfish” are taken with gillnets, which are usually set out only for short periods of time, since a relatively small number of fish are taken today. In the past, fish were cut and hung to dry in the Brooks River area, or at other camps, but today they are generally hauled home for preparation. The fish are cut so that both sides remain attached by the tail, then they are hung on a rack outside so the surface of the flesh will glaze over.

Cool, dry fall weather quickly dries the fish, but if weather is wet they have to be put under shelter or they quickly spoil. When the fish have dried sufficiently they can be stored in a cool place. Today some families keep the dried fish in the freezer to preserve it better in case of warm weather.

The white flesh of the spawning sockeye has a low fat content, dries quickly, and is valued both for its flavor and because it is said to digest more easily than strips made from salmon fresh from the ocean. Older people particularly like dried "redfish". They often eat it with seal oil, bear fat, or butter.

KATMAI NATIONAL PARK AND SUBSISTENCE FISHING CLOSURES

During the 1970's the National Park service allowed residents of Naknek and South Naknek to fish with gillnets in Katmai National Monument. The Alaska National Interests Lands Conservation Act (1980) apparently does not allow any subsistence fishing in the newly established Katmai National Park, although it does permit fishing under sport regulations. In fall, 1981, the National Park Service formally prohibited local residents from taking "redfish" in the Park, which includes all the waters of Naknek.

Gillnet fishing through the ice for freshwater fish has occurred in Naknek Lake until the last few years. Trappers and residents of Naknek and South Naknek commonly used gillnets to take fish for themselves and for dogs until the 1950s, and few people have continued to occasionally set nets through the ice to take fish for their own use.

Interest in the potential for a commercial whitefish market developed in the mid-1960s, and test fishing occurred on Naknek Lake. Transportation and marketing problems, biological concerns, and the 1969 extension of Katmai National Monument to include all of Naknek Lake discouraged further effort.

A number of freshwater subsistence permits were issued by the department for gillnet fishing in Naknek Lake during the 1960s and 1970s. Whitefish has been the primary target species. After Katmai National Monument was extended to take in all of Naknek Lake, people also obtained permission from the National Park Service to set nets in this area.

Gillnets have also been used in Naknek Lake, and occasionally in the upper Naknek River according to one informant, to harvest “redfish” (e.g., spawning sockeye which have turned red in freshwater). The Brooks River area of Naknek Lake was traditionally an important fall camp area, where “redfish” were caught, processed, and dried. A small number of Naknek and South Naknek families, descendants of the people who traditionally used this area, have continued to travel up to Naknek Lake in the fall to take “redfish”.

Lake. Park managers cite the state regulation prohibiting the taking of salmon upstream from Savonaski as one justification for this closure.

BIOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Division of Sport Fisheries has expressed concern that gillnet fishing in the Naknek River would pose potential threats to rainbow trout, grayling, and char populations.

Gillnet fishing in the lake apparently does not pose such a threat. Local resident’s observations and the records of the Naknek Lake commercial test fishery suggest that whitefish, lake trout, and lingcod are taken in greatest numbers by nets under the ice, while fewer char and pike are taken. The mix of species obviously depends on fishing times and location. Apparently few rainbows or grayling have been taken in net fishing on Naknek Lake.

Only a small number of local families in Naknek River communities have expressed an interest in taking “redfish”, or have harvested them in the last decade. Although few reliable harvest records are available, informants indicate that these families only take a small number of “redfish” - perhaps in the range of 15-50 fish per family. Most of these fish are taken in short sets of a few hours or overnight. According to informants other species are seldom caught when people are catching “redfish”.