

Tillion, Clem

Formation of Alaska's Fisheries Management System

Lady's and gentlemen members of the Forum and other interested participants. I thank you for this chance to address you. For I am one of those who think our system here in Alaska is working.

When I had the privilege of serving on the National Advisory Committee on Oceans & Atmosphere with people like Julius Stratton, Ed Link, and Bill Nierenberge. The fight between the Law of the Sea advocates and those who were for unilateral action was one of the big items. After the Caracas meeting when Chad cast the vote to cancel that of the United States of America there was little doubt in my mind. Unilateral action was not only the route but the only route. To sit in the gallery and watch the Magnuson Act pass was a real pleasure. This does not mean we do not have a moral obligation to the whole world to manage well.

The difference in how the resources of Alaska and those of the New England states are managed amazes me. Some say it was the fact that unlike the little states of New England who sit cheek to jowl each with two Senators each Alaska is all one entity. Others say because Senator Stevens was so close to Magnuson Alaska got a better deal. I am sure this did not hurt but it alone was not the reason.

The need to approach the management of our living resources on a more localized basis had become brutally apparent during Territorial days when the great white father ran every thing from the banks of the Potomac River. The Fish & Wildlife personnel in the field did their best but almost every action had to be cleared in D.C. and the special interests often had more say then those who were stationed in Alaska.

It was at this time in the mid 1950's that Alaska's course was set. When the Constitutional Convention was convened in Fairbanks and Territorial Senator Bill Egan became convention president Clarence Anderson who was to become commissioner of the Fish and Game Department was there in close contact with Senator Egan who was destined to be our first Governor. It was at that time a modicum of insulation was placed between the body politic and Fish & Game. Unlike most of Alaska's Departments who serve to the pleasure of the Governor, Education & Fish and Game are picked from a list nominated by the respective boards. Thus the Commissioner of ADF&G is picked by the Governor from this list and as the boards serve staggered terms it tends to cool sudden actions further more field announcements by Area Management Biologists require hours not weeks of notice.

The Convention also established a Board of Fish & Game chosen by the Governor and confirmed by the Legislature and serving staggered terms who had in their hands the allocation of that portion of the living resources declared surplus by ADF&G biologists. In short the Department shall serve the resource the board and the people.

Clarence Anderson called his biologists together and laid down the law: "Gentlemen the Governor has informed me of this support of any support needed, to return our salmon runs to their former abundance regardless of the pain inflicted on our people. So I call you here today to charge you with filling our streams with spawning salmon. If your actions result in a substantial over escapement thus depriving our fishermen of their livelihood you can expect to be criticized, but on a more personal level if you allow an under escapement you can expect to be fired." This resulted in actions that for instance closing all King Salmon harvest in Cook Inlet Native Subsistence, Sport and Commercial for a number of years. The howls were loud the pain severe. Lodges went under, Fishing gear became worthless, but today Alaska has eight times more salmon returning to its streams than returned before 1959 (Statehood).

It was this type of mindset that was in place when the Magnuson Act came in 1976. Senator Ted had assured Alaska of a voting majority in the NPFMC and Alaska and the State of Washington were at that moment blessed with Governors who were determined to manage our living resources for future generations. Governors Dan Evans and Jay Hammond set up a conference call and the result was a council picked primarily of men who knew each other from years on the International North Pacific Fisheries Commission, men like Ambassador Donald McKernan, Harold Lokken and Elmer Rasmuson. While the advisory panel became the industry voice the Scientific & Statistical Committee became a basis for all Council action. In these past twenty six years, the council has often reduced the numbers of recommended by the SBC committee but never have they exceeded it. The biggest cut being when the SSC told the council they had a biomass in the Bering Sea that could support a yearly harvest of three million six hundred metric tons. The Council, at Chairman Rasmuson's recommendation, set a cap of two million. Do we leave a great deal on the table? Yes, but, no long lived species has been lost in the race to maximize short term returns.

Has the NPFMC had to contend with actions taken in D.C. that like the Mammal Act was poorly thought out? For it failed to tell us what to do when a species such as the California Sea Lion, Harp Seal or in some areas the Pacific Sea Otter start impacting other species as their numbers exceed anything seen before. We see stupid wording that classify a species that has never been fished as over fished when its numbers decline for any reason thus tying up staff to do a paper work exercise to no purpose. If one council fails does that mean we must load so many failsafe burdens on the other Councils that they too fail?

My fear is that we get so boxed in that our management can not adjust to a Decadal Oscillation or Regime Change as we had in 1947 and are in the midst of today. In 1948 I was packing salt cod in 1949. I had trouble filling the small orders. Read Salt of the Sea, the story of the last Bering Sea Dory fishery under sail. The cod disappeared. Who knows why? No foreign fleet at that time, the King crab boom was then in 1965. The cod came back right in to the teeth of a huge distant water fleet that was annihilating our long lived Pacific Ocean Perch. The flatfish populations exploded but we had no way to harvest them in real numbers for fear of impact on crab and young halibut. Now without man's help they are going down. Does this mean we will have an increase in

crab? I for one think so but what happens if a flounder population reaches the over fished definition?

Twenty years ago the Steller Sea lion populations in western Alaska started declining so the panic button was pushed. The Council under pressure from National Marine Fisheries Service closed all Commercial fisheries within ten miles of the great rookery on Borgoslof Island the Sea Lion in that area continued their decline so it was closed twenty miles off shore. Last year the survey showed a continued decline in Sea Lion but to every ones amazement there were ten thousand Fur Seal on the island. Shortage of fish? I think not. The diet of Sea Lion and Fur Seal is not the same but is man the only player or when a regime change takes place does everything but the long lived species who are designed by nature to see it through change?

Some of our more radical groups the “Chicken Little” syndrome I call them would have you believe fluctuations are only caused by man and nature is both wise and kind. Those of us in this management game might go along with the nature is wise but the kind part is best left to a Disney film, and those who feel all knowledge is on the internet might be wise to consider that many of the species we are charged to protect have a life span far longer than man or the computer for that matter.

For those who are interested old books can be very informative. The report entitled Natural History Collections Made in Alaska. Edward Nelson, Washington Govt. Printing Office 1887 is a case in point. Nelson to quote him: “Steller’s Sea-Lion, formerly they were abundant all along the Aleutian Chain. They are now so scarce among these islands and the ones that are found there frequent places so difficult of access, that the Aleuts secure very few of them each year.”

Good wildlife management is more than art, more than a science for any of us in this game. While using science as far as it takes us the unknowns are always a large by guess and by God segment of any plan. The simple rule of Manage for your long lived species like the Rockfish component here in Alaska not for the short lived species has been our creed for some time now and while we leave a good deal of say Pollock stocks under-harvested is less painful to correct than the alternative.