

# The Off-Season: Masculinities, Rurality, & Family Ties in Alaska Commercial Fishermen

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines existing discourse about Alaska and the masculinity of commercial fishermen in light of the concepts of cultural and economic capital, as well as local ecological knowledge (LEK). It further examines how fishermen describe their experiences in the industry as ones that are rooted in family influence and economic gain, while also believing that in order to make money, a “true fisherman” needs to be able to learn fast and endure what the industry throws at them. By exploring these parallels, this study shows that for Alaska commercial fishermen, masculinity is achieved through hard work, and manifests most clearly through the hard work and overall experiences on the boats.

## INTRODUCTION

Through the examination of interviews from eleven commercial fishermen and drawing upon previous entrée in South central Alaska, this study explores the intersections between masculinities, rurality, family, and ecology. By exploring these intersections, this study asserts that Alaska commercial fishermen understand their gender identities through hard work and experiences on the boats. This study joins many others in building on the scholarship of Raewyn Connell who theorizes that masculinities should be looked at as plural. Parallels are also made by using Pierre Bourdieu’s (1986) notions of cultural and economic capital.



Example of commercial fishing nets.

ALASKA COMMERCIAL FISHERIES

### Salmon Management Activities

A listing of the major Alaska salmon fisheries

#### NORTON & KOTZEBUE SOUNDS

CHUM SALMON  
Principal River Systems:  
Kobuk, Nostak, Kwimuk,  
and Unalakleet Rivers

#### YUKON & KUSKOKWIM RIVERS

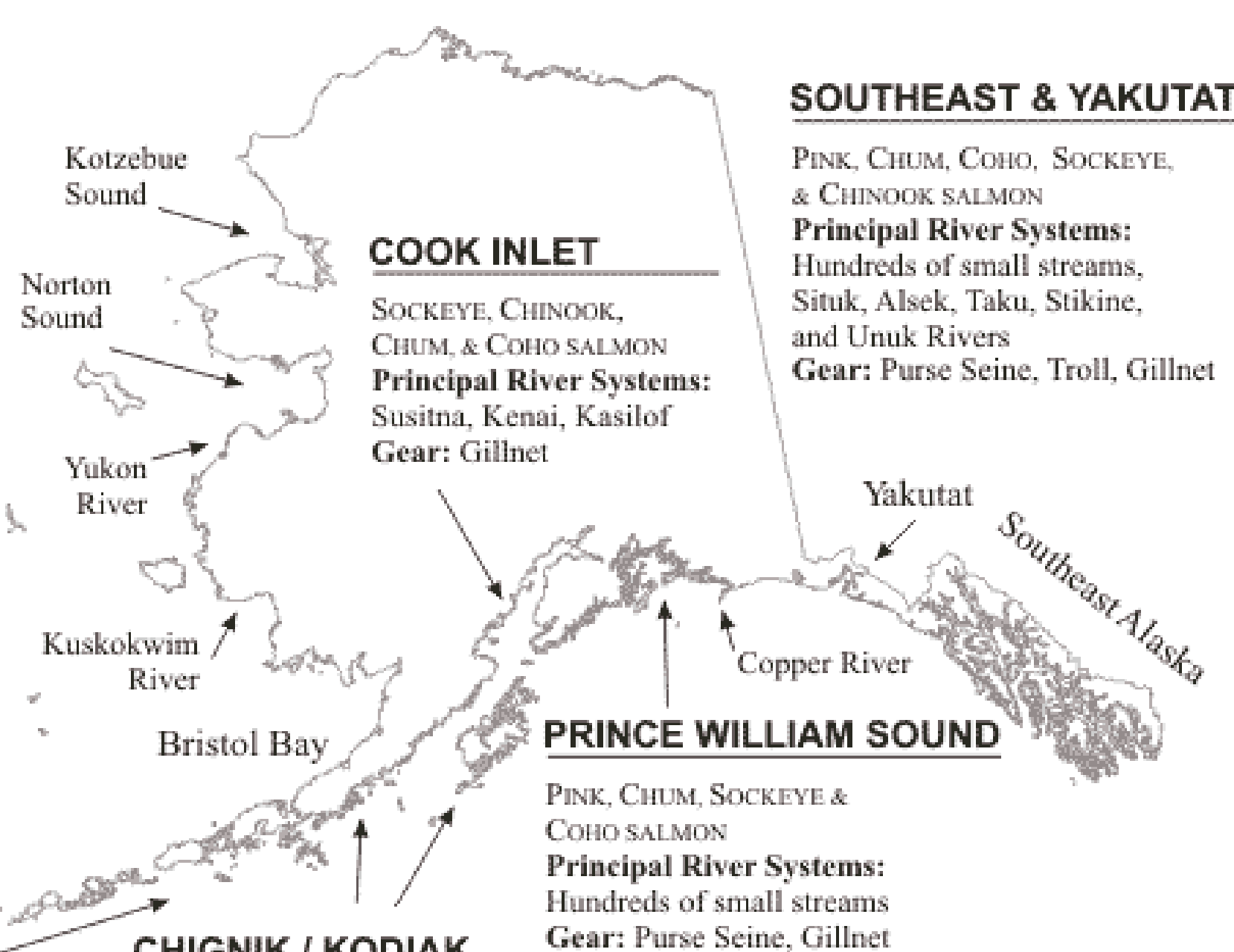
CHUM & CHINOOK SALMON  
Gear: Gillnet

#### BRISTOL BAY

SOCKEYE, COHO, CHUM,  
CHINOOK SALMON  
Principal River Systems:  
Kvichuk, Alagank, Naknek, Egegik,  
Ugashik, Wood, Igushik, Nushagak,  
Mulchatna, and Togiak Rivers  
Gear: Gillnet

#### ALASKA PENINSULA

SOCKEYE & PINK SALMON  
Principal River Systems:  
Mestik, Ilnik, Sandy, Bear, Nelson  
Gear: Purse Seine, Gillnet



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Sample map of different fishery regions in Alaska courtesy of Alaska Fish and Game (2005)

## METHODS

I conducted eleven semi-structured interviews with ten male commercial fishermen and one female commercial fisherwoman.

Interviewees:

- Were between the ages 20 and 48.
- All had at least 1 season of commercial fishing experience.
- Fish in South central Alaska.
- Were given pseudonyms to preserve anonymity.
- Were contacted via snowball sampling, convenience sampling, and posts on social medial sites.

Interviews:

- Were open-ended questions that ranged from background information to how they felt they acted on the boats.
- Were recorded, transcribed, and coded.
- Lasted between 20 and 40 minutes.

## ANALYSIS/CONCLUSION

The interviews suggest that the fishermen construct their gender identities based upon the hard work and experiences they have on the boats. Additionally, a hegemonic structure is established on each boat based upon the experience each fisherman has. Using Connell’s framework of hegemonic masculinities this explains that on the boats, the hegemonically masculine male is the captain while the least masculine is the greenhorn. Bourdieu’s notions of habitus and capital also highlight the fishermen’s focus on family life and the benefits of utilizing radio groups as a form of LEK.

Of the fishermen that I interviewed, opportunities and knowledge in the commercial fishing industry were mainly influenced by the cultural and economical capital they gained from their families and community. LEK is therefore reproduced through shared networks of knowledge (radio groups) and family businesses, enforcing Creed’s (2000) view of the family as a source of economic gain. The acquisition of knowledge is then transferred to an unofficial boat hierarchy in which the captain is the hegemonically masculine member of the crew and the greenhorn is, as Charlie explains, “the last man on the totem pole”. Identities of masculinity, especially in the rural sphere, are then created based upon the expectations of more experienced deckhands and interactions with the environment and equipment

While this study has shed light on the Alaska commercial fishing subculture, it has revealed other areas that warrant similar attention, including the exploration of commercial fisherwomen in relation to fishermen; the influence urban masculinities have on fishery masculinities; and the comparison between different types of commercial fisheries and masculinity. Although not covered to the full extent in this study, these relationships all offer more insight into the intersections between masculinities, rurality, family, and ecological factors. With that being said, this study has offered more to the field of rural masculine studies with an introductory look at a group of individuals who have yet to be looked at in such an ethnographic way.

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## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Rural Masculinities

Campbell and Bell (2000) stress the need for an examination of masculinities in order to broaden our “understanding of gender and power relations — particularly how they are embedded in rural spaces or incorporate the rural as a symbolic entity” (p. 535). Hogan and Pursell (2008) explore the relationship and influence the state of Alaska has on ideal standards of masculinity A “true Alaskan” complex is created in Alaskans through “the domination of nature and the ability to survive in a challenging landscape” (p. 68). This mirrors other rural masculinities scholars who find that masculine identities are formed and maintained through the rural space.

### Local Ecological Knowledge

Local ecological knowledge (LEK) “is embodied in a variety of material forms, as talk, action, performance or as texts or artifacts” (Murray, Neis, and Johnsen, 2006:551-2). LEK is thus gained through personal fishing experiences, obtained from older generations, or shared from others who are part of the community (p. 552). Shared knowledge is an important component to fishing communities in that it can “extend beyond the boundaries of the vessels and the fishers to local institutions such as households and communities” (p. 552). LEK is therefore a dynamic process that is changed and altered depending upon the socioecological network it presents itself in.

### Family

Creed (2000) goes into length to explore the relationship between the idea of “family” and the economic value it holds within various groups. It is here that he makes the claim that family values “attempt to tap the cultural capital concentrated in the idea of ‘family’ for personal, social, political, and economic objectives” (p. 330). Barlett (1993) explains that family farms are able to survive economic hardship because of their size, operation, and management style. Netting (2002) reaffirms the idea that households are able to more efficiently train family members in the trade rather than rely on outside help.

## THEORY

### Raewyn Connell & Masculinities

Connell urges the acknowledgment of multiple masculinities in an effort to not fall back upon “collapsing into a character typology” (1995:76). Her concept of hegemonic masculinity serves as a useful viewpoint into this exploration. Connell argues that by claiming and maintaining power and/or authority, one specific type of masculinity is deemed acceptable within a community. Ultimately, Connell offers a framework in which to conceptualize and “analyze specific masculinities” (1995:81).

### Pierre Bourdieu & Habitus/Capital

An individual's *habitus* is constantly with them from “the apparently most insignificant techniques of the body...[to] fundamental principles of construction and evaluation of the social world” (Bourdieu, 1984:466). Thus, an individual's habitus is the way in which they act within a given sphere. *Capital* can take various forms, most notably cultural, economic, and social. The combination of these different forms of *capital* are then transformed into symbolic capital once that individual enters a specific field (Bourdieu, 1986). Once inside this field, *capital* can be switched to better an individuals position in the field.



Photo of Alaskan harbor where this study took place. Taken summer 2014.