

## **The Current Situation of Indigenous Peoples and Traditional Fishing in the Kamchatka River Valley: problems and solutions (1900 to the present)<sup>1</sup>**

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The Kamchatka River flows north-west through the central lowland of the Kamchatka Peninsula. Its length is about 500 km, with a variable width. The wide valley of the Kamchatka river is changeable, in upper river it measures up to 4 km, but then it quickly widens to 80-100 km. The river has many brooks, the largest of them being Kozyrevka, Bystraya, Yelovaya, Schapina and Bolshaya Khapitsa.

The history of fishing in the Kamchatka River valley began millennia ago. Ancient ancestors of the Itelmen people (Kamchadals) used salmon from this river as a staple food source. Fishing played a primary role in the lives of the indigenous peoples of this region and its methods changed little before the modern fishing industry. As a rule, fishery was a collective activity. A few main types of fishing existed, mainly through the use of nets made of stinging nettle twine.

Before the beginning of the 20 century, customs such as the following existed among the Itelmen: after cleaning ice from the river, they lowered a salted fish into the water, and watched it. If this fish moved down the river it was a good sign there would be a lot of fish, but if the fish stuck to the bank it was a bad sign.

Before the advent of the Russians, Kamchatka was settled by another indigenous people – Koryaks. These reindeer breeders settled in the north of the peninsula, and the fishing Itelmen settled along the east and west coasts and in the central part – the Kamchatka River valley. 90% of the food base consisted of salmon. Fish was also the main source of food the dogs kept by both cultures.

For this reason, Kamchatka natives devoted the entire summer to fishing. It began at the end of May, when the largest of salmon species, the king salmon, began climbing the river to spawn. They partitioned off the river with giant nets and tied strategic traps in place. Red salmon was the next to enter the river (in July), followed by silver salmon in August. Fish were traditionally used and prepared in myriad ways, including drying, smoking, souring, freezing, and also rendered into a useful oil. Some of these methods, most notably smoking, is still used throughout the peninsula. For drying, Kamchadals filleted the fish, leaving each side connected by the tail, and hung it on racks. The backbone and the head were dried separately for dogs. An easier way to save the fish for the winter was to bury them in holes. They would rot, and later the natives would dig them up and feed them to their dogs. According to one traveler in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was impossible to breathe during this process due to the heavy smell of rotten fish (V. Jochelson, *The North expedition*, 1902)

As a rule, each spring the stored food decreased, and April often featured hungry days. When the first fish was caught in summer, locals all came out onto the bank of the river where they shared it and celebrated the beginning of another season of plenty.

With the arrival of Russians, a new way of stocking the fish up appeared – salting. Fish became the main source of food for the newly arrived people until the 1930s. Many Russian settlements, including Ust-Kamchatsk, Nizhne-Kamchatsk and also Kluchy and Kozirevsk, developed industrial fishing methods. They traded some with the natives, who coveted much needed manufactured goods. Thus, new changes in the traditional social and economic structure of the population began in earnest.

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The establishment of a state-run fishing industry in Kamchatka had a significant effect on the development of Koryak fishing. First, the production of the fishery was sold through the communist cooperative system to national organizations and enterprises. By the end of the 1920s, fishing plants were created on many large rivers in the Koryak Autonomous Okrug (northern Kamchatka). At the beginning of each fishery season, the workmen (natives and Russian) migrated to these sites, and portions of each catch started going into a storage system (V.V. Antropov, Culture and life of the Koryak people, 1971)

The KJSC (Kamchatka Joint-stock Company) was established in 1927. It became a turning point in the free fishing of salmon by the population. This company had the sole right of harvesting all biological resources of the rivers, including salmon. Since that time, native rights to catching fish were diminished. The fish catch for personal consumption in 1927 is shown in the following figures: (table 1)

**Table 1**  
Fish catch by the residential population in 1927\*

No.	Name of settlement	Population	The total amount that caught (items)	Total amount per one resident (items)
1	Ust- Kamchatsk	541	107780	199,2
2	Kamaki	135	57676	427,5
3	Kresty	87	47244	543
4	Sredne- Kamchatsk	88	29216	332
6	Schapino	86	35112	408,2

*\*(A summery table about fishing grounds equipment along the east part of the Kamchatka region for 1927. Government Archive Kamchatka Region GAKR FUND-210, Register 1, Dossier 2, sheet 328)*

After the Soviet government proclaimed a policy of industrialization, Kamchatka salmon became a strategically important resource. «Let English ladies gobble our canned fish. Working people know that the currency got for it will be spent on building hundreds of new factories...» (Questions on the history of Kamchatka's fishing industry. P-K, 2003, p. 84). In this way, newly formulated state policy contradicted the ancient traditions of fishing of indigenous peoples.

At the beginning of the 1930s, due to the actions of the KJSC, a more limited system of fish consumption was introduced. In the context of this policy, which was carried out in 1934, the obligatory resolution No. 5 of the Kamchatka Regional Executive Committee "On the catching salmon species of fish in spawning rivers in Kamchatka region." was declared. It appeared in the following extract from the resolution:

1. To prohibit the catch of salmon anadroms (chum salmon, king salmon, silver salmon, pink salmon) in the following ponds with all inflowing rivers, channels and springs:
  - a) lakes: Azyabach, Nerpichey, Kyltuchnoe, Kyratochnoe, Yshkovskoy, Kozyrevskoe, Kyrilskoy, Nachiki, Bliznee and Dal'ney Paratunskoe
  - b) rivers and tributaries: Zypanka (tributary river Kamchatka), Klimansly brook, Kolkovsky, Ololsky brook, big and small Krivkenky
2. To prohibit the commercial catch of those species of fish in all the rivers and springs higher than 15 km from the river mouth, except the Kamchatka river where to fix 70 km.
3. To fix the quota of fish catch for the residential population in 1934:

- a) food quota of anadrom of salmon species per head of large salmon: 150- for nomadic population, 80- for collective farmers, 60- for individualists, 30- for the rest.
- b) the population of Ust-Kamchatsky, Bystrinsky and Milkovsky regions should fix a forage quota for dogs in number of 150 of Siberian salmon or 300 of hunchback salmon per one dog” (GAKR F 507 Register 1, Dossier 3, sheet 27).

Over the course of the next thirty years, up until the 1960s, those who had confirmed their indigenous ethnicity had been allowed to freely catch salmon species. In Kluchi, at this time, about 120 persons were registered as indigenous Kamchadals, according to the on evidence of village soviet. These lists of the entitled were unfairly drawn up by local officials and they did not accurately reflect the real situation. The lists were based on poling facts, which were gathered from older residents of the settlement.

The dynamics of the 20<sup>th</sup> century red salmon catch on the Kamchatka River are traced in table 2.

**Table 2**  
The dynamics of red salmon catch on Kamchatka river\*

No.	Year	Unit	Amount
1	1910**	it.	509505
2	1924	it.	1864761
3	1925	it.	2270305
4	1939	Thousand ton	18,8
5	1942	Thousand ton	3,7
6	1950	Thousand ton	4,5
7	1975	Thousand ton	1,027
8	1976	Thousand ton	0,755
9	1977	Thousand ton	1,61
10	1979	Thousand ton	3,635
11	1980	Thousand ton	2,575
12	1981	Thousand ton	2,208
13	1982	Thousand ton	1,769
14	1983	Thousand ton	2,529
15	1984	Thousand ton	3,320
16	1985	Thousand ton	2,783

\*the table was made up on a basis of archival facts, collected by Borisov V. I.

\*\* caught by fishing industry persons Demby, Berich, Kramarenko, Japanese firms

Thus, from 1927 until the beginning the 1990s, the Ust-Kamchatsky fish cannery was the primary consumer of fish in the region. It produced annually 10-15 million cans of salmon on average. Since 1960, the collective farm “Lenin’s Way” appeared with the union of several small farms. The necessities of the population were provided by a state-run production unit, which caught, salted, and smoked fish. Fish were then distributed to collective farms. In many instances, collective farms and state-run fish canneries exported all of the high-quality salmon produce to the Russian mainland and abroad, while the spoilage was sent to local markets.

After a long period of prohibition on salmon fishing, the Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North was established throughout northern communities in Russia. Since that time, power structures began to provide salmon for the personal needs of registered indigenous inhabitants.

In 1992, some branches of the Association momentarily received quotas for personal salmon catch in Ust-Kamchatsky region. The quota established the following limits: Ust-Kamchatskaya

Association of Kamchadals on the Kamchatka River (for economical activity) – 82 tons, Kliuchevskaya Association of Kamchadals – 225 tons, Kozyrevskaya Association of Kamchadals – 35 tons.

According to the Ust-Kamchatskaya Association of Kamchadals, only 40.5 tons were apportioned for personal consumption in 1992, including 7 tons of king salmon, 3 tons of red salmon, 0.5 tons of chum salmon and 30 tons of silver salmon. The catch took place in the specific areas of the Kamchatka River. Approximately 50-60 fishermen participated. Also, fish were caught by the enterprise «Il'chinets», which was founded by the Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North. The quotas consisted of 20.5 tons, including 4.5 tons of king salmon, 3 tons of red salmon, 17 tons of silver salmon. For this enterprise, two men used a 200-meter net to catch all of the apportioned fish. They harvested 17 tons of silver salmon, including 7 tons for the enterprise, 3 tons for the collective farm «Lenin's Way» (according to an arrangement) and 7 tons for veterans and ex-servicemen from the second World War. (According to the president of the Ust-Kamchatsk Association of Kamchadals O. Kirychenko, letter from September, 22 1992).

In 1993 the quotas for salmon fish in the Ust-Kamchatsky region were again approved. Indigenous Peoples of the North received a 182-ton quota on the Kamchatka River for personal consumption. The fish were caught in Ust-Kamchatsk, Kliuchi and Kozyrevsk for the all branches of the Association.

In July, 2003 a research expedition took place in Central Kamchatka under the project «Opportunities of Salmon Protection with Indigenous Peoples Participation in Kamchatka». The trip took place in 3 districts of the Kamchatka region: Milkovsky, Bystrinsky and Ust-Kamchatsky regions. They conducted monitoring of the traditional fishing of indigenous peoples. Specifically, they looked at fish caught for so-called “personal consumption” and the opportunities of fish protection with the participation of indigenous peoples. Another aim of the trip was to research reasons for poaching salmon among indigenous locals.

Today, the primary organizations are family groups of fishermen. As a rule, the Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North forms fishing groups and makes arrangements with enterprises concerning their quotas.

The following quotas for personal consumption were developed in 2003 by indigenous peoples on the Kamchatka River valley: 46,958 tons were caught in Ust-Kamchatsky region, 31,931 tons were caught in Milkovsky region, and 10,27 tons were caught in Bystrinsky region. Thus, according to references from «Sevvostrybvod» the quotas are not always accurate. People are often afraid of the close of the fishing season, and so they under-report their catches to the state fish inspection agencies.

About 60% of fish resources reproduce in the waters around Kamchatka including such valuable species as crab, cod, herring, halibut and 5 species of salmon. Industrial fishery is the basis of the peninsula's economy and the main part of industrial and everyday catch is salmon. During the past 10 years, the volume of industrial production has decreased by half, and most rural inhabitants survive mainly on salmon, and other resources which they must harvest directly from the rivers and sea. Salmon alone maintains the livelihoods of the indigenous peoples of Kamchatka – the Itelmen, Koryaks, and the Evens.

At the present time, indigenous peoples from Ust-Kamchatsk, Kliuchi, Kozyrevsk, Krapivnaya, Kamaki, and Milkovskaya Associations catch fish in the Kamchatka River. The distribution of the quotas takes place in the regional fish economy council in Petropavlovsk- Kamchatsky in April or May. The apportioned amount of fish is distributed according to the norms on a per inhabitant basis. These norms are often insufficient, being that the requirements of one inhabitant is approximately 150-200 kg a year.

The seasonal salmon catch is executed in the lower reaches of the Kamchatka River from the end of May until early September. In the upper and middle parts of the river it takes place from June until the end of September and wintering silver salmon are caught until December.

Almost the entire indigenous population, including women and children, used to participate in catching and producing fish before the beginning of the industrial catch. During the yearly salmon run, everyone was at the river. Storing fish for the winter was realized in the following way: all fish caught on one day was given to one family, according to the queue, and on another day it was given to another family. If there was a great amount of fish it was divided between two families. Nowadays fish is divided according to the lists, and in Mylkovsky region fish is already salted before it is distributed.

The distribution of salmon for personal consumption for indigenous peoples along the Kamchatka River can be seen in table 3.

**Table 3**

The distribution of salmon fish on individual consumption for few Indigenous peoples of North along the Kamchatka river in 2003

No.	Kinds of fish	Total Limit (ton)	Limit per 1 person (kg)	Family brigades (total 41 persons) (kg)	CSC «Bystrinskoe» total limit (total 971 persons) (kg)	CSC «Bystrinskoe» limit (per 1 person) (kg)	In CSC «Bystrinskoe» 30% from 1 person (kg)	In CSC «Bystrinskoe» limit 30% (kg)	Limit for distribution (kg)
1	King salmon	1,3	1,27	52,07	1247,93	0,89	0,38	374,4	873,5
2	Red salmon	5,4	5,3	217,3	5182,7	3,71	1059	1554,8	3627,9
3	Chum salmon	10	9,8	401,8	9598,2	6,9	2,94	2879,5	6718,7
4	Silver salmon	4,8	4,7	192,7	4607,3	3,3	1,41	1382,2	3225,1
5	Pink salmon	2,0	1,96	80,36	1919,64	1,38	0,58	575,9	1343,5
6	Loach	2,0	1,96	80,36	1919,64	1,38	0,58	575,9	1343,5
TOTAL		25,5	24,99	1024,59	244475,41	17,56	7,48	7342,6	17132

The distribution of salmon for personal consumption in the rivers bordering on the Sobolevsky region and the rivers Icha and Oblukovina are shown in tables 4 and 5. 57 indigenous inhabitants who catch fish in the Icha river received 178.92 kg per head on average and 28 indigenous individuals who fish on the Oblukovnina and Ozernaya rivers received 328.3 kg per head.

**Table 4**

The distribution of salmon fish on individual consumption for few Indigenous peoples of North along the Icha river in 2003

Limit	Pink salmon	Chum salmon	Red salmon	Silver salmon	King salmon	Char	Total
Total limit (ton)	0,5	5,5	2	1	0,2	1	10,2
Per 1 person (kg)	8,77	96,49	35,08	17,54	3,5	17,54	178,92

**Table 5**

The distribution of salmon fish on individual consumption for few Indigenous peoples of North along the Oblukovina river in 2003

Limit	Pink salmon	Chum salmon	Red salmon	Silver salmon	King salmon	Char	Total
Total limit (ton)	0,4	10	0,2	0,5	0,4	1,0	12,5
Per 1 person (kg)	12	303	6	15	12	30,3	378,3

Nowadays the fish is caught by means of floating nets 150-200 meters long. As a rule, factory made motor boats «Kazanka» are used and self-made iron and wooden boats are used in Kliuchi. They weigh one ton on average.

Ritual festivals dedicated to celebrating salmon still exist among indigenous peoples of Kamchatka. One of the most well known is the First Fish Festival, which is held in both towns and smaller settlements. The main features of the ceremonies are similar though there are local differences. A place near a spawning river is chosen, and participants build a small fire there. The tribal shaman, or chosen elder, leads the ceremony. He throws animal fur and herbs into the fire, while thanking nature for fish and a lucky fishing season. They also through pieces of pie, fish, and candies into the river as offerings. As a rule the festival is held in July.

Salmon continues to play a huge role in the life of indigenous peoples in Kamchatka. Existing fish quotas for personal consumption cannot solve the current problem. There is a strong need to develop mechanisms that will completely satisfy the needs of indigenous peoples for their ancient staple. This task should be considered a priority. It is also necessary to solve the problems concerning the rights of non-indigenous, Kamchatka-born locals who also rely on fish to some extent.

The main problem of the traditional fishery is the decrease of fish resources and providing the government and business enterprises with the best fishery areas. The high prices of transport and other economic difficulties lead to very low profits in the industrial fish sector for both small and large organizations.

Government policy can contribute to a revival of traditional lifeways among indigenous people, especially tribal communities. The present situation is very complex and contradictory. The traditional way of life is not oriented toward the market economy. Much depends on a change in the mindset and psychology of locals. The decentralization and demonopolization of Kamchatka's economy can contribute to it concerning traditional nature management in the North.

**Endnotes**

- 1 In the article archaic materials were used and they were collected and kindly given by Borisov V.I., he is a chairman of public fond of Kamchatka studying and development of few Indigenous population of North. The author also expresses his gratitude to Borisov V.I. for valuable notes to this work, which was offered to Your attention.