

# From Creek to Plate

providing urban Anchorage youth with the tools to safely catch salmon from a local fishery

Male pink salmon chase a female up Ship Creek. USFWS/K.Mueller

Anchorage is Alaska's largest urban center with a population just shy of 300,000 people. A major jumping off point for the state's 1.5 million summer visitors, Anchorage is home to the world's busiest seaplane base (Lake Hood) and fifth busiest air cargo hub (Ted Stevens Anchorage International Airport). The Port of Anchorage receives 95 percent of all goods destined for Alaska. Anchorage has big city diversity with 95 languages spoken by Anchorage School District students (behind English, the top five are Spanish, Hmong, Samoan, Tagalog, and Yup'ik). It also has areas of big city poverty, and these were targeted in this effort to teach area youth about local fisheries.

In combination with its urban character, Anchorage offers the wildest outdoor opportunities in the country, 135 miles of paved trails and 300 miles of unpaved and wilderness trails that offer access to multiple river systems with all five species of Pacific salmon, close-encounters with moose, migratory bird viewing, and thousands of acres of wildlife habitat.

Despite close proximity, a surprisingly large portion of Anchorage's urban residents are unaware and/or do not have the means to access and enjoy outdoor opportunities literally within blocks of their homes and schools. Like most urban populations, cultural, socio-economic, and safety barriers (both real and perceived) prohibit some of Anchorage's neighborhoods and residents from accessing these outdoor opportunities.

As a conservation agency, the Service understands that it is imperative to create opportunities for people, especially youth, to connect with nature—and help remove barriers to participation. In fact, one of the Service's six national priorities is: *connecting people with nature, ensuring the future of conservation.*

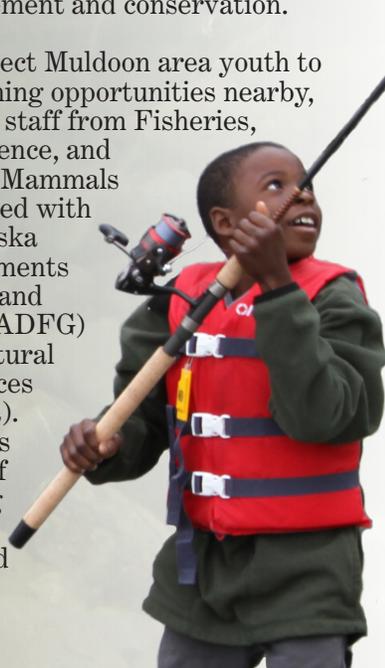
In Alaska, our Connecting People with Nature Working Group is dedicated to just that. In 2012-2013, this cross-program group distributed

\$31,250 towards projects in Alaska that connected people to nature; the funds were made possible by the Department of the Interior's Youth in the Great Outdoors Initiative. One of eight projects, "Creek to Plate" targeted youth from Anchorage's Northeast Muldoon Boys and Girls Club, a hub for 700+ youngsters during non-school hours.

Like the Service, Anchorage Boys and Girls Clubs want to build capacity to get kids outdoors. A growing body of research shows that kids who spend more time outdoors and less time inside using screens (e.g., smart phones and television) are generally happier, healthier, and do better in school. According to Muldoon Club's Athletics Director, many of the 700+ youth enrolled at Muldoon have never been exposed to fishing, nor do they (or the Club) have the equipment or know-how to gain that experience on their own.

Introducing youth to fishing in Alaska has many benefits. It gets them outdoors pursuing a healthy food source. Salmon and other Alaska native fish are well-known for their heart-healthy omega-3 fatty acids that also benefit brain development and function. Fishing also contributes significantly to the state's economy and funds generated from license fees and equipment help support fisheries management and conservation.

To connect Muldoon area youth to safe fishing opportunities nearby, Service staff from Fisheries, Subsistence, and Marine Mammals partnered with the Alaska Departments of Fish and Game (ADFG) and Natural Resources (ADNR). ADNR's Office of Boating Safety supplied



## Connecting People With Nature



Trent Liebich (Office of Subsistence Management) preps students before heading down to Ship Creek in Anchorage to catch salmon. USFWS/K.Mueller

“Kids Don’t Float” life jackets and instruction on their proper use and coldwater safety. Quality Chinook and coho salmon fishing equipment—to be housed permanently at the Club (along with the life jacket station)—was purchased by the Service with a generous discount from B&J Sporting Goods in Anchorage. With help from two giant stuffed salmon, ADFG provide lively instruction on fishing ethics, salmon identification, and fishing regulations. The classroom portion of the day wrapped up with casting practice assisted by Service and ADFG staff.

With the basics behind us, 12 excited kids loaded into the Boys and Girls Club van and headed to Ship Creek, Alaska’s most urban fishing spot—and one of the most frequented. It was August 1st and the coho salmon were just starting to show up. We started our trip with a stop to see salmon schooling just below the Knik Arm Power Plant dam fish ladder near downtown Anchorage. From there, we headed downstream, learning about salmon habitat and restoration as we walked to where we would be fishing—just below the old timber-trestle (now pedestrian) bridge.

The fishing was slow—VERY slow—but there was never a dull moment. The new anglers experienced bird’s nests (balls of tangled line), forgot to engage reel bails, and crisscrossed lines. Other anglers gave our group an extra wide berth. The fish likewise avoided us during this first outing, but enthusiasm grew as casting technique improved, fish were sighted from the bridge, and other anglers allowed the kids to view and handle their catches of pink and silver salmon.



Getting out a little tangle. Sydney West/Boys&GirlsClub

The final take home message? It’s called fishing, not catching... and there is more to fishing than catching. A nice, albeit fishless, day spent outside during the short but sweet Alaska summer was further improved with a shore-lunch among friends, and culminated with a tour of the new state-of-the-art William Jack Hernandez Sport Fish Hatchery further upstream and lucky photo-op with Alaska fish artist Ray Troll, visiting from Ketchikan.

The 700+ youth enrolled with the Club now have direct access to the fishing and safety gear housed there. Service

and ADFG staff will interact with a subset of these youth up to two times a year—when the Kings are running in May and when the coho salmon move up river in August. Enough equipment was purchased to make a rod loaner set available at another Boys and Girls Club in Anchorage. With Anchorage serving as a gateway to Alaska’s world class fisheries and 16 National Wildlife Refuges covering more than 76 million acres, this project took a small, but important step toward engaging the next generation of conservation stewards in Alaska.



As they hone their technique, Jenessa, Taurean, and Zach will be able to land a coveted salmon and bring it from creek to plate (these two silvers were kindly lent for this photo-op by a lucky angler). Sydney West/Boys&GirlsClub