Kuskokwim River Fisheries Co-Stewardship: Tribes and Agencies Working Together

The Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission (KRITFC) and the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) have had a formal agreement to co-steward the Kuskokwim area salmon fishery since 2016. This relationship has been cited as an example of good co-stewardship in the United States. This relationship to cooperate on salmon fisheries on the Kuskokwim River has evolved and grown significantly over the years. Between 2020 and 2023 the KRITFC and the Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge (YDNWR) met repeatedly during the Spring and Summer to share both Traditional Indigenous Knowledge and Western Fisheries Science to compare information. In advance of the Salmon returns, in-season managers from the KRITFC and YDNWR would deliberate for hours to try to come to consensus on whether salmon conservation measures were needed. The meetings would continue weekly to determine whether salmon restrictions could be loosened or lifted. The management framework was built on partnership and included the Tribal involvement with the YDNWR and the State of Alaska- Alaska Department of Fish and Game which included the Kuskokwim River Salmon Management Working Group. Due to Chinook, Chum, and Coho Salmon declines between 2020 and 2023, those fisheries were restricted for all users on the Kuskokwim River. In recent years, the USFWS and other Department of Interior Bureaus have been directed to promote co-stewardship with Tribal organizations like KRITFC. This promotion of a co-stewardship framework has helped support expansion of arrangements such as the collaboration in fisheries management between KRITFC and USFWS. This presentation hopes to highlight this relationship from both the KRITFC and USFWS perspectives.