**Spatiotemporal trends in salmon metapopulation contributions to portfolio effects in Western Alaska**

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Tweetable Abstract:

Diversity in life history in space and time is critical for salmon fisheries, but we know almost nothing about how these change over time in some of the largest river basins in Alaska. Here, we use otolith-based techniques and Dynamic factor analysis to examine how these trends change over time. We found distinct run timing between several portions of the watershed, as well as changing patterns over time which could threaten this diversity. Upper Kuskokwim fish seem to be returning earlier, protecting them from harvest but homogenizing run dynamics into fewer stock.

**Abstract:**

Chinook salmon populations in Western Alaska have experienced severe declines, yet management strategies largely ignore the spatiotemporal complexity that provides resilience through portfolio effects. We used otolith-based methods to examine spatiotemporal patterns in Chinook salmon contributions across the Kuskokwim River basin from 2017-2021. Otoliths were collected from the Bethel Test Fishery (n=250) and used to reconstruct natal origins and create time series of proportional contributions across 20 management units grouped into seasonal quartiles. Dynamic Factor Analysis identified two underlying trends explaining 89% of variance in spatiotemporal patterns. Trend 1 revealed increased contributions from southern and central management units beginning in 2019, while northern tributaries showed declining contributions. Trend 2 indicated progressive consolidation of Upper Kuskokwim stocks into the first quartile (early season), particularly pronounced in 2020-2021. This temporal shift has management implications, as the first quartile corresponds to the current front-end closure period (June 1-11), potentially creating differential protection favoring early-arriving upper basin stocks over later-arriving downstream stocks. These findings suggest that current management approaches may inadvertently reduce run timing diversity through differential harvest pressure. The spatial redistribution combined with temporal consolidation indicates potential changes in metapopulation structure that warrant monitoring. Our results emphasize the importance of studying sub-basin scale spatiotemporal patterns and designing management strategies that maintain the diversity essential for metapopulation resilience in Western Alaska salmon systems.

**Introduction:**

Chinook salmon populations are experiencing unprecedented declines across much of their range (Atlas et al., 2023; Ohlberger et al., 2018). This trend is especially severe in Western Alaska watersheds, which contain some of the world's last pristine Chinook habitat but have seen steep declines in returning Chinook and Chum salmon in recent years (Lamborn et al., 2025; Murdoch et al., 2024). Salmon from this region support lucrative commercial fisheries, contribute billions of dollars to regional and global economies, and have historically supported subsistence harvests for dozens of communities in the region. As runs have collapsed, however, many upstream communities have voluntarily reduced or ceased subsistence fishing altogether, triggering a region-wide crisis of food insecurity, cultural loss, and the potential disappearance of a critical economic resource (Brown & Godduhn, 2015). As a result, resource managers face the difficult task of designing management strategies which balancing ongoing harvest opportunities with the urgent need to rebuild salmon populations and strengthen their resilience to future perturbations.

There is growing recognition of the critical role that intrapopulation variability plays in fostering resilience at the ecosystem scale in both terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems (Bolnick et al., 2011). In salmon populations, substantial variation in both return timing and spatial distribution of habitat use produces significant complexity in life history strategies within and among populations. Overall population performance in salmon ecosystems is therefore shaped by the statistical averaging of multiple distinct, semi-independent sub-units distributed across space and time (Connors et al., 2022; Ohlberger et al., 2016). Weak or negative covariance among these stocks helps buffer the broader population against the poor performance of any individual subunit, whose success may fluctuate in response to a dynamic mosaic of multi-dimensional environmental conditions (Brennan, Schindler, et al., 2019; Schindler et al., 2010). This “portfolio effect” dampens ecosystem variability by distributing risk across its components, much in the same way that financial diversification of a portfolio spreads investment risk across sectors to reduce overall volatility (Cline et al., 2017; Griffiths et al., 2014; Markowitz, 1952; Schindler et al., 2015). Ecosystems composed of numerous negatively or weakly correlated “assets” are therefore better equipped to withstand both localized and system-wide disturbances, as such events may favor some components while disadvantaging others. Both the duration and magnitude of resources available to communities depend on the systemwide stability that this intraspecies variation provides. For example, fisheries that harvest downstream stocks during their upstream migration, such as commercial Pacific salmon fisheries, rely on the aggregate dynamics of multiple upstream populations. The stability of downstream harvests, therefore, hinges on preserving response diversity across these upstream metapopulations, which in turn enhances both the accessibility and reliability of harvest opportunities (Nesbitt & Moore, 2016).

In many salmon populations, particularly those at lower latitudes, this natural complexity has been eroded due to poor management and anthropogenic impacts on salmon ecosystems (Griffiths et al., 2014). As a result, many systems now exhibit increased synchrony across subunits, leading to greater covariance in performance and generating “boom-or-bust” cycles in ecosystem productivity. This homogenization increases ecosystem vulnerability, even if aggregate return numbers appear stable or even more productive than more diversified ecosystems in the short term (Schindler et al., 2010). Consequently, the health of salmon populations at the riven-basin scale in terms of long-term resilience is better assessed by the health and viability of contributing subunits rather than by total run size alone (Connors et al., 2022). Efforts to rebuild and conserve the long-term resilience of Western Alaska Chinook salmon must therefore account for this spatiotemporal complexity and design management strategies which maintain it in the long term. This include designing harvest methods which consider both overall exploitation rate as well as stock specific exploitation rate, which may vary throughout the season. Strategies that concentrate on harvest in periods of peak abundance (e.g., highest CPUE per day), for example, may fail to account for whether this peak consists of a mix of vulnerable, weak stocks or a single, more robust stock that can sustain higher exploitation. Instead, management strategy should aim to allow harvest opportunities on healthy stocks while minimizing the risk of overexploitation for co-migrating weak stocks (Connors et al., 2020). In practice, however, implementing such stock-specific management approaches requires detailed data on the spatiotemporal ecology of salmon populations; information that has historically been limited at sufficiently fine spatial and temporal scales (Connors et al., 2020, 2022).

In the absence of fine-scale data on stock-specific spatial ecology in Western Alaska, management strategies have been implemented at relatively coarse spatial scales across large river basins. In the Yukon River Basin, for example, decisions are based on broad stock aggregates defined by the resolution of available genetic baselines. As a result, large portions of the watershed (e.g. Canadian-origin salmon) are managed as a single aggregate stock. This approach obscures the presence of multiple contributing sub-stocks, each of which may exhibit substantial variation in life history traits both within and across seasons (Connors et al., 2023). In contrast, the Kuskokwim River Basin employs front-end closure strategies aimed at allowing an estimated number of early-returning fish to escape before harvest begins (e.g. Bechtol et al., 2025). While this strategy supports basin-wide escapement goals, it does not account for the relative stock composition of fish protected by the closure and is likely to favor fish returning to the furthest upstream portions of the watershed (Clark et al., 2015). Moreover, assessments of basin health are typically conducted on annual timescales and focus primarily on total returns over time, which may overlook the relative health of individual sub-stocks and shifts in their spatiotemporal distribution or contribution to the broader metapopulation portfolio. In both cases, managing based on aggregate spatial or temporal patterns risks obscuring underlying trends which may very independently from the aggregate and respond differently to environmental pressures or management actions. Here, we apply otolith-based methods to reconstruct spatiotemporal patterns of Chinook salmon natal origin distribution at the sub basin scale in the Kuskokwim River-bain. In doing so, we will: (1) identify the spatiotemporal structure of returning populations in Alaska’s most productive salmon-bearing watersheds, (2) assess how this structure varies with overall run dynamics; and (3) evaluate the potential impacts of harvest strategies, including front-end closures, on stocks across these systems.

**Methods:**

**Otolith Sample sets**

Otoliths for this analysis were collected over multiple years from both the Yukon and Kuskokwim River basins at the Lower Yukon Test Fishery (LYTF) near Emmonak, Alaska, and at the Bethel Test Fishery (BTF) near Bethel, Alaska. Both fisheries are designed to monitor the stock composition of returning salmon throughout the duration of the run. Approximately 500 otoliths were collected over the full duration of the run from the Kuskokwim River between 2017 and 2021, and from the Yukon River in 2015, 2016, and 2021. From these, about 250 otoliths were selected for analysis to ensure coverage across the full sampling period and to provide proportional representation relative to catch per unit effort (CPUE) throughout the run. Selected samples were sectioned along the transverse plane, mounted on microscope slides, and polished to expose internal growth structures (Donohoe & Zimmerman, 2010; Zimmerman & Reeves, 2002). Prepared samples were analyzed at the University of Utah Strontium Isotope Laboratory using laser ablation inductively coupled plasma mass spectrometry (LA-ICP-MS). Laser ablation was conducted along a transect from the otolith core to just beyond the inferred onset of marine growth using a 53 μm diameter beam and scanning at 2μm/second (Brennan et al., 2015). The result data represent a continuously integrated measurement of Sr87/Sr86 which is expected to be minimally fractionated during incorporation into the otolith and represents the experienced Sr87/Sr86 of the fish from early development until marine entry (Brennan et al., 2015; Campana, 1999; Capo et al., 1998). From these data, a discrete value associated with the natal freshwater rearing period was manually extracted by examining known patterns of changes in Sr87/Sr86 and Sr88 between the core and freshwater region as well as morphological features of the otolith visible among the ablation path.

**Isoscape Development**

Isoscapes were constructed to model spatial variation in Sr87/Sr86 ratios across the river basin, following the methodology described in Brennan et al., (2016) and Makhlouf et al., (2025). Briefly, Sr87/Sr86 values were derived from water samples collected throughout both river basins (Supp. 1) and modeled using spatial stream network modeling, which considers several geologic and hydrological covariates as well as Euclidian distance and hydrological connectivity between sampling sites (Ver Hoef & Peterson, 2010). The resulting isoscape provides a spatially continuous estimate of Sr87/Sr86 values and their associated uncertainties for roughly every ~1km stretch of tributaries across the basin (Figure 1). To avoid overrepresentation of regions with very low uncertainty, which could lead to inflated assignment probabilities, minimum error values were constrained to those above .0006. This threshold was selected based on the distribution of uncertainty values across the basin and systematic evaluation of thresholds that minimized over assignment to a limited number of low error tributaries while preserving broad-scale production patterns. Implementing a minimum error value ensures that assignments are primarily driven by isotopic similarity between otolith and isoscape values rather than by differences in local uncertainty, therebye balancing the need to consider uncertainty in isoscape prediction without allowing this variation to drive assignments.

**Assignment framework and priors**

For each fish, a posterior probability of origin was calculated using a geographically continuous Bayesian framework (Brennan, Cline, et al., 2019). This approach considers the relationship between extracted natal origin otolith Sr87/Sr86 values as well as several variance generating processes including analytical, within-population, and isoscape prediction error. We assumed all errors were normally distributed, and combined them through the equation:

Posterior probability values of provenance for each tributary (j) were then calculated using Bayes theorem (Brennan & Schindler, 2017; Wunder, 2010) ;

The probability of an individual assigning to tributary j is defined as the product of the probability of the isotope ratio in the otolith of an individual (o) given the isotope ratio in tributary j (r\_j) and 3 separate habitat priors. The probability of the isotope ratio (rj) was assumed to be normally distributed with a mean represented by the otolith isotope ratio (o) and an error of . Several priors were included to limit assignments to areas within the river basin suitable for spawning Chinook salmon. First, a stream order prior (PStreamOrder) was applied to limit assignments to higher-order tributaries, reflecting Chinook Salmon’s known preference for spawning in larger streams. Only reaches with a stream order of 4 or greater were included in assignments (assigned a prior value of 1), while smaller tributaries were excluded (assigned a value of 0). Second, a habitat suitability prior (PHabitat) was used to exclude regions below a threshold contributing slope value , thereby preventing assignment to exceedingly slow or flat reaches determined to be unsuitable of spawning Chinook. Finally, data was included on observed locations of spawning chinook presence derived from USGS Arctic-Yukon-Kuskokwim (AYK) Chinook Salmon Intrinsic potential mapping. This dataset synthesizes several sources of data on observed Chinook salmon spawners (Falke & Paul, 2025) to provide a binary 0 or 1 value for locations with or without observations across the dataset. To avoid biasing regions without observations but with low sampling effort, this prior was only applied to mainstream tributaries and those with the second highest stream order. From these tributaries, reaches identified in the IP dataset as lacking observed Chinook spawning were assigned as a value of 0.

**Natal origin distribution estimates.**

Posterior probability estimates of origin were generated for each individual across all tributaries in the basin. To retain only the most likely natal habitats, the top 30% of posterior values were preserved while the bottom 70% were discarded. This filtering reduced the influence of diffuse, low-probability values and improved the spatial resolution of basin-scale patterns. Full-run estimates of the spatial distribution of natal origins were calculated by summing the thresholded posterior probabilities for all individuals at each tributary location. To assess temporal patterns within the run, individuals were grouped into predefined quartiles based on their capture date. The first quartile spanned from the beginning of the run through **June 11**, corresponding to the current front-end block closure on the Kuskokwim River. The second quartile covered **June 12–21,** the third spanned **June 22–July 1,** and the final quartile included all individuals captured from **July 2 onward.** Although the duration of the fourth quartile varied slightly among years due to interannual differences in run timing, these deviations were minimal and had negligible impact on overall CPUE. Quartile-specific natal origin distributions were calculated by summing the thresholded posterior probabilities of all individuals captured within each quartile window. For both full-run and quartile-specific estimates, values were normalized to sum to one. For visualization purposes, these values were then rescaled to a 0–1 range to depict the relative distribution of natal origins across the basin.

**Management units and timeseries construction**

Tributaries across the basin were grouped into management units based on regions of management concern identified by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADFG). These included key tributaries such as the Aniak, Kwethluk, Takotna, and Holitna rivers, which are subject to active management goals. For each of these systems, all upstream stream segments were grouped and assigned a common management unit identifier. Additional tributaries not explicitly highlighted in ADFG’s management priorities were grouped into units of comparable size or hydrological significance. These included units such as “Upper Kusko Main,” “George,” and “Lower Kusko,” ensuring that the entire basin was binned into management categories that could be reasonably compared across regions (Figure 2). Production estimates across the basin were aggregated by management unit and rescaled to sum to one for each quartile. This process was repeated for all quartiles across all years in the dataset (2017–2021), resulting in a time series of proportional contributions for each of the 20 management regions (Figure 3)

**Dynamic Factor Analysis**

To identify shared temporal patterns in salmon run timing across management units, we applied Dynamic Factor Analysis (DFA) to time series data of proportional contributions within each quartile. DFA is a multivariate time series technique that models observed series as linear combinations of a smaller set of latent trends, capturing underlying structure in the data while accounting for observation error. The model consists of two main equations, an observation equation:

And a state equation;

In the observation equation, represents the vector of observed proportional contributions at time t, while contains m latent trends that drive the observed patterns. The loading matrix Z quantifies how strongly each observed time series responds to each underlying trend, with larger absolute values indicating stronger associations with a given trend. The matrix D contains coefficients for covariates , the intercept term d captures the mean level of each series, and represents observation error with covariance matrix R. The State equation is modeled as a random walk, where the process error covariance matrix Q determined variability in trend evolution. This approach is particularly well suited for dimensionality reduction across multiple time series and provides a systematic framework for identifying the optimal number of underlying trends, estimating their influence (loadings), and exploring the effects of potential covariates.

**Model Selection**

All timeseries were Z normalized to allow comparison of trends irrespective of absolute production values. We then used a three-stage approach to model selection where we first identified the optimal *m* number of underlying states, then tested several R covariance matrices, and finally tested the influence of covariates against a null model. We compared *m* model fit for a 1-4 state model by calculating a partial R2 value defined as;

This metric allows us quantify the extra variation explained by the addition of each additional trend.

R covariance structure and the inclusion of covariates were compared using AIC. We compared two common R matrix options including “diagonal and equal”, which assumes all timeseries have the same observation error variance and are uncorrelated, and “diagonal and unequal”, which also assumes no correlation between timeseries but allows each one to have its own error variance. Finally, we tested the effect of two covariates related to the size of returning cohorts in the year of analysis. These include a “run size” covariate which is the full run size for the given year of analysis and a CPUE covariate which is the proportion of CPUE contained within each quartile. From the best-fitting model, we extracted the underlying latent trends and the corresponding loadings for each time series on each trend and applied a varimax rotation. Factor loadings were mapped onto their corresponding management units within the watershed to provide a clearer, spatially explicit understanding of the loadings onto the underlying trends.

**Results:**

Model selection based on partial R² identified two underlying trends as optimal. Together, the first two trends explained 89% of the variance among time series, while adding a third trend contributed only an additional 2.4% of explained variance. Comparison of observation error structures strongly favored a structure of "diagonal and unequal" over “diagonal and equal” (AIC 332.16 vs 521.75) meaning each management unit time series was allowed to have its own unique observation error variance while maintaining the assumption that observation errors are uncorrelated between units. This result tracks with our expectation that observation error across the basin would vary based in part on isoscape prediction error variance among management unit regions. Finally, the best model contained neither CPUE nor run size covariates based on AIC.

**Underlying Trends and spatial loadings**

Trend 1 (Figure 4) is characterized by an increase in mean proportional contribution starting in 2019, driven by increased Q3 and Q4 contributions. This trend is led by strong positive loadings from management units such as the Hoholitna, Takotna, Nixon Fork, and Stony Rivers. In contrast, several tributaries in the northernmost portion of the basin have strong negative loadings, including the East, North, and South Fork Kuskokwim as well as the Kwethluk and Big Rivers, indicating the opposite trend of decreasing mean proportional contribution, particularly in the latter half of the run.

Trend 2 (Figure 4) contains a more stable mean across the dataset but shows a shift from patterns driven by relatively equal contributions from Q1 and Q2 to an increasing contribution from only the first quartile in the last two years of the dataset (2020 and 2021). This trend is driven by strong positive loadings from most tributaries in the upper portion of the river basin, including the Upper Kuskokwim mainstem, South Fork Kuskokwim, Kwethluk, Big River, and Tatlawiksuk Rivers. In contrast, the lower reaches of the Kuskokwim, including the Oskawalik, Tuluksak, Swing, Aniak, and Holokuk Rivers, contain strong negative loadings on this trend, indicating a shift towards higher proportional contribution away from the first quartile.

**Discussion:**

Our analysis identified two major latent trends in the spatiotemporal ecology of Chinook salmon in the Kuskokwim River basin, both reflecting shifts in the proportional contributions of different regions and time periods to the overall salmon run which may have implications for understanding metapopulation dynamics and assessing the effectiveness of current management strategies.

Such changes in spatial contributions have direct implications for subsistence communities distributed throughout the basin. Increasing contributions from the Takotna and Nixon Fork sub-basins, for example, may enhance salmon availability for upstream communities like McGrath, which sits at the confluence of these tributaries with the mainstem Kuskokwim. However, if these spatial shifts are accompanied by changes in stock-specific run timing or migration patterns, they could disrupt the alignment between local harvest strategies and historical salmon availability, as many subsistence practices have evolved to match the phenology of specific stocks (Brown & Godduhn, 2015).

The second trend suggests a progressive consolidation of Upper Kuskokwim stocks into the first quartile of the run, particularly pronounced in 2020 and 2021. If true, this temporal shift has direct implications for current harvest management strategies. The first quartile of our dataset was selected to reflect the timeperiod protected by the Kuskokwim River's front-end closure (typically June 1-11), designed to allow early-arriving fish to escape upstream before harvest activities begin (Bechtol et al., 2025). Our findings suggest that this closure may be moving the run timing of upper Kuskokwim stocks earlier, and, subsequently, further into the window of protection afforded by the closure. As Upper Kuskokwim stocks increasingly arrive during the closure window, they receive enhanced protection relative to stocks arriving later in the season, often originating from downstream and mid-basin regions. This differential protection could establish a feedback loop whereby early-timed stocks experience reduced harvest pressure, while later-timed stocks remain more vulnerable to exploitation. Over time, such dynamics could reduce the diversity of run timing across the metapopulation, potentially affecting one of the key mechanisms that provides stability to the broader system (Schindler et al., 2010). Taken as a whole, the spatial redistribution documented in Trend 1, combined with the temporal consolidation shown in Trend 2, suggests potential changes in metapopulation structure that warrant monitoring.

While otolith-based natal origin reconstruction has been validated in similar systems and spatial scales (Brennan et al., 2015), explicit validation in the Kuskokwim system has not been conducted, and a thorough assessment of assignment error is therefore not possible. However, the consistency of our findings with documented ecological patterns, such as the general downstream progression of stock contributions throughout the season, provides support for the accuracy of our assignment results. Additionally, basin-scale salmon production patterns are inherently complex and dynamic at multiple spatiotemporal scales (Brennan, Schindler, et al., 2019), and it is possible that some portion of the variability observed in our dataset reflects natural life history variability rather than long-term trends. These considerations underscore the need for continued monitoring of these patterns over time, including with techniques that can recreate spatiotemporal patterns at fine spatial scales.

Despite these limitations, our findings emphasize the importance of studying spatiotemporal diversity in salmon metapopulations at the sub-basin scale and highlight the need for management approaches that account for this complexity. As Western Alaska salmon populations face ongoing challenges, understanding and preserving the mechanisms that provide resilience, including portfolio effects generated by diverse, healthy stock components, will be important for maintaining both ecological integrity and the human communities that depend on these resources.

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