



Copper Basin

Subsistence Household Surveys, 2022 and 2023

"We took some kids hunting and they got their first moose and all that. And the first one you have to give it away. You can't eat any of it. You have to give that first moose away."

– Mentasta Lake resident

Project Background

As the communities closest to the headwaters of the Copper River in Southcentral Alaska, Mentasta Lake, Mentasta Pass, Chistochina, and Slana/Nabesna Road are at the heart of a region whose residents have long relied on **salmon, freshwater fish, moose, caribou, and other wild resources**. Due to roads connecting this region to some of Alaska's largest population centers, the area also receives substantial fishing and hunting pressure from Alaska residents living throughout the state. This study addressed local concerns about food security due to changes in access to wild resources, especially salmon and moose, since the communities were last surveyed in 2009 and 2010. The Alaska Department of Fish and Game Division of Subsistence partnered with **Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve** and the **Ahtna Intertribal Resource Commission** from 2022–2025 to document changes in access to wild foods through comprehensive household harvest surveys and ethnographic interviews.

Harvest and Use Overview

Survey results show that wild resources continue to play an important role in the lives of study community residents: at least 93% of households harvested wild resources and 98%–100% of households used wild resources in 2022 and 2023 (Figure 1). However, results also suggest changes in wild resource use since the last surveys in 2009 and 2010. Overall per capita harvests declined significantly in Mentasta Lake and Slana/Nabesna Road, while resource substitutions between salmon and moose appear to account for the relatively stable per capita harvests in Mentasta Pass and Chistochina (Figure 2).

Technical Paper No. 526:

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Electronic copy of project report is online:

<http://www.subsistence.adfg.state.ak.us/TechPap/TP526.pdf>

Community Subsistence Information System (CSIS):

<http://www.subsistence.adfg.state.ak.us/CSIS>



Photo by Jacqueline M. Keating, ADF&G

Approaching the Mentasta Lake Spur Road on the Tok Cutoff Highway, June 2024.

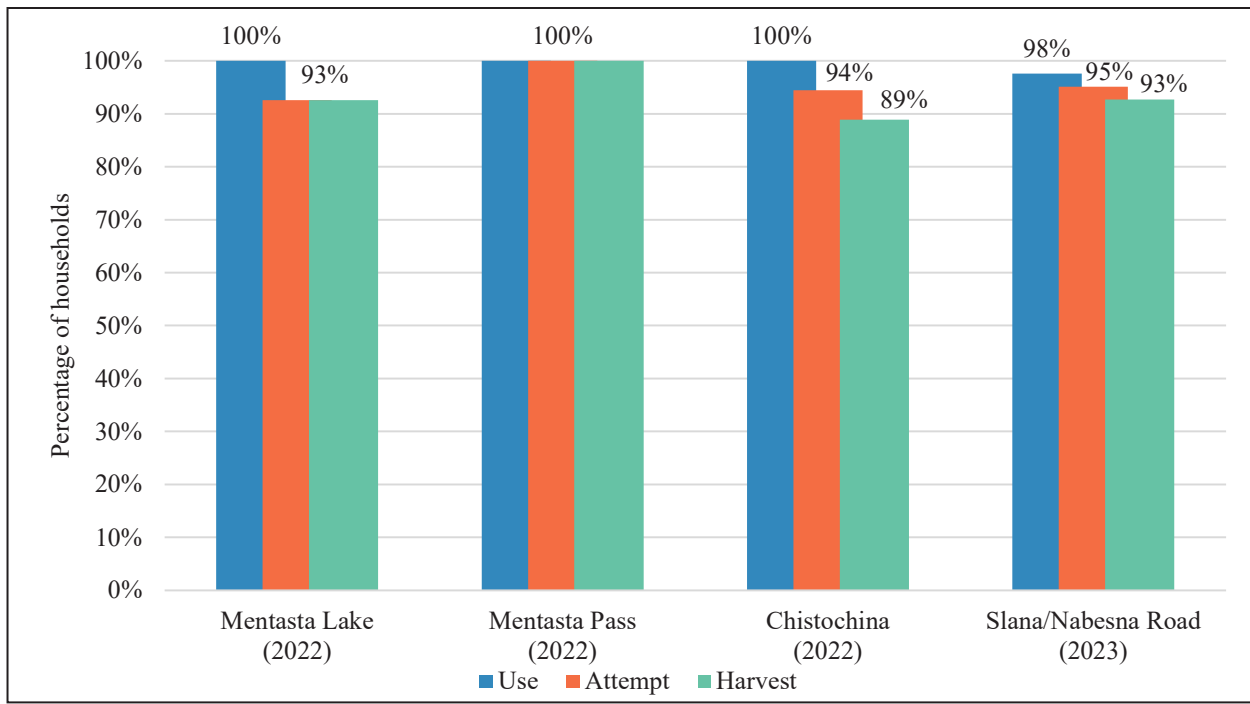


Figure 1.—Percentage of households using, attempting to harvest, and harvesting any wild resource, study communities. 2022–2023.

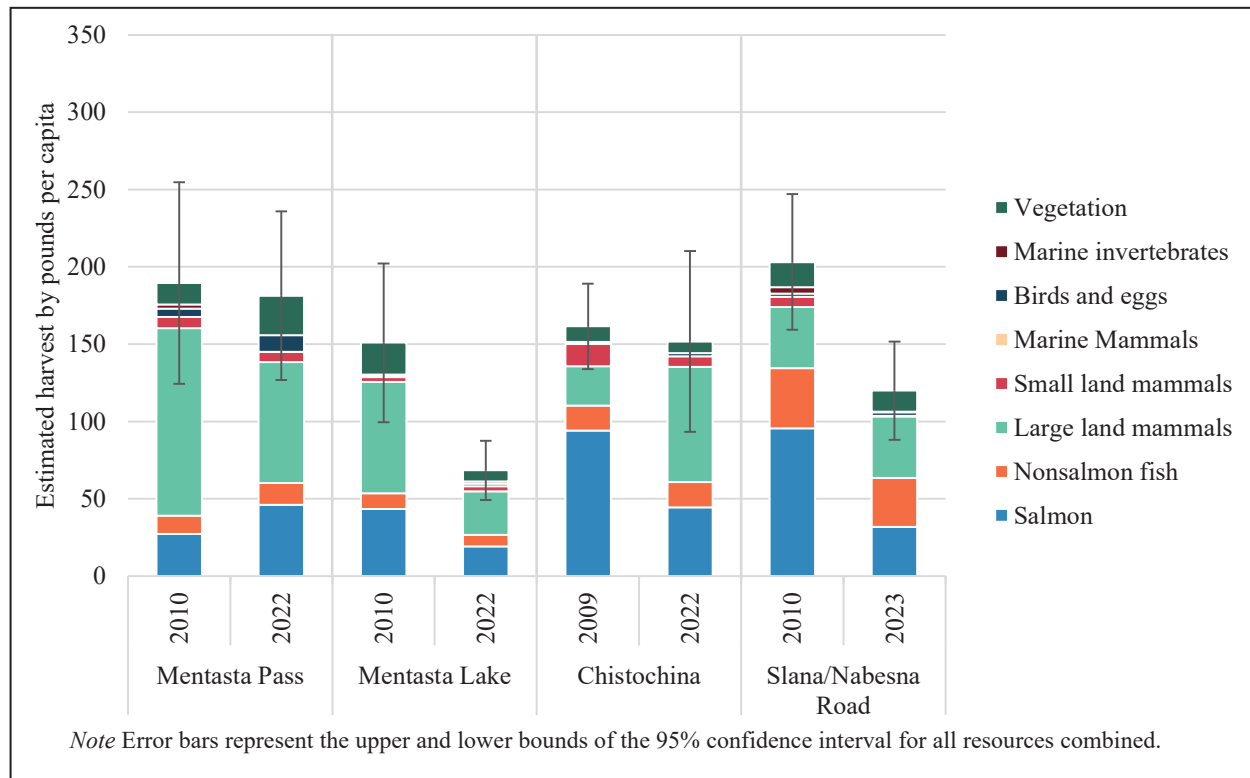


Figure 2.—Composition of per capita harvests, by resource category, study communities, 2009–2010 and 2022–2023.

“ Moose encounters seemed to be, were lower last year, across—. Even families we didn’t exchange with, the usual hunters reported not getting moose, getting a small moose, or having to share—. Versus, you know, previous years where they got a moose the day the season opened or whatever. ”
 – Slana/Nabesna Road resident

Concerns with Accessing Resources

Many residents attributed challenges with salmon access to changing river conditions that made fish wheels less effective. As one Mentasta Lake resident explained:

“The river, the channel changes, the river changes. There’s not a lot you can do about that. We do move the fish wheel. We have to move it if we’re not catching anything here. We will move the wheel up or move it down If we have to move the wheel, you know, we’ll gather up four or six of us out there, and with the couple of machines, a long winch, whatever. It’s a chore.”

– Mentasta Lake resident

A Slana/Nabesna Road resident explained how higher water levels and debris made it increasingly dangerous to use a fish wheel:

“We basically just chose to not to put it in, because of how much maintenance it is ... with the massive flooding, not just the initial ice going out but with the rains like we had last summer, and you’re bringing trees down basically, it’s very, very difficult to operate any type of fish wheel.”

– Slana/Nabesna Road resident



Photo by David Hooper, AITRC

Newly built fish wheel at Batzulnetas, 2023.

“There was a whole bunch when I was younger. And now there’s hardly any. Like salmon, there used to be so many down there but now there isn’t no more.”

– Mentasta Lake resident



Photo courtesy of National Park Service

Lena Charlie cleans a moose hide, Batzulnetas Culture Camp.

Residents all shared concerns about changes in access to large land mammals. With declines in the Nelchina caribou herd, hunting opportunities were sparse in 2022 and hunting was closed in 2023.¹ One Chistochina resident explained:

“Unit 13 is getting just totally overcrowded because it’s so accessible. There’s so many roads going in and everything so people can come and go. So, I haven’t hunted caribou ... last time I got a caribou was probably about four years ago.”

– Chistochina resident

While moose could still be hunted, residents stressed that there was a notable increase in competition that made hunting more difficult. As one Mentasta Pass resident shared:

“The time, again, competition, I would say is the thing that is probably having the bigger impact on the resource than anything. Where we used to be able to hunt, you know, without all the pressure. When we used to go back in where we hunted, we never had to worry about seeing anybody else... . Now, in an area, approximately eight miles, you got a couple hundred people hunting right back here. And it’s got to have a hell of an impact on the resource.”

– Mentasta Pass resident

1. Alaska Department of Fish and Game, 2023, “Advisory Announcement, June 30, 2023: Nelchina Caribou Hunts RC561, RC562, and CC001 closed by Emergency Order,” accessed January 31, 2025, <https://www.adfg.alaska.gov/static/applications/publicnotification/2023/releases/R4-AA-23-1056.pdf>.

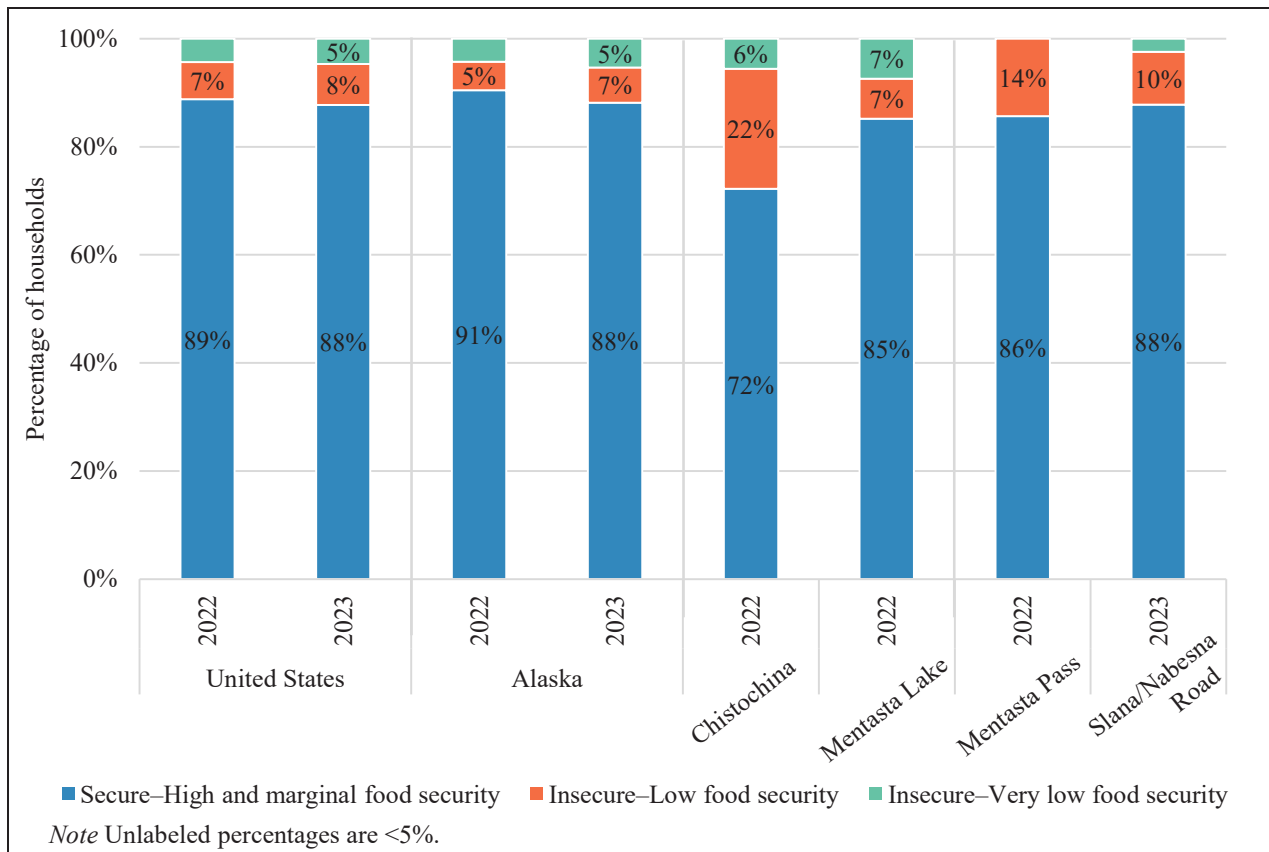


Figure 3.—Comparison of food security categories for households in the United States, Alaska, and study communities, 2022–2023.

Food Security

Based on responses to the food security survey module, households in Mentasta Lake, Mentasta Pass, and Chistochina experienced lower food security than state and national estimates by the U.S. Department of Agriculture for 2022, while Slana/Nabesna Road had the same percentage of food secure households as state and national estimates for 2023 (Figure 3). Environmental changes, competition, and the cost of subsistence harvest activities were some of the most prominent risk factors associated with subsistence resource access. Compensating for wild resources may not be economically affordable for some residents. Cultural and social adaptations such as **sharing, long-term storage, involving youth in subsistence harvests**, and resource self-management techniques are used for maximizing household and community utilization of available wild food. As one Mentasta Lake resident explained:

“These [sharing] systems that you question us about, that’s how they’ve been built. Is because, really, we can’t rely on anybody else. We’re so far off the grid that we have to do these things on our own. ... when we provide moose meat, you know, it doesn’t just go into our freezer. It goes to everybody’s freezer. It’s the same thing with the fish.”

– Mentasta Lake resident

Project Funding

The National Park Service provided funding for this study. Research was a collaborative effort among the ADF&G Division of Subsistence, Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve, the Ahtna Intertribal Resource Commission, and the communities of Mentasta Lake, Mentasta Pass, Chistochina, and Slana/Nabesna Road.

“I can bring a cooler full of fish home and not bring one fish back to my house. It goes to everybody in the community. Elder? Priority. Low budget? Priority.

People with kids? Priority.”

– Mentasta Lake resident



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