

BUILDING BRIDGES

Students from Kamchatka and the U.S. learn together

WHEN IT COMES TO ECOSYSTEMS, and especially salmon, there is a lot in common between Alaska and its neighbor across the Bering Sea, Kamchatka. But because of political and language barriers, much of the scientific knowledge and management practices between the two regions remains separate. A new initiative by the World Wildlife Fund and several universities is aiming to bridge that divide.

For over a decade, professors from the University of Alaska Fairbanks and the University of Washington have been taking students to Bristol Bay during the height of salmon harvest. The students spend weeks acting as mock managers, performing fish counts, monitoring population health, and interacting with professionals in the field. For the past several years, several college students from Kamchatka have joined the summer workshops and learned alongside American students.

John Simeone, who has been working with the WWF and the universities to coordinate the exchanges says it's remarkable to watch students who speak different languages bond in the field. Not only do the Kamchatka students learn monitoring techniques, they were fascinated with how



Kamchatka State Technical University undergraduate student Elena Zhelezniakova (left) and UW graduate student Alex Lincoln (right) install bands on deceased salmon at Lake Aleknagik, in western Alaska.

much salmon permeated Alaskan culture with things like salmon leather wallets and the Salmonfest music festival.

In the big picture, Simeone says there are multiple goals for the collaboration including sharing management techniques, instilling an international conservation ethic, and promoting scientific collaboration. "It's the last remaining stronghold of salmon," he says. "It really makes sense to have scientists talking to each other and doing joint research."

Margaret Williams, the managing director of the WWF's Arctic Program, says she sees this as an early step in building long-term relationships between Americans and Russians that can not only bolster science and conservation, but further

connect two countries. "I think of the salmon work as being part of that bigger picture of keeping the fabric together for the future of our nations' foreign relations," Williams says.

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