

Oystermen, Environmental Flows, and Moral Economy in the ACF Basin

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Watershed Context



The Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint (ACF) basin is shared by Georgia, Alabama, and Florida. Allocation of water and management of federal dams is highly contested. Conflict increases during drought.

Apalachicola Bay, at the mouth of the ACF system, produces 10% of the nation's commercial oyster harvest. Oystermen claim that reduced river flows harm the oyster resource and oystermen's livelihoods.

Methods

Data was collected through ethnographic fieldwork in Franklin County, FL:

- In-depth semi-structured interviews with oystermen (n=12) and other key informants (n=11) including scientists and resource managers
- Observation of meetings and public hearings relevant to the ACF basin, Apalachicola Bay, and the oyster industry (n=26)
- Archival research using management documents, meeting minutes, media reports, and activist materials
- Participant-observation in community life over 11 months of fieldwork

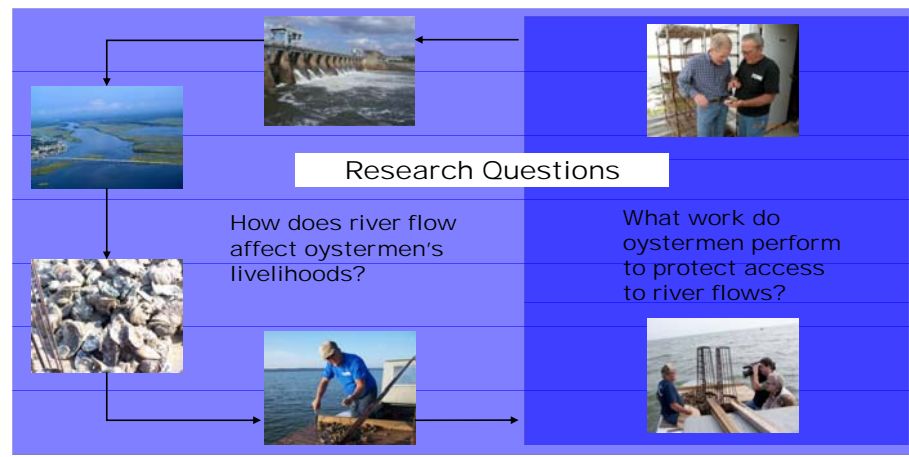
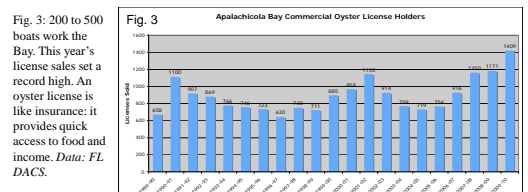
The researcher analyzed texts using an iterative, inductive coding approach.

Oystering Culture in Apalachicola Bay

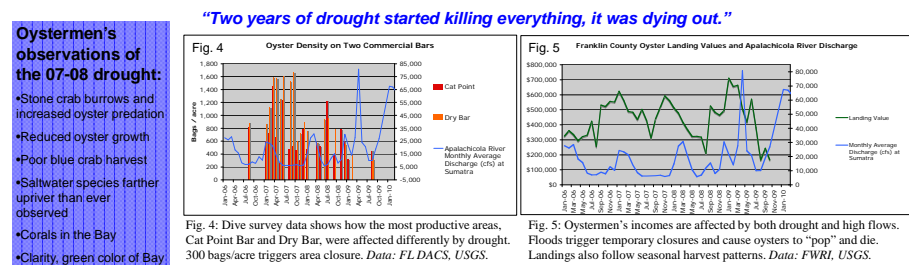
"Daddy oystered, and Mama shucked. When we got home from school, we'd go out on the boat."

The local commercial oyster industry began in the late 19th century. Many current harvesters are third- or fourth-generation oystermen.

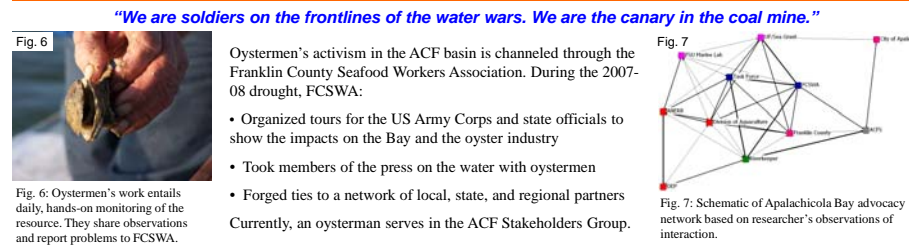
Oystermen head out at dawn on 20-foot skiffs. Harvest of oysters from public bars must be done by hand, using a pair of long-handled rakes called tongs. Oystermen know good oysters based on vibrations in the handles of the tongs. Legal oysters are >3 inches. Smaller oysters are returned to the bar to grow. Oystermen are independent contractors. A 60-lb bag typically earns \$16-18. They have a shared repertoire of ecological knowledge learned through work.



Q 1: How does river flow affect oystermen's livelihoods?



Q 2: What work do oystermen perform to protect access to river flows?



Fluid Discourses: A Moral Economy of Water

"We want to keep the water flowing, but we don't want to put people out of work. We all need to work."

Oystermen voice two common - and seemingly contradictory - positions:

- When speaking directly about river management, or in an extra-local context: *"We need to go back to the historic flows, with natural high and low"*
- In a local context, when not speaking directly about river management: *"We need a steady flow"*

This matches the position put forth by partners in the advocacy network.

These claims are not so mutually exclusive as they may seem. They must be understood within the context of oystermen's work.

While wishes for a "steady flow" could be misinterpreted as support for water control structures and prescribed flow levels, they are more likely a response to the state's area-based system of management for Apalachicola Bay. High river levels trigger closure of some or all oyster harvesting areas. This creates financial hardship. Water, then, has the ability to both enable and pre-empt work.

Oystermen's claims are based upon a **moral economy** (Thompson 1971) in which water should support workers in their efforts to attain basic needs and provide for their families. In contrast, the use of water to support luxury and leisure while others are unable to work violates the moral economy.

Conclusions

Preliminary results suggest that an ethnographically rich, actor-based approach to stakeholder analysis yields useful insights for watershed management.

The concept of the moral economy may reveal common ground for negotiation. While stakeholder analysis often focuses narrowly on each group's interest, analysis should also consider values and norms. In the ACF basin, oystermen's value of work may be shared by other labor groups and industries, cross-cutting geographic and interest groups.

Works Cited

Thompson EP. 1971. The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the 18th Century. Past and Present 50:76-136.

Twichell DC, Andrews BD, Edmiston HL, and Stevenson WR. 2007. Geological Mapping of Oyster Habitats in a Shallow Estuary, Apalachicola Bay, Florida. USGS Open-File Report 2006-1381.

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