

Salmon and Subsistence

Salmon was an important food source and a valuable commodity for Ainu.

Before the nineteenth century, a single Ainu household was estimated to catch between 300 and 1,000 salmon every year. Ainu in the Kamikawa Basin around Asahikawa used weirs, nets, and hooked spears to catch cherry salmon and chum salmon as the fish migrated upstream from Ishikari Bay each autumn. A large portion of the catch was preserved for trade and to ensure a steady food supply through the long Hokkaido winters.

Traditional preservation methods included air drying, smoking, and freezing. Records from the fifteenth century list preserved salmon (*satcep*) as one of the three main trade commodities from Ezo (present-day Hokkaido), alongside herring and kelp. As trade with Wajin (ethnic Japanese) on Honshu increased during the Edo period (1603–1867), salmon was also salted for shipping.

Around the mid-seventeenth century, Wajin merchants set up commercial fishing operations in Ishikari Bay to meet the growing demand for marine products in Honshu, and Ainu were forced to work at the fisheries. In the late 1860s, as the Meiji government set up initiatives to develop Hokkaido, salmon exports increased, and Japan's first cannery was established on the Ishikari River in 1877.

By the 1960s, salmon had virtually disappeared from the Ishikari River due to overfishing, water pollution, and land development. Efforts such as restocking the waterways and installing fish ladders have had a positive impact, and salmon are slowly returning to the river.