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Four Alaska women talk about subsistence living

Moses Wassillie, moderator

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Moses Wassillie said during the season of the seals there was definitely a procedure to follow when the Indians harvested the animals. Susie Abraham of Yakutat recalls those times. Susie Abraham said they were told when to seal. They couldn't make a fire because the animals didn't like smoke. They could make a fire right where the tide would wash it. They had to wait until the seal babies were a certain size and then they could go up to sealing camp. They went up to the sealing cave. They stayed there in May, June and July. They would go to the place for fishing in September. When the missionaries had Christmas in December they would come back. Now there are lots of trees down to the bay. When the missionaries were there they had a sawmill and they cut down all the trees.

Song by Eric Clapton

Maggie John talked about the subsistence life in southeast Alaska. She said in the month of June they would go to the red cedar bay for seal hunting. They would stay there until the last part of July. They would go up to the big lake next to the ocean cape. They had big houses for drying fish there. One house would hold 400 fish for drying for winter. The next village was small village where the Coast Guard is. The third village is where their tribe was. They used to have 1600 people. They would live off the beach. The whole bay is full of food. The winter seaweed would grow in March. First black seaweed grows. And then the white ribbon seaweed grows in May. The black ribbon seaweeds are in July. They never ate mussels and clams. In May, April and June they would start to eat things on the beach again. There are a lot of fish that would come in the bay. White people would come for trawling. They have king salmon come in May. They would get candlefish, halibut, codfish, and red cod. They had quite a bit of fish in the bay.

Song by Ken Hensley

Moses Wassillie said the country around Aniak on the Kuskokwim River is a bit different from the Southeast. Clara Morgan talked about a way of life for the Natives there. Clara Morgan said usually around the end of April they would go out to spring camp. They would haul everything with dog teams and drag the boat out. They would stay at spring camp for three weeks to a month depending on the river goes out. They lived off the land when they were out at spring camp. They would pick berries. They would come back the end of May or beginning of June. In the middle of June they would start fishing for king salmon and sheefish. They would put up the fish for eating and for the dogs. A lot of people then would go off to fish camp. Now they fish right in the village and have their smokehouses. There aren't as many fish wheels as there used to be. Most people get their fish by drifting instead set nets. In the winter they use fish traps but there aren't too many of those. She talked about using pike and making

Eskimo ice cream. Down the coast they use seal oil. They try to put up a lot of king salmon strips in the summer. In August and September moose season starts. There are a lot of people from downriver who come up for moose hunting. People are using freezers. They used to put up dry meat and jarring. Winter usually starts in October. They usually get their first snow then. Mink trapping starts the first of November and ends in January. Beaver trapping starts in February. Her husband goes out beaver trapping. She talked about preparing beaver meat.

Song by Eric Clapton.

Moses Wassillie said their final segment will feature Mary Nicolai of Aniak. She talked about tanning beaver hide for sewing. She said they would soak the fur in warm water with brown soap. They would weigh down the hide with something heavy after they rolled it. They would leave it in the water for two days. If it is still dry and not ready to be tanned they may have to soak it one more time the same way. When it is ready then it is scraped. When they are done with scraping then they rub it with bacon grease. They put something heavy over it and leave it for two or three days. They take it out and scrape it again. They keep rubbing it with their hands. They would get real soft. That was the way they tanned a long time ago. Nowadays they have different ways of tanning. She said she used to watch older people tan furs. She tans her own furs, too. She would rather tan her own lynx and wolverine. Sometimes they overtan them if you send them in to be tanned and the hair comes out. If they overtanned them then they are hard to sew. She has made beaver jackets, mukluks, slippers, and caps. She learned by watching the older people sew. She used to go visit them and she would watch them work. The older people would tell her to cut her own patterns so you would learn.

Song by Lanny Hall