

Project: Elders Warnings

Funder: North Pacific Research Board

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KT: Katie Turner

TN: Thelma Nicolai

00:00:10:29 - 00:00:40:10

KT: My name is Katie Turner. It's January 15th, and I'm sitting here with Velma Nicolai of Hughes.

KT: So where did you grow up and what year were you born?

TN: I grew up in Hughes. In 1962 I was born in Tanana.

KT: Did you grow up fishing or participating in fish camp?

TN: Yes. I grew up in the fish camp with my grandparents and my parents. Stayed there from when school got out all the way till school started.

00:00:40:12 - 00:01:18:25

KT: How would you say fish camp has changed from when you were growing up?

TN: It's really changed. It's way different than nowadays than it was then. We participated in

cutting fish, you know, hanging fish, checking fish net, everything.

KT: How much time do you think a day you spent fishing?

TN: Probably all day.

KT: All day?

TN: Yeah, because we would cook for dogs and you know, help our parents and our grandparents get the fish ready and hang it.

00:01:18:27 - 00:01:30:02

KT: Who taught you how to fish and who did you usually go out with when you went out?

TN: My grandma and grandpa and my mom and dad.

00:01:30:04 - 00:01:55:12

KT: Where did you fish?

TN: In Hughes. We had (traditional Hughes tribal name here) a tribe is our name of our tribe.

KT: What would you say traditional knowledge means to you?

TN: Traditional knowledge? I think it means all our traditional,

00:01:55:14 - 00:02:30:29

TN: Traditional ways and stuff. All our young people, everyone should know or learn our traditional cultural ways as they're growing up. If they live in the communities of the villages.

KT: Are there any environmental factors that let you know that fish are close by or on their way?

TN: I always used to hear grandma and grandpa talk about the cotton flying in the, you know, in the air.

00:02:31:01 - 00:03:02:08

TN: They say the salmon is coming.

KT: What does a subsistence way of life mean to you?

TN: It means that we live off the land. The majority of our food. And you know, everything we have.

KT: From your experience, how is the regulation and management of fish changed in your area?

TN: The regulations are real restricting. We're not allowed to fish

00:03:02:10 - 00:03:30:28

TN: And when we go to fish camp today like that last summer, we brought our kids and our grandkids but we weren't able to fish except for whitefish and pike and, you know, few fish, but the sheefish are not around in the summertime. Grayling in the fall. Yeah.

KT: How do you feel about these changes in management?

TN: Well it's really

00:03:31:01 - 00:04:07:10

TN: It's challenging. I think sitting in that meeting listening to the board and our people testifying on behalf of our subsistence way of life, and it's really changed from when we grew up.

KT: What are your thoughts about advocacy for salmon?

TN: I think that more people in our communities should, should know to advocate for all. All our native people.

00:04:07:13 - 00:04:37:13

KT: That's important. What do you think we can do to reverse our depleted fish count?

TN: Depleted fish count?

KT: Yeah.

TN: Well, I think that it's very important to restrict it right now, but, you know, we should at least get a few fish. Each family. If it's possible, you know.

KT: What does maintaining a sustainable harvest mean to you?

00:04:37:15 - 00:05:07:23

TN: Maintaining a sustainable harvest? Maintaining our fishing every year, our hunting.

KT: Yeah.

TN: You know, just taking what we need. Not, you know, over. Go overboard with. We just need what we need. That's important.

KT: What is your favorite way to eat or prepare salmon?

TN: I like it pan fried, in camp, on wood stove.

00:05:07:25 - 00:05:34:08

KT: When do you think was the last time that you were able to have your favorite preparation of salmon?

TN: Let's see. Oh. Tanana Chiefs send us some fish. Red, sockeye salmon. So that's how we had salmon for a little while, and I jarred mine, so I'm very happy I did that.

KT: What does salmon mean to you?

TN: Salmon means everything.

00:05:34:10 - 00:06:00:11

TN: Salmon is good. It's good. Healthy stuff for your body. Better than red meat. So I, I would prefer to eat that than red meat.

KT: Do you notice the difference in how you feel when you're unable to harvest salmon?

TN: It's really tough. You know, it's frustrating. When you think about it and you start talking about it among your people, you know?

00:06:00:13 - 00:06:28:25

TN: And, it's tough for everyone. Some people don't have money to, you know, go to the grocery store and get food. They're used to, the elders are really used to subsistence foods, and that's what they prefer.

KT: Have any elders talked to you about how this lack of salmon makes them feel?

TN: Yeah, they say it makes them sad.

00:06:28:27 - 00:06:55:06

TN: And, they say their ancestors had told them, not their ancestors, their, you know, grandparents and stuff had told them that this will happen someday. They had a lot of predictions and it's happening now. Things are changing. The weather's changing. The animals are getting mixed up and all that kind of stuff.

KT: Do you remember when salmon runs were beginning to become concerning?

00:06:55:22 - 00:07:18:17

TN: Yeah.

KT: What happened?

TN: Yeah. When we were in fish camp and we were growing up, we would get this big salmon.

Yeah. And, man, that would be just, just happy for us, you know, when we start catching.

Because we only could catch just, how many days? It's not even a week because they come all the way up the Koyukuk river.

00:07:18:19 - 00:07:41:29

KT: Yeah. How big would you say that they were before they started?

TN: Man, they must have been about 30 to 50 pounds.

KT: 50 pounds?

TN: Yeah. My mom. When we were growing up in camp, my mom would cut fish, and there was fires around, you know, wildfires. They would hire her to cook salmon for them. Yeah and we would stay there all day and play around.

00:07:42:03 - 00:08:11:16

TN: So, yeah.

KT: So do you remember when that disease started becoming more prevalent in salmon?

TN: No, I don't remember. But I remember one year, you know, what summer was that? The water was really hot in Alaska and, during that time on our Koyukuk river. There was a lot of dead salmon on the sides of the river.

00:08:12:20 - 00:08:33:06

TN: Fish and game, I think, came in with and then they hired a boat. One of our boats, you know, from the village and they went down to Huslia trying to count all the salmon they see on the side of the river and there was over 800 just between Huslia and Hughes.

KT: How far is it between Huslia and Hughes?

TN: It's about 180 miles.

00:08:33:08 - 00:09:06:13

TN: But that's devastating.

KT: Yeah. How did community members respond to this?

TN: They you know, they said that they know that their parents and grandparents were telling them that this was going to happen. And this kind of changes. So they knew back then.

KT: How do you think that this situation will affect this generation of young people?

TN: It will affect this generation because for one thing, nobody's going to fish camps.

00:09:06:24 - 00:09:32:10

TN: There's no way to teach your kids right now how to cut fish, because we have no fish. You know, we talk to them about it. Tell them how we grew up. But our kids nowadays have no idea. You know.

KT: Do you think that it affects them spiritually and culturally as well?

TN: I think that it does, because we all have roots from our people, you know, and that's what we do.

00:09:32:12 - 00:09:37:05

TN: That's how we survive.

00:09:37:07 - 00:10:02:06

KT: What does this lack of salmon mean to your way of life?

TN: It puts a cap on, you know, our pocketbooks because we have to go to the grocery store.

And some people, they can't afford to go to the grocery store. You know, it's tough nowadays, and it's only going to get tougher.

00:10:02:09 - 00:10:31:09

KT: So nature is often referred to as a healer. What are your thoughts about that?

TN: I, I know it's a healer. I love being in camp. Winter camp. Spring camp. I love all those seasons because the all those seasons, we go out and subsistence hunt and just get what we need, you know.

KT: Do you think that this lack of salmon is affecting all of the other animals and stuff that you guys harvest?

00:10:31:09 - 00:10:58:28

TN: Yes. Yes it is. The bears are really hungry. This summer we've had, how many bears come into our community? Because they have nothing to eat, no berries, no salmon. And they, right after the reds came in the first batch. One family was cooking fish, and you could smell it. It was summertime. They opened their windows and stuff, and a bear came down off the hill and was just sitting right behind our house.

00:10:59:01 - 00:11:26:03

TN: They had to shoot it down. Yeah. So it's getting dangerous.

KT: Did your elders give you any warnings about salmon or advice on how to behave around them?

TN: They always told us that we had to take care of what we took from the land. It was very important. And not to take too, too much.

KT: So do you have any warnings or advice for us about salmon?

00:11:29:19 - 00:11:40:29

TN: I don't know. I just, it doesn't seem like it's getting any better right now. You know, the salmon count and whatnot. It's hard to tell. Yeah.

00:11:41:01 - 00:12:05:13

KT: Would you mind sharing one of your favorite fishing stories, or any other thoughts you have on how to take care of salmon?

TN: Our parents and grandparents taught us how to fish and cut fish. You know, we used to cut fish for dogs too, you know, so there was some of us, dogfish cutters and some of us eating fish cutters.

00:12:05:15 - 00:12:30:01

TN: Yeah me and my three brothers were the oldest ones so we we learned to cut the dogfish. Yeah. My sisters and they cut the eating fish. Yeah.

KT: Did you eventually graduate on the cutting eating fish?

TN: Yeah. Slowly. Yeah. Because it's easier and faster to do dogfish.

KT: Right?

TN: Yeah.

KT: Yeah. Okay. I think that was my last question.

00:12:30:04 - 00:12:48:22

KT: Is there anything else you want to add?

TN: Just that I'm real proud of you guys for standing up at a young age and advocating for your people.

KT: Thank you so much. We learned a lot from you.

TN: Thank you.

KT: Thank you so much for your time.

TN: Yes. No problem.