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Knowledge of Native Elders
Peter and Elsie John
By: Margaret Olk

It was good to see the video about songs of Minto, especially since Peter had sung some of the songs, during the previous class. Since I have never visited Minto, I was better able to frame Peter John's stories in the more real context of the environment of Minto. It became obvious as the tape progressed that the songs evolved naturally from the ongoing life of the people, and that the process of developing new songs is not a thing of the past, but ongoing (the airplane song). It seemed to be such a rich and vital part of the culture. During this class I was sitting next to Melinda, who is an Athabaskan from Northway. Part of my enjoyment of the video was an enjoyment watching her recognize with pleasure many of the songs sung at potlatches.

During this class Peter elaborated a bit more about how the environment is contaminated. It was interesting to see how sensitive he is to subtle (and not so subtle) environmental pollution. I expected the awareness of water pollution because it is so obvious during flooding and from evidence from mining. But I was surprised by his awareness of the degree of pollution in the air and its effects on plants, that awareness is completely outside of my experience. His linking the pollution of plants to the declining importance of the medicinal value of plants and the multiplying effects through the food chain was certainly thought provoking. It demonstrates rather dramatically how close he is to the world in terms of the essential of life-and how removal from it I am.