

Oral History
Alannah Hurley
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Interviewers: Anna Lavoie, Jean Lee, Kim Sparks (PSMFC, NOAA Fisheries AFSC), Kitty Sopow (BBNA Project Intern) and Sean Day (independent volunteer technical expert)

Abstract:

Text in brackets [] signifies interviewer/s interpretations, and/or clarification of the narrative of the interviewee.

Text in parentheses () represent nonverbal sounds and activity during interview.

Anna Lavoie: This is Anna and I'm here with Alannah, and at first you could talk about your history fishing, your experiences, how you learned, your family.

Alannah Hurley: Sure. So my Irish name is Alannah Hurley, and my Yup'ik is [...] I was named after my [...], my great Grandma, who actually traveled to Bristol Bay from the Kuskokwim because of the commercial fishing, because of the opportunity that the commercial fishery brought. And I was born and raised in a village across the river, in Clark's Point in [...], which is home to one of the oldest canneries I think, one of the oldest in the bay. Growing up as a young, Yup'ik woman in Clark's Point, I feel really fortunate for the way that I was brought up, especially with very strong women who were very rooted in Yup'ik tradition and culture. And first and foremost valuing where we come from and the fishery from that—foundation. And there's, you know, the buzzword subsistence, but basically the indigenous people's view of this place, and how we interact with it. And all the lessons that come from our people being here for thousands of years. So, I think first and foremost when we talk about the fishery the vast majority of Native people in this region, including myself, identify from that perspective, from an indigenous perspective, from a subsistence perspective, or a traditional way of life perspective.

In addition to that—having the fortunate opportunities to engage in a sustainable cash economy in a changing world, you know, with the very interesting history of colonization and introduction of Western culture and ways into our region, that kind of were, I would say, brought forth by the commercial fishery. And so I think for many generations, Alaska Native women in particular have—trying to think of the best way to put it, engaged in the fishery in that way. And the place I come from is actually a very interesting place and I think has a lot of amazing untold stories that in a time, you know, pre-statehood, pre-civil rights movement, there were people from all these different cultures coming together around the fishery. And what did that look like? Was it perfect? Was it equitable? No, it was not, but a lot of that melting pot, so to speak, happened because of the fishery. So my grandpa was Filipino from the Philippines and came up to work in the canneries. A lot of the people like Gayla, who you've talked to, her grandpa was Greek. There were other influences from Scandinavian and Norwegian countries, all these different people coming together, Italians, and intermingling with Native women and I think giving birth to a lot of the different families, very diverse families around the region. And then the areas where like I come from, Clark's Point—the diversity that was there was, I think unprecedented in this country, so I think it's a pretty amazing story of, people coming together and

resilience and I think we've been really fortunate that the Alaska Native and indigenous way of life in that has been sustained through generations.

And so I was also a commercial fisherman from the time I was—ten, I started fishing seriously, but you know, my parents had been taking me out on the boat since I could walk I think. And before I could walk probably. And so growing up in that environment was just normal.

Anna Lavoie: And when you were out on the boat were they drift nets or set?

Alannah Hurley: No, so I'm a set netter and I think a lot of, I shouldn't speak for everybody, but a lot of people, a lot of the Native women in the fishery were set netters, and a lot of their husbands went out on drift boats and so the set net fishery has been primarily Alaska Native women for generations.

Anna Lavoie: And so when you first learned to set net, do you remember and could you tell us who taught you and what it felt like, and—

Alannah Hurley: Yeah, you know, I remember little things from when I was really little, like the excitement of being able to stay up late, like anything a little kid would find exciting. And getting muddy, and dirty and being out on the water. But, I think when I first started commercial fishing as a full blown partner or crew member I was ten, and I fished with my uncle. And he, along with my family, you know had taught me kind of the basics, but he had really pushed me into taking it seriously and showing up every tide. That was back in 1996, so from there my brother and I, my younger brother and I kind of took over my family's set net operation when I was fifteen, maybe about five years later. My brother was twelve. My parents were ready to retire. My dad had some health issues, and so did my mom, so we took over our family set net site, and from there have been pretty much set netting ever since.

Anna Lavoie: Great. So you as a Native woman who fishes and have experienced the culture, do you, in your mind, what do you think are the major contributions and importance of Native women who fish and maintain the culture?

Alannah Hurley: So I think women—and it's so interesting that you guys are here talking to me today because I was just working on a grant report for a women's initiative type thing that we work on that kind of encapsulates all the protection work that we do, and how it's based in—the sacredness of indigenous women and that worldview that comes from our people from thousands of years ago. And how I think our people have understood from the beginning of time that life in general is a sacred thing, and who is the givers of life? Its women. And so I think I've, in my experience, have been very fortunate to come from a very long line of strong Native women who, even in the face of change and many different obstacles that native people across the world have faced in regards to colonization and contact, really found their strength in our traditional way of being and our traditional beliefs. And so, I think that story of these amazing women throughout Bristol Bay's history, who were insanely powerful, strong women who were raising really big families and fishing to provide for their families. But never forgetting who they were and ensuring that our people knew the cultural significance and importance of our fishery and our region, is something that is a story that isn't necessarily highlighted, and so it's cool that you guys are doing that.

Alannah Hurley: I can't remember what the question was, but I think I answered it.

Anna Lavoie: Yes, you did. Yeah, it was how you perceive the role of women, and what the importance of—

I think it's been critical, it's been a critical role. And I think when you learn about your grandmas and your great grandmas who did this, and they set netted. It was a very different time back then, you know Native people, especially in the fishery were—marginalized. And—these are things that we're still learning, I think they're really painful for some people to talk about, about how Native people were treated in the commercial fishery. How their access and participation was limited because of—because of who they were, because of who they were born—to be Native people. But the fact that our people kind of persevered through that and, and kind of forged a path for our generations to still be able to take part in this amazing, sustainable economy—is very, very admirable and an honorable history that we can be proud of.

Anna Lavoie: Ok, we wanted to ask a bit about your experience with climate change or environmental change, and how you may have experienced it or how you perceive it in your life so far—

Alannah Hurley: Sure, if I could just add one more thing, that I think is really cool that I don't think a lot of people hear about—is just in stories, the short stories that I've heard about what set netting was like and what the fishery was like for women back in the day, or back before us. I don't know how many of you are familiar with how intense and hard work set netting is? But, I do it with power motors and reels and skiffs and it's still really hard and these were ladies who literally knew the, I mean they had tapped into I think to their, their traditional indigenous knowledge about the tides and how the waters worked to make it work for everybody. And they helped people, all these different women and their children and their partners, pulled each other's nets in. And they all worked together on the beach to make sure that everybody was fishing, because they knew that that was going to give them the cash to be able to survive in the new cash economy that was transforming our region at the time. So—I literally cannot imagine pulling out and in a net by hand, and those women did that every summer, and it's just *phenomenal* the amount of not only physical, but mental strength that they had to have to be able to do that.

And you talk to a lot of the people who are like my parent's generation or a little older and they were raised by those people and grew up doing that. And they remember a lot of the early strikes when people were striking because the canneries were not paying a fair price. This is an issue we still struggle with today. And so, I think I think we draw a lot of inspiration and motivation to hold these different—industries accountable to the people of this region. And so when you hear someone talk about sitting on a tender with their mom and ten brothers and sisters to stop fish from being transported because that was part of the strike, that's some really powerful stuff. And I think as we face a lot of these challenges not only within the industry, but within climate and resource development in general, looking back on that history and that—fortitude that those people had is really, really inspiring. So anyways, I just wanted to add that.

Anna Lavoie: Since you went back to talk more about it, maybe—I have a couple more questions about the women in fishing. And one is you said it takes a lot of force for these women to pull these nets in. How many—salmon would they get in the net, you know, in one pull? If you're like really pulling?

Alannah Hurley: (laughs) If you ask my grandma, she's like, Oh the fish you guys catch today is nothing compared to what the nets used to be like in our day. And I *believe* it because I've seen change over my time fishing, my very short time compared to hers. Thousands of pounds of salmon they were pulling in by hand, but they did it with their knowledge of how the water worked, how the tides worked and working together. Which is—*phenomenal*. I mean, you have to be able to time it just right, you have to be able to know what nets you need to be at when, because the beaches are different and the tides operate a little differently depending whether you're on the mud flat or you're up in the rip. Fishing is I think—the amount of thought and planning and knowledge that goes into not only subsistence but also commercial fishing, is astounding. And when you learn about how much actually goes into it and how much thought, I think you have a much more profound respect for subsistence and commercial fishermen.

Anna Lavoie: We've noticed that there are quite a few women who own set net permits. Are you aware of it, or do you know if it's really common for women to own—I mean, there's approximately 40% of women who own set net permits. Do you know if it's always been that way? If there's fewer women owning permits or now is it more women who are owning permits?

Alannah Hurley: Well, I think that's kind of a loaded question because it has to do with not only women owning permits, but local permits and permits leaving the region and what reasons those permits are leaving the region. It's a really, really big question.

Anna Lavoie: Set net permits are leaving the region?

Alannah Hurley: Yeah, and set net permits are still, we still retain a lot more set net permits than we do drift permits within the region as a whole. I'm not aware of the breakdown by women and men, but I do know that the vast majority of set netters were women—in the generation—in my grandma's generation. And so I would say 40% of the permits, looking at how many of them are locally owned, when I say locally I mean the Bristol Bay region, I would say that that number has probably decreased over time. Because of the outward migration of permits.

Anna Lavoie: Ok.

Alannah Hurley: There was like groundbreaking legislation that came out of Togiak, Togiak people, based on a number of different factors but primarily the language barrier, because a lot of Yup'ik fishermen, even if they saw those notices, you know—they did not even speak English and so how were they supposed to apply for a limited entry permit. So we have this, I am sure you are aware of these, interim permits, that my mom actually has one, that people were awarded on a points based system, that came out of that litigation. So—there's all these different factors in history to take into account when you look at local permit ownership and outward migration.

Anna Lavoie: It's complicated.

Alannah Hurley: It's complicated (giggles), but not really! Like if you think about it, it's pretty interesting. When people have the opportunity, or you know, the choice in front of them to feed their families or heat their homes for the winter and the only thing they hold of value is a fisheries permit. The choice is pretty clear—if you have a family to take care of. And that

plays into much broader societal issues I think than, that could even create another conversation, so (laughs).

Anna Lavoie: Maybe we can go back to perhaps the climate change thing. It's your perspective and experience of climate change or environmental change and what it means to you.

Alannah Hurley: Yeah, so, I think—I think change in terms of climate and, and threats to the fishery overall are something the people of Bristol Bay are very familiar with because we face many threats to the fishery from the environment I would say, whether it be offshore oil and gas development, mining development on land, climate change issues. These are really, really, big issues and threats to the fishery that our people have taken seriously for a very long time and have been opposed to these different development projects for a really long time—over a decade now. And so in regards to climate change, a couple different things I guess—ocean acidification, changing climate, our people are seeing these impacts every day. We are sitting here on an 80 degree day probably, when Trump pulled out of the Paris Agreement on June 1st, which is unheard of, you know, temperatures. This is probably going to be one of the hottest summers on record. And so—looking into the face of change that we don't necessarily have a lot of control over is pretty alarming. And I think in my own experience, we actually just fought for a proposal—at the Board of Fish to change some different regulations in Clark's Point in regards to how far out we can fish, because of increased erosion, because of climate change, and we are seeing our rivers change, we are seeing the timing of the fish runs change. These are *very real* changes that our people can point to because of climate change. And so, I think combining the, the anxiety about those changes and how our people adapt, and how we—how we make sure that we, are able to adapt, I guess, in the face of all of these other different development threats, is a lot of stress on our region I think. Especially when we are looking at kind of the broader global issues around salmon, and Bristol Bay being one of last sockeye salmon fisheries on the face of the planet. I think our people have a lot on our shoulders to make sure that this place is protected and can adapt moving forward.

Anna Lavoie: Is there anything else that you would like to talk about? I won't ask any more questions. I'd like for you to just talk about anything else you think is important. Anything you'd like to add, anything about Pebble Mine, anything.

Alannah Hurley: Yeah, so I think—well I work with a tribal coalition that is working to protect the Yup'ik Dena'ina way of life into the future and so when we look at what those threats are, all of these things kind of intermingle. The sustainable economics and unsustainable economics and those different threats. And so, when we talk about Pebble Mine, or mines like Pebble, and off shore oil and gas development, and, the fiscal crisis of the State of Alaska and all these different things that kind of intermingle. I am just really confident that we come from a really long line of strong stewards who have a foundation in what's important for our people in this region. And so, I am optimistic that we are going to be able to continue this fishery for my future grandchildren hopefully—and I think that's it, (laughs),

Kitty Sopow: I was really interested how you were saying, about the melting pot here before the civil rights movement—

Alannah Hurley: Um-hum.

Kitty Sopow: I didn't really think about it that way. Can you just, talk more about that?

Alannah Hurley: Sure. Well just from my own personal perspective—Clark’s Point, the place I am from is very diverse and we all come from a very diverse set of backgrounds. But if you think about what it must have been like then, to have all these different peoples from Europe and Asia coming in and kind of melting with Native Alaskans in these different canneries. And the canneries kind of had to do this melting thing in order to make the fishery work because there were not enough people necessarily to make it successful if they didn’t. And so, it’s just really interesting to think about all these different ethnicities and peoples coming together, and some of them staying in rural Alaska and making a life here and marrying into the Native women that were here, and how our Native people had to adjust to that. I guess—influx of different cultures and different peoples and it’s created some really interesting dynamics, I think in modern, in our generation society. (long pause)

The last thing I think I’ll say is just—in terms of this whole women in the fisheries thing, I thought it was—interesting because I feel like there’s been this whole kind of surge, in like women in different—industries that they aren’t necessarily historically been seen as a part of. But if you talk to them, and like my grandma, they’re like, are you kidding, you know? They’re just, I think they find it kind of funny because they’ve been doing this for so long and their mothers did it, and.

Well it’s cool that this portion of the story is being told because I think their role has been pretty critical moving us into where we are today. And I don’t think the fisheries are perfect and I don’t think that anyone in Bristol Bay will ever disagree that changes can be made to our fisheries, especially the commercial fishery, to ensure that the people who actually live here, and have been stewards of this place forever—could benefit more from this fishery, and more from sustainable industries within this region. So, I think that’s a really important piece of the story moving forward— is how do we transform these industries that have—not necessarily served the people of the region in the past, and how do we transform that into ensuring that the people who actually live in these places benefit in equal amount, I think.

Kim Sparks: You said originally, like most of the set net, if not all of them, were women. Do you have a sense of why that was?

Alannah Hurley: I don’t, and I shouldn’t say all of them were, because I know that there were some men who set-netted as well. But maybe it’s because, if I had to guess, it’s probably because they had large families and they had young children that they had to care for and you can’t really go out on a boat for three weeks if you have eight kids you need to take care of. And so, it was probably practical. You stay on the beach and work with your kids to set net. I would think. That would be my guess.

Kim Sparks: Thank you. And also you said that, you know, when you have limited entry there was probably this language barrier that kept people from getting their rightful permits, and you said that applied in Togiak. How much do you think that applied to the whole—?

Alannah Hurley: That applied to the entire Bristol Bay region. So we’re from Clark’s Point and my mom was able to get one of those interim permits because of that litigation. And there’s some interesting stipulations on those permits. You’re not able to sell them, and once you pass on, they are not transferable to another person. So, I can’t remember the exact number we have left in the region. But once, and those are all local permits, and so once those permits are gone, because of the way the interim permit was set up, because of current law, we are

going to lose a sizable number of local permits. So, that litigation I think helped a lot of people across the board in Bristol Bay, a lot of Native people specifically, get a limited entry permit.

Kim Sparks: Um, where do you see the future of set-netting here? What does that look like to you?

Alannah Hurley: The future of set-netting—that's a really good question. I see it, if we are able to organize and we are able to unify a lot of the set net fishery, it has a very promising future, I think. The set net fish, especially where I come from- Clark's point, the fish we deliver are still alive because we are that close to the tenders. And so, the quality of those fish are, you know, I don't think they are unbeatable. So I think if we are able to organize and ensure that we can—capture more of the revenue from the commercial fishery for the actual people that live here in our regional residents has a very promising future. Unfortunately we have seen a lot of beaches that were traditionally people from the region fishing,—leave, leave the region. And so we have a lot of people who aren't from the region now entering the fishery. But it isn't like that everywhere. So like in Clark's Point where I fish, where my family has fished from the beginning, we, the entire beach is still people whose parents fished there, whose grandparents fished there. Every single set-netter in Clark's point has ancestral ties to Clark's Point and to people who have been fishing there for generations. So I think the dedication to not only protecting our fishery, first and foremost for our Alaska Native traditional way of life, but also for a sustainable economy in a commercial fishery is very, very, strong and I don't think I see that changing any time soon (long pause) that's it.

Kitty Sopow: I know we use the word subsistence now but before there was a commercial permit, or commercial concept, set-netting was being done by women, right? Or maybe not?

Alannah Hurley: By the commercial fishery? Or what do you mean?

Kitty Sopow: Like before there was a commercial fishery Alaska. Like pre-contact times, like set-netting was occurring here, or no?

Alanna Hurley: You mean Native People's like traditional fishing? So it was just women it was everybody and even now it's everybody today. So—it's a very intense process to say the least and so really are entire families take part in putting away fish for the winter as our people have for thousands of years. And, so women primarily now hand down a lot of those skills in terms of how to cut fish, how to, you know, do it right so you don't waste at all, which is very hard. How to make sure you time it with the weather right, you know, all of that is, from my experience has been from my grandma. And I think is the vast majority of everyone else's experience.

Kitty Sopow: And so when you are talking about the fish being delivered to the tenders alive, you are talking about the Clark's Point?

Alannah Hurley: The Clark's Point commercial fishery.

Kitty Sopow: Ok, and so what's the big difference, I mean in the user group, between the commercial set-netters and the subsistence set-netters? Is there a difference?

Alanna Hurley: Is there a difference? I don't think so, I mean I think across the State, and this is another can of worms, there are—fish wars between commercial, subsistence, or Native users, and

sport fishermen. And that is very, very contentious. Allocation issues are really contentious. I would say in my experience in Bristol Bay—we have some of that for sure. We're not exempt from those types of issues—at all. But I think because we have so much fish, it hasn't been as contentious as it has in other parts of the State, which I think we're very, very fortunate to have. But also, that kind of plays into this—these threats of development that we've been dealing with the Pebble Mine, with offshore oil and gas. Those issues have really brought together these different factions of people who traditionally fight like hell over fish, but because of this larger threat to all of us have—and it's not perfect—but have figured out how to work together and unify to protect the fishery as a whole, so we'll have something to fight over in the future. And I think that's really helped bridge some of those issues between user groups.

Everybody I think who is a commercial fisherman, at least if they're from the region, does both. So we put up subsistence fish, that's our number one priority, that's the foundation of the fishery for us, is our connection and our sacred connection to these salmon who have been coming here for thousands of years. And then, in addition to that is the commercial fishery, which has allowed our people to engage in this cash economy that is new to this region, you know, a generation ago. So to answer your question, people do both.

But when you think about colonization and the introduction of Western ways and non-Native peoples to this region, that's not that long ago. You know you think about Native American history, you think, Oh, ten generations ago this happened and that's not the case here in Alaska, it's very, very recent. My grandma didn't see non-Native people until she, you know, was forced to go to school. So these things are very, very, fresh here.

Kim Sparks: It sounds like you and other interviewees have said, you know like, everyone here is taught by their grandmother. And I guess my question is where does your Mom fit into that picture? Is she also teaching you or does everyone defer to the eldest female?

Alannah Hurley: Ah, I would say that my Mom and I both learned from her. But I think in a lot of families we have a lot of matriarchs and the matriarchs kind of calls the shots when it comes to that stuff. And so I think that's why a lot of people will say, My Grandma taught me this or my Grandma taught me that.

And just to add to that, that I don't think a lot of people, especially in the state of Alaska understand, which is really, really hard and kind of contributes to these issues over subsistence, and this misunderstanding of subsistence: it's not just about food and about—and I'm sure other people have told you this as well—but this is something much, much deeper than that and much more sacred than being about food. While we're insanely lucky to have access to the most delicious, wild organic food on earth that they're charging fifty dollars a pound for at Whole Foods, it's so much deeper than that. It teaches our people so many things, like it has for thousands of years. How to work hard, how to respect life, how to respect other people, how to respect the environment, how to think beyond yourself because a lot of it is so based in sharing and community. The way we live and why I think we're so fortunate is it really is a completely different worldview than mainstream society, and our subsistence way of life or our traditional hunting and fishing ingrains that in us from the time that we're little. And so I think that is kind of a missing piece, when you hear a lot of debates about subsistence and Native Alaskan resources is that this fight is not just about food for us. Food's important, and having access to our traditional foods is

important but this is really a fight for who we are at our core as Native people and how our people have sustained ourselves for thousands of years and taught our people how to operate in the world.