

Oral History

June Ingram

Dillingham Alaska,

June 5, 2017: 9:30 AM

Interviewers: Anna Lavoie (PSMFC, NOAA Fisheries AFSC) and Kitty Sopow (BBNA Project Intern)

Notes:

During most of the interview June's gaze is between Anna and Kitty. At times her hands are flat on the table, one on top of the other. Other times she is using her hands in the air as a conductor might be instructing an orchestra. A flow occurs between her hands and the speed with which she speaks. Her language speeds and slows with the energy of the story.

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 Lavoie with Kitty Sopow interviewing June Ingram in Dillingham, Alaska on June 5, 2017.

June Ingram: June Ingram of Bristol Bay, and I'm an elder.

Kitty Sopow: How do you spell "Ingram" just so we know?

June Ingram: I-n-g-r-a-m

Kitty Sopow: Thank you.

June Ingram: So, I'll start off about fisheries. We grew up from the time I came to realizing I was alive, we were at our camp down at Ekuk—E-k-u-k. And it was a way of life. My great—my grandfather Anderson on my father's side, he—he got that site in the early 1940s. So, and he gave it to my mother in the mid-1950s. So that site that we occupy is still in the family, has been in our family for maybe seventy or eighty years. We have been told we cannot sell it. We have to keep it in the family and with eleven, thirteen people in our family, and each one had children, that's a whole village, almost a city. So, now we have grandchildren and one great-grandchild.

So this is how we do it: those people in the family who are willing, hard work—fun, learning our ways, we don't bring technology down there, we have no running water, we have outhouse, we live on the complete subsistence way of life. We could change it, we could get satellite, we could get computer access, we could get electricity, but we want to keep the way, the traditional way of life that we were taught. And, my sister, my sister has a permit, but we work the site together, her and I, at my mother's request. We share most of the overhead, and we have our family, children, our grandchildren, and first year of the one great-grandchild going down this summer. Of course the younger kids they want the money, but it depends upon the price, the number of fish coming through, where the fish go, because we're stationary. We cannot move our net, so some years we make a lot, some years we barely make to cover our bills. My sister and I are down there mainly to help our offspring with their schooling and their way of life and to teach them what we have been taught.

The first week, ten days, it's like, culture shock to the kids. But they keep coming back. And they just look forward to it all winter. They keep coming back. They're, they're nitpicking, they're arguing, they're like, they're in withdrawals. And then after the week, ten days, then there's complete harmony. That's what we allow them to do that because we know they're withdrawing from the so-called real world. But I believe that Ekuk, with none of the comforts of nowadays, is truly, really the real world. So everyone comes down, the young ones. And it becomes—joyful, it's hard work, but everyone works.

Before when my mother and my sister first, I'd say twenty years ago. It used to be strictly women fishing set nets. It was all women. The men went out on the beach. The boys would fish on the set net until they turned thirteen or fourteen. Then they would go out with the fathers or the uncles in fishing in the fishing boat. Now I notice down at the Ekuk beach there's a potential, I would say, of seventy, at least seventy-five sites. And for a set net site nowadays you need at least six to eight partners because of the way the fisheries have changed. Because of the requirements that the canneries want, pure, fresh, fish. So we have six to eight partners on our site. When the men came in and started occupying the set net sites down at Ekuk, I always watched. It has become—competitive. Sort of like get as much as you can, to heck with everything else.

But, on our site, our main goal is to enjoy, and to work as hard as we can, but yet enjoy, but we do not compete with anyone. We do what we can and the best we can. The good thing is, and I bring this up to the kids before we start the fishing season. This is a good lesson on teaching when you start something you cannot quit. Because when we pull in that fifty fathoms of net chock full of fish, we cannot stop. We have a certain amount to pick the fish at high water, we have about an hour before the tides start ebbing. We have to pick the fish as fast as we can and get that net back out before the tide goes too low so we could catch the outgoing and incoming tide. So we work silently and we work together. It's so good you guys. It teaches those kids to finish what you have started. It teaches the kids to work together as a team and it teaches the kids the plain simple way of life. What I do to my kids and my grandkids, I teach them the old style, what we were taught.

My late mother passed away 2012. She was eighty-eight. She said the Yup'ik way when you go down to Ekuk is to take a little bit of dirt and put it in your mouth and swallow it. Then you will become one with the earth and it will know you're there, and that you are there with it. And the greens, the berries, even the fish will come to supply for you. So this is—it's a lot of work, but it's a way of life—a way of life that I want to pass on to my great grandchildren—I, it's something that teaches everything, everything is possible for our people, for my family, to learn, to depend, independent and not competing. Independent of providing for yourself, whether it be putting up fish, salting fish and not to compete with other people. We tell them, what we do here and what other people do on their site is their business. Because that was the way that we were taught growing up in a small village, was to stay out of people's, other people's lives, and not to compete because that will cause problems. So that, that's how we try to live. Fishing is very, very important to us—I hope it does not end with the Pebble Mine. I have great fear.

I'm an elder. I'm sixty-seven years old. I grew up, I was born in 1950. In Alaska, in bush Alaska, we are not ashamed of our age. We're proud of it. We're proud of our gray hair,

we're proud of our wrinkles, because by gaining those things we gain wisdom. We're not goofy no more and trying to find our way. We know where we are.

So it's a family, it's a family, I can't say we make a good living from fishing. Sometimes we do, but it's mainly for the young people. That's why I still work, my sister still works. Because we're not doing it for ourselves. We're doing it for the generations that's coming up behind us, to teach them the Yup'ik way of thinking, the Yup'ik way of respect for other people, the Yup'ik way of respect for themselves and the land and the abundance that the earth gives us.

That's it. If you have questions, ask.

Anna Lavoie: I do. From what you've talked about, it's very beautiful. It seems your role as a woman and a Yup'ik and other women are very important,

June Ingram: Thank you,

Anna Lavoie: and educating and teaching the children,

June Ingram: Yeah.

Anna Lavoie: Would you like to speak more about the importance of women in fishing and teaching?

June Ingram: Yes. The, the way the culture started, on set-netting, it was all women. The women teaching and training the girls how to put up fish, how to draw from the land as seasons came because different greens are growing different time of the year. And then the berries come and we're still fishing. So it was mainly a women's fishery. The men went out there and really, really fished hard for the grubstakes, the winter's fuel and the winter's ten months' worth of groceries. Because there was no jobs back then. Now we're just trying to keep that up. So we still teach our children how to gather because gathering is still important to us.

Women in fisheries is very, very important, because I believe we set the standard for the, not for the bringing the dough, bringing the money. But we set the standard for the ladies and the young boys on the beach as they're growing up. That's what I think the importance of women in the fisheries is, because during the winter there's school, the kids are in school almost eighty percent of their time, and when we take time off—I thank God for the hospital which allows me to take two months off to spend complete time with my family. And teach, and bring, and making them come back to reality. Reality of one day we might have to live like we live at Ekuk with no electricity, no running water, outhouse, and just off the bare essentials. That's what—fishing is involved, but there's other things involved also. It's our culture and people seem to be forgetting it. It's, everything wants to be done fast and lots. Quantity over quality. When quality and peace and teaching is more important than anything else, because the earth, the world, the creator will provide if we continue to give to our offspring the keys to living a good life. To me that's the importance of women in fisheries. Not the money, nothing else, but to teach our offspring. What, how to be, how to live. It's good.

Anna Lavoie: That's beautiful.

June Ingram: Yeah, it's good. I enjoy it. I love my family and whenever someone comes onto our camp, I'm more. I enjoy youth. Because youth are honest like you guys are genuinely

honest. And genuine in your feelings without barriers. And which makes it good and comfortable for us older people. And, I really appreciate, and I am humbled that Gayla and you guys have allowed me to speak on behalf of, I can't say for all the women in Bristol Bay, but for my family, which is a huge family. It's a real huge family, because thirteen kids. And everyone had kids (laughter), so—

And women in fisheries also teaches (coughing) the girls. I have, my first-born granddaughter who goes down there every year ever since she was, like, six. And now she's twenty-one. And she has a child, and the grand, my great-grandchild is going down there for the first time this year. I want that great-grandchild because the air smells different down there. The ground smells different, they get it into their spirits. They cannot stay away because that's a total different way of life. There's no outside pressure. There's no certain way you have to be, or look, or dress. Its total freedom and connection with the land and our creator. Because we have no one else to depend upon but our creator, who gives us strength, who gives us answers when we ask. And these are the things our offspring are learning. The girls are learning, they're not girls anymore, they're growing up. From the time they realize. I have two grandkids coming this summer, eleven and thirteen, and a little, an eight year old grandson. They're coming up from Washington to spend time down there. We try to gather and get them to participate—

The girls, you know, learn how—even how busy we are, we provide three meals a day. We work together without arguing or fighting, take turns cooking. We also gotta pack water from the cannery all the way down to our camp. And we have to do certain things like keep the maqii [steam bath], the steam bath waters full, because we take one every single night. We have to chop wood for the maqii so that everyone will go to bed clean and free of all the days when we chukha, we splash on the rocks. We try not to talk. We just put our heads down and we think about what happened during the day. At least this is what I do. I tell my kids, in the maqii, you guys don't seek, to heck with competition, who can take it the hottest. You guys sit there because right at the back of your head, all day long it's straight up. This was what told to me by my mother.

During the maqii you take it just as much as you can. You put your head forward and you think about all that had happened to you during the day, all the people that you're involved with, what they, how they affected you in your spirit. Because it'll come to your mind and it'll go into your spirit. And every time you hang on to stuff you throw it into the sled that you're carrying. In the maqii if you think it out and let the things that will not help you go out through this, this hole right here, (demonstrates by pointing to area behind the neck while facing the ground, while sitting) you let everything that somebody had something that make you feel hurt, you let it go. You think it, you feel that emotion to the max, and then you let it go. Those things that are going to help, I'm sharing with you guys that my mother shared with me. Those things that are going to help you, somebody said a kind word to you, or just, you felt the person like you, our spirits connect. You keep those things in your spirit. And of course you have to send out good thoughts to those people who have injured you, and you also send out good thoughts to those people who have been, who helped you. Life is a circle, she said. She said, whether—my mother—whether we, whatever we give out, whether it be good or bad, will come back to us (June's hand is slowly, constantly moving in a clockwise circle at this time as she explains the circle). She said give out goodness instead of badness and

it'll be like a big snowball that goes down through all your kids to the end. That's the Yup'ik way of thinking. It sort of reminds me of the Christian way of thinking, to give good instead of evil.

My mom was very, very, very, very, knowledgeable. When she married my father she didn't speak one word of English. It was a pre-arranged marriage. She married in 1942—and, one time I asked her. I said, How did you stay married, Mom? Because when, when people first came to Bristol Bay there was no pianists, there was no doctors, there was no lawyers, there were no teachers, they were all sailors. So when I, when I hear people talk about how Natives, Alaska Natives drink and get drunk, that's how they were taught, to drink like a sailor till they're drunk and for days. But our, when we went away to high school, we saw a different world. We are, at least my eyes were opened. And there was, there's all kinds of people just like in the Yup'ik culture there's all kind of people. And I realized, hey, you know, we're no different. So, which is good. Everything is good, ladies. Everything is good for those who believe that's it gonna be good, you know? Yeah (smiles and nods head).

And I probably went away to my women and fisheries but I explained our job. Women in fisheries is to teach the young ones, to prepare the boys to go out and follow their fathers in the boats while the women teach the girls how to gather the greens as the seasons, because every two weeks there's a different season to pick, as we're fishing. And to be a housekeeper. And to cook. And to go fearlessly and pick berries, without (laughs) no fear of bears. So we all do it together, those of us women in the village who are following at Ekuk fish camp, those of us who are following our traditional way of life, we all go in a group, all scared of bears making lots of noise, but we go up and we pick (laughs). Good way of life.

Anna Lavoie: Well, you mentioned the change in the seasons and in picking. Would you mind talking a little bit about how you have experienced environmental change or climate change, or what it means to you?

June Ingram: Yes—sadness, to begin with. The berries for three years, the salmonberries, it's a staple in our lives, the berries, the salmonberries we get down at Ekuk. We move back up here and we get the blackberries, the cranberries, the huckleberries, and we couldn't figure out for three years how come there's no salmonberries? Last summer, our friend—she came down from the hill and we were doing something outside of our camp and she held up a Ziploc bag and that was around the eighteenth of June. She said, They're ready! And it was like, what? Because that was a month before, about a month before they supposed to be. I see some greens are not growing. It's, uh, the heat comes too fast, like the green ikiituk [wild celery] we call it, we go and they're not growing very big. They supposed to grow in cool, rainy weather with a little bit of sun. These aren't growing. The puyuraaq [wild raspberry], they used to be abundant down at Ekuk on the flat. They're wild raspberries, they don't even grow anymore, because it's too hot and there's not enough rain. It's so hot, you guys down there, we could barely stand it. Every single summer. Before the water would be cool, the wind off the water would be cool and we'd be picking salmon, king salmon and red salmon, with an overcast like it is now with a slight rain. This is supposed to be fishing weather.

The fish, I watch, I keep an eye on the fish. I noticed in the last, I'd say four or five years, the fish take a long time coming and like they're staying out there and it's too hot up in the Nushagak River. And then when they come they go like, the boats out there are not catching where their nets used to go down. Sometimes they don't catch. I believe that they're going real deep where the water's cold. Because I know fish like cold water. And they're taking a different route. I notice that the sandbars, I don't know what it has to do with climate change, but I notice that there's a lot of sandbars, and you could even see it out here outside in Dillingham. The sandbars I don't know if the water's receding from the heat, but outside of our site when we put out our nets, our lines last weekend, there, the water, the sandbar was so close I actually walked out there where I never ever walked before. And, the way the salmon are coming, it's never the same twice. In fact, I've, I pity the salmon, because last year I told my sister, I would pull in the net and I would, with the truck, and the guy, one of the boys would be in front putting it on the corks and I would pull in the net, and I would look at the fishes as I'm pulling it in. And around July after the main run, around July 21, I told my sister, we're partners, I told her, I said, the fish are really looking, there was even red fish that probably came out of the hot up there, and came back out. We were catching them, we never did before. So I told my sister, I said, it's time to quit, the quality of fish is really low, these fish are suffering. I am not joking. They were not healthy looking. So, we pulled up our lines, we pulled our net and we quit. Because it's so important to sell, to me, the best quality fish to the cannery to keep the prices up there. So we had to, we pulled up, there was still people fishing and they probably thought us goofy but we didn't give a heck, you know? We do our own thing. We don't compete.

So last summer was a good season. We made some money. The boys and girls made some money and they left real happy. Now they're coming back pure broke and are ready for another season (laughs). They're good, they're good kids. They love to sleep because we get up, last summer, we fished. I was very proud of the kids, for twenty days we fished six hours on, six hours off. After we pulled in, picked, delivered to the cannery with the trucks we got an average of two hours sleep for twenty days. Four hours sleep in a twenty-four hour period.

Anna Lavoie: Wow.

June Ingram: Uh, I'm getting tired.

Anna Lavoie: If you want to stop, we can.

June Ingram: No, go ahead. Yeah.

Anna Lavoie: Okay. Well, so you have commercial nets and subsistence nets?

June Ingram: We have one. We have a commercial fifty fathoms set out. We still put our pegs, our outer pegs in the same place because we're women and kids, and if we put them too far out like my husband wants to, what would happen if the pegs came up in the middle of the season and we don't have men down there to go out and put them out, or if the tides are not minus, we can't reach, we'd lose the whole fishing season. Where my Grandpa Anderson staked his site, it's like an eddy. It's where the two tides meet. I don't know why, but I noticed we always catch fish. They must like to play in that eddy.

My sister likes to cook, so she cooks and wash dishes, but I'm always watching the river and the boats and the tides. So we complement each other, you know. But to be a fisher, beach fisherman, we have to know the tides. She knows the tide book real good, but I watch. If, sometimes, if the breakers could be up to five, six feet, and when it gets rough, so we were taught, by my Grandpa Anderson and my mom—you have to watch the horizon down below. If the water looks black and its pure calm here and nice, beautiful, if it looks black way down there, that means big wind is coming. Listen to the radio and see how windy it is. Pull in because your net, because where we have our net usually the breakers are on the beach are real high, it buries at least twenty, fifteen, twenty fathoms of net with rocks and sand. And so we lose out and we lose the net. It costs about, a fifty fathom net costs a little under fifteen hundred bucks, so every two years we need to change. We have four nets, different sizes because [Alaska Department of] Fish and Game always have a requirement, you can't fish over five and three quarters or five and a quarter, so we have different, different, sized nets, whatever Fish and Game requires we pull in and we pull out, whatever they require. The hard thing is when the cannery down at Ekuk, they flash freeze their fish so, this is how we work it:

I'm the truck driver, so I drive the one truck up before we even pull in. And with one partner, and we get, they provide slush ice and water and we mix it. Then we drive down and I park right down by the net. Then I get the other truck and the strongest boy hooks it on as I drive down and here's the net. I drive it down and he has a hook where he hooks it on to, as far as he could, onto the cork. Then on this side, here's the pulley line and it's connected to the net. My sister is over there but she's gonna train the twenty-one year old granddaughter of mine this summer. She has the rope. When the person who is hooking the cork raises his hand like this, she lets it go and holds on until she sees him go down and I'm holding the net. And it only pulls in like five fathoms at a time, because we try to save the fish. The more we drag the fish in, the more bruised they'll get and the more scales will come off. So we, she, when she sees my truck stop, she tightens that rope up again, so that the net don't continue to go out. If it continues to go out we're gonna lose it if nobody was over there.

(June is acting it out in her chair. Spinning her hands in circles when she is tying the rope around the stakes. Part of the process is one person standing on the line for which she stomps her foot on the ground for emphasis. As if she was standing on the line)

So, one of, another partner comes and steps on the corks to hold the net in place while I quickly drive down and I get, he hooks it on again, and we do that five fathoms at a time until we get the fifty fathoms in. In the meantime, the other partners, the four other partners are picking as we're pulling it in. And they're putting the fish above the net and then after we pull it all in, there are still fish in the net. But I use the truck and I back in and I go up to my sister because we have to meet that tide or beat that tide before it ebbs too far and we can't put out. We usually pull in high tide. And that's when the tide starts going out. So I back up real fast to her, she hooks the rope up and I pull the net back out. And then, when I'm done pulling the net out, they tie it, they tie that one end and then the people down there are still picking. So I go park the truck out of the way because all these trucks from flounder flats gonna be delivering, it gotta be out of the way, we gotta keep the road open. So I run down, and I bring the slush truck and one of the, the youngest one is the one to throw the fish where the pickers put 'em in piles into the truck

with the slush. That's the youngest one's job. So it's that over and over and over again (laughs). We don't talk, we just laugh once in a while at each other. It's a great way to live. Each one of us has a responsibility and that person knows no matter how young they are they are responsible for that, their job that they're given. Because before the season, we have a meeting. And we talk about who's going to have what job. Because every job is vital. If that person doesn't wake up and doesn't show up, then we can't set or we can't pull. It's team effort. So that's how we teach our kids about life—a good way of life.

Climate change—I don't know what it's gonna bring this summer. But I see on the hill down at Ekuk used to be, this is supposed to be a rainy place. Lot of rain. Damp place. But when we walk, when I walk on the tundra up the hill, it's crunching and dry. And the berries are not as, there's a lot of places where the berries don't grow.

Anna Lavoie: Do you have to walk further to find berries?

June Ingram: No. But the places where we grew up picking berries and getting the berries are, seems like they're scattered. They're not as abundant. And they seem to be coming earlier. Some of them die because of the heat and not enough rain. We'll see how the summer goes. My Mom used to warn us, the last two months she was alive, she would, she was very weak but she tried to fill us in with as much as she possibly could, that she heard passed down through the generations. She said her old dad would tell her to pass on to her kids and grandkids,

When [change of tone] the earth start getting tired, things are going to start changing. The way things we're used to, is gonna—not be the way they are. They're gonna say lots of fish is coming, but hardly any will come and nobody will know where they go. The animals will go farther and farther to colder places. And the people from the, the not-real people—we're the real people, the Yup'ik, the first people—will make rules where, the land don't belong to everyone no more. The land belongs to this person and that person. You can't go hunt where you want to, where you used to. You can't go pick berries where you used to or gather greens where you used to because it belongs to that person.

My mom never did get Native Land Claims Settlement Land. She said nope, everybody owns the land. So one time down here, I won't mention names, I took, I was young and I was learning. I had my first child on my hip, and I went with my mom and her cousin to pick berries down here. And they were so determined they were walking determined like, so I followed them and I watched their every movement. They didn't talk, they'd only speak in Yup'ik quietly to each other. So this man came out of his house and I got real scared, I stood there and I watched them react. He was shaking his arms, “Get off my property.” So my mom and my aunt walked up to him and I followed them in a, you know, in a respectful distance, and I listened. And my aunt looked at him and she said, “Did you plant the salmonberries?!” It took him aback. “No”, she said, “we won't bother your land, we just going to go pick them, you never plant them so they don't belong to you!” (laughter) So, he turned around and he walked in his house, not saying a word (laughter). I'll never forget that (laughter), yeah.