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Location: Passamaquoddy Tribal Office, Pleasant Point, Maine.

Interviewer: Julia Beaty

Interviewee: Brian Altvater

Associated sound files: BrianAltvater.wav

Brian: My name's Brian Altvater, Sr.

Julia: And why did Ed suggest that you come? Do you have a special role in the –

Brian: I'm the chair of the Schoodic River Keepers. I was kind of the one that got the whole committee going and fired up to try and restore the river, the St. Croix River.

Julia: Oh, okay. So what was that like? That was a long process, right?

Brian: Well, I think the thing I'm most proud of is almost every member is from either Indian Township or Pleasant Point and that it's a grassroots organization and that we say that we're non-politically motivated, but at the same time, you're in the middle of politics because you're talking about two different countries, the Tribe, and of course the state of Maine, and the International Joint Commission, so it involves a lot of people.

Julia: And so you were part of that process?

Brian: I was really upset that at the time I think they hadn't allowed the alewives up beyond the Grand Falls dam. Up above the Grand Falls dam is the east and west branch of the St. Croix River. Just above the Grand Falls dam, because the dam has created a lot of backup of water, they call that the Grand Falls flowage. So basically the alewives were being denied about 98% of their ancestral habitat. So they weren't able to spawn and breed. Without that the numbers would never recover because, you know, 98% is a lot of the total watershed that they were not allowed – and for 22 years they were not allowed to go above Grand Falls dam. Last year with the help of many people, LD 72 was passed. That would allow a board to be removed from the fishway at Grand Falls dam. So we're hopeful in ten to twelve years that the numbers of alewives within that watershed will really recover and hopefully bounce back. Just one other thing, the St. Croix River watershed has the potential to have more sea run alewives than the Penobscot and the Kennebec put together. So that tells you something right there.

Julia: Yeah. I've heard that it's huge. I'm not super familiar with it. I live in Orono and before that I was not in Maine. So thanks for explaining some of the background. I was doing an interview with someone in Ellsworth and he was really excited that that was opening up – I think it was in Ellsworth – because he thought that that would help all the rest of Maine if there's tons of alewives coming back.

Brian: They've done some river restoration in the Union River, which is in Ellsworth. There's been a lot of other places. Down in Damariscotta they have an alewife festival. I think it was last

weekend. And many of the rivers such as the Little River here in Perry, Pennamaquan in Pembroke, Dennys in Dennysville, Edmonds, East Machias, Machias. All the rivers are having a really excellent run of alewives this year, which is very exciting.

Julia: On all of those rivers are there people maintaining passage?

Brian: Yeah. Some of the rivers are in better conditions than others. Unfortunately there are several dams in some of the rivers. This is one of the few places – not every municipality allows harvesting of alewives. East Machias is one of them. I don't know how they got that set up, but I think it's like three days they can fish and four days they have to open up the fishways, they're not able to fish. And they have a limit. So they've got a number that they go by where they can take – I think the rule of thumb, and again, I don't know exactly what they follow – but the rule of thumb is you can allow maybe 235 fish per acre of your watershed. If you harvest 200 fish then that 35 fish will be able to sustain the species. That coupled with you've got that factored into how much you're going to be harvesting.

Julia: Okay. So is there separate Tribal management for around here? I'm not super familiar with how it works.

Brian: Not really because very little of our reservation land Downeast – we don't really have lands where the rivers run through the Tribal lands. The St. Croix River's a little different. Up in Indian Township, we have lands up there. The alewives certainly do go all the way up towards Big Lake and Lewy Lake. They're not able to get above West Grand, which is in Grand Lake Stream. There's a lot of watershed above there, but at this point the bill only allowed those fish to go up to West Grand on the west branch of the St. Croix River. On the eastern branch of the St. Croix River they're able to go just below Spednic Lake. At Spednic Lake, they've got a dam there also, and a fishway. I'm saying we don't have access to the entire St. Croix River watershed, but we're working on it.

Julia: Okay. So is that part of the reason why you were so involved in that was that you could have access –

Brian: The whole reason for us getting involved in what we did was river restoration. I look at the saltwater and freshwater as one body of water because you have species of fish that live out their lives in saltwater and spawn in fresh and immediately go back after they spawn to saltwater. And then, like the American eel, they live out their lives in freshwater and they spawn in saltwater. So to me it's just one body of water that needs that connection. The different species of fish keep that going.

Julia: Okay. So it's about fixing the whole thing?

Brian: Yes.

Julia: That makes sense. Can you describe the cultural importance of alewives, or eels, or both?

Or all river species?

Brian: Well, *Siqon* means spring. *Siqonomeq* means spring fish. That's what we call the alewives. And the Schoodic River, *Skut* means fire. *Skutik* is kind of like a place of fire. I've been told by some of the elders that when they were smoking fish by what is now called Salmon Falls in Milltown, in Calais, there were so many fires where they were smoking alewives that at night it looked like the whole sky was on fire. Thus came the name that is now, the English version is Schoodic. Before the times of McDonalds and pizzas and all these fast food places, after a long winter I'm sure a lot of the supplies of food and stuff became low. The real big feed of fish came at this time of year because you had the alewives and the blueback coming to spawn back then in the millions. And so our people took advantage of that. And that was one of the things that sustained them. It was a sustenance for the Tribe.

Julia: Did they use it for any other uses besides consumption, human consumption?

Brian: Well, my grandmother was born in the late 1800s. I used to talk to her and she used to say when she was a young girl at Pleasant Point everyone had a garden. Sometimes they'd use seaweed as fertilizer, fish, and I think she mentioned alewives. I think she even mentioned lobster. Because right here at Half Moon Cove used to be, before they put the causeway in, there was a spawning ground there for lobster. She said that they would take the wagons down there and fish for them and just load the wagons up with lobster.

Julia: Wow.

*[0:11:10 – 0:12:04 interrupted by someone else coming into the room.]*

Julia: So one of the questions on here that I think you may have already touched on a little bit, but what do you think is the biggest threat to the alewives, and the bluebacks, and the eels, and the other river-running species in this area?

Brian: Just not allowing them access up and down the rivers with the dams and the culverts and stuff like that. Because you have some culverts that dump into the river and some of the culverts are actually higher than the high water mark. So they can drain out but there's no passage for them to go up to the small brooks, streams, and ponds, and flowages, and lakes, and stuff. So I definitely think that's an issue right there. And the rivers have evolved over hundreds of thousands of years to flow and have the fish go up and down. I think that once you start damming them up that prevents those fish from going up and down the rivers. It's a huge obstacle for them and there's been times that some fishways, it's been said that although you have a fishway there only 10% of the fish actually make it above the dam, as opposed to if there was no dam there, you'd virtually have 100% making it up there. But because of the dam, the fishway isn't designed to meet all different species that go up and down the river.

Julia: So what do you think is the best way to address that problem?

Brian: Take out all the dams. To me that's restoration, is to take out all the dams.

Julia: Yeah, that would be nice.

Brian: Because they generate very little electricity compared to the damage that they do to the entire ecosystem.

Julia: Do people around here distinguish between alewives and bluebacks when they're harvesting?

Brian: Well, there's so few bluebacks. There's probably, I don't know what the number is, but usually about 10% of the run are blueback herring. I know last year at Milltown when they were counting fish that there was only like four or five blueback herring and the rest of them were alewives. So my thinking is there's very few blueback herring out there. I can't tell them apart. I really can't! They're really hard to tell. They almost look identical. There are some differences with them but they're very hard to tell apart.

Julia: That's what I've heard.

Brian: They're almost the same size. They're almost the same shape. But there are things about them that you can distinguish the difference between them. If I just pulled them one out of the river I wouldn't be able to tell the difference.

Julia: Do you know if there've been – so, I guess you said you're not a harvester yourself –

Brian: No. No.

Julia: But you seem like you're pretty in touch with what's happening, out there talking to harvesters. Have there been any changes in abundance or any other changes in what's happening with the alewives?

Brian: As far as the alewife goes, again, at one point the St. Croix River was way under 1% of the historic runs. And that's just one river. There's rivers within the northeast where they've totally disappeared. They don't fit the criteria of endangered species, but I guess they list them as a species of concern or maybe even a threatened species, but they don't meet the criteria to list them under the Endangered Species Act. Although less than 1% of what they used to be is significant in my thinking. But in terms of how the law is written, they don't fit the criteria.

Julia: Do you think they should be endangered?

Brian: I think they should be, definitely. But I'm not the federal government.

Julia: They're going to reconsider it in a few years time, which is part of the reason, like I said, why NOAA is involved in this. I don't know which way they're leaning but I think all this

restoration work is definitely going to help influence their decision... What do you think Downeast Maine would be like if there were no river fisheries?

Brian: Downeast Maine, no river fisheries at all? Well, I think you see what's happened and that's that the lobstermen are buying their fish from New Zealand, Australia, and California. And you don't know if there's any viruses or things that may come as a result of those bait fish coming into our area. It's a shame. Alewives make excellent lobster bait. I think that could be a balance. I think you could have the rivers open, have the population increase like crazy, and still have some of the people harvest some of them. I think you can have a balance there. But if there was no fisheries at all that wouldn't hurt my feelings. But I don't think that's going to happen because people do have a livelihood. I guess the sardines are bay herring. They're virtually gone now. They are quite expensive from what I hear.

Julia: And that used to be a big industry around here?

Brian: Huge industry. My dad was a herring fisherman. That's how I grew up. I used to help him on that. He had the best two fish weirs in the Passamaquoddy Bay. I don't think there's one fish weir, at least on the American side, that's operational now as far as a fish weir goes. Because what happened was with fish finders, sonar, and airplanes, they were nabbing the fish even before they got in the bay and they shut off an entire cove. Sometimes they would catch, you know, a hogshead is 17 ½ bushels of fish, that's one hogshead, they'd catch thousands at a time. And then you had other ships come in from other countries with factories right on there - this was before the 100-mile limit - and they just virtually wiped out the whole stock.

Julia: So this was in the '60s and '70s?

Brian: No, this was probably more towards the middle '70s and towards '80, in that area. But it's like a forest. Once you cut it you realize that you made a mistake. You can do what you need to do, but those 200-year-old trees aren't going to grow back over night.

Julia: So even 30, 40 years later they still haven't come back?

Brian: Yeah... Anything else?

Julia: Do you know if the timing of – I guess this is about either river herring or eels, but do you know if the timing of the arrival and when they leave, does that change on a year-to-year basis?

Brian: Well, it's like anything else. Spring's late this year. The runs are late this year because we had an extremely cold winter and we had a cold spring and there was a lot of runoff. A lot of it probably has to do with water temperature. They have to get a certain water temperature and if you have a lot of ice in the lakes and stuff it's going to take a while for the temperature of the water to get up. So it was late this year. I was looking at the records, as far as the St. Croix River goes, we've had years where the run of alewives, the heavy run isn't until the second week of June. So there's been other years when they're late. They'll run when they're ready, but as far

as we're concerned, they're late.

Julia: Okay. So the second week of June, for the bulk of it, that's late?

Brian: Yes.

Julia: And what's it normally?

Brian: Right now should be the peak, right about now. And it's peaking in other rivers. But it's like a wave. It comes up the coast and the St. Croix River is the last one to have a run because they've got the farthest to migrate.

Julia: What about the elvers? Do you know anything about the timing of when they come in? Has that changed?

Brian: I don't really know. I'm not that up to date on elvers. I know a lot of fishermen and people that harvest them but I don't – from talking with people that do fish for them, some of the neighbors, they're saying that they were running late too. They were running late this year, and of course the alewives were running late. But the elvers run before the alewives do. At some point they overlap and they begin to catch up. Alewives, in their fyke nets!

Julia: Oh no. I didn't realize that. And do the alewives keep going after the elvers are done? Like you were saying that the elvers come in first and then the alewives come in –

Brian: See with the elvers it's a one-way trip. They're going up to fresh water to live out their lives. Then the alewives and the blueback herring are just going up there to spawn. The alewives spawn in ponds and lakes. The bluebacks spawn in swift-running water. And so as soon as they're done spawning they immediately head back out to sea. And then probably I'd say mid-July the alewives will probably be three, three and a half inches long. And they migrate out to the ocean. And they probably won't return until they're four years old, to spawn for the first time.

Julia: Okay.

Brian: I don't want to take up Chief Akagi's time because I've done that before and I never heard the end of it.

Julia: I think you answered all of my questions. But if you have anything else that you think I should know or that I missed?

Brian: No, just that I tell people that if you close off an artery or a vein and complain about blood flow, it's like our rivers. When you block off those rivers it's going to impact everything, every animal out there, from the eagles to the marine mammals to the otters and bears. You name it. If we have a good population of alewives, then it feeds everything else, including the

groundfish, pollock, haddock, and cod fish. And they said that in the Kennebec River, for the first time in decades there was a large school of cod fish on the mouth of the river. And they haven't seen that for many, many years. And the other thing too is they were tagging shortnose sturgeon and Atlantic sturgeon up in the Kennebec River and they tracked them right here to Passamaquoddy Bay. And some of these fish were big. Some of them were 175, 180 pounds. That's a big fish. So it's all connected. It's all inter-connected.