Date: Thursday May 29, 2014.
Location: Boyden Stream, Perry, Maine.
Interviewer: Julia Beaty
Interviewee: Ed Bassett
Associated sound files: EdBassett.wav

Julia: Can you repeat what you were saying about your name and where we are?

Ed: Oh, yeah. Sure. We're at the head of tide at Boyden Stream or the Little River - it's a stream that comes out of Boyden Lake – in the town of Perry. My name is Ed Bassett. This is May 29, 2014. Sitting here, preparing for an interview. I don't know what else you want.

Julia: That's good. So this project is about alewives and eels. Do you feel qualified to talk about – do you want to talk about eels at all? Or do you just want to talk about alewives?

Ed: I can talk about whatever you want to ask. If I can't answer you I'll just say I don't know.

Julia: Okay. That's fine. So, you harvest alewives?

Ed: Yes.

Julia: Do you also harvest elvers at all?

Ed: No, but my family does. My wife and my child, my daughter.

Julia: Okay. So you know about them then. Can you first describe your role in the Tribe? Does that related to –

Ed: I work in the environmental department. I was hired to do GIS work and I have since expanded to do some work on the St. Croix River restoration. And not only just the St. Croix but basically work within the confines of what we consider the Passamaquoddy traditional homeland, of which the St. Croix is the central artery, basically, of the tribal homeland. But it also includes other rivers and streams south of here, which goes all the way down to Ellsworth, the Union River and north in Canada to the Crow River. And it goes, all those head waters, up into the land, into the internal, what do they call it? Up into the head waters, basically. The higher ground – inland, that's what I was looking for. So that's a pretty big piece of land or territory, the Passamaquoddy homeland, traditional homeland. But my focus today is alewives, amongst other fish, but primarily alewives. The Tribe is trying to evaluate the St. Croix watershed for fish passage, not just for alewives but for other migratory fish that come from the sea as well as trout and landlocked salmon. We need to determine how healthy our rivers and streams are, the habitat, also for fish passage and for water quality. So we've got a lot of work ahead of us. And so I work in that area plus I'm finishing up a term on Tribal Council. I'll be done September 30th. What else? I'm a grandfather of many grandchildren and I hope to be able to see great grandchildren. And that's what this work is all about, by the way. It's about

the future generations. I will get into that a little bit.

Julia: Can you tell me about where we are right now and why this is a good place to harvest alewives?

Ed: Well, Boyden Lake has been a lake that has been pretty productive for alewives for as long as I can remember. And the Tribe has come to this stream at this location to harvest alewives for thousands of years. And also other local rivers and streams like the Pennamaquan, which is just a little ways from here. And the St. Croix is just north of here. There are a lot of different places that are considered traditional alewife spawning habitat. And this is an alewife spawning lake, upstream.

Julia: So did you ever harvest alewives at the St. Croix? Or is that too far from here?

Ed: No, I haven't, because the St. Croix has been pretty much decimated by a whole lot of different influences over the years. We're trying to work to try to restore the river as much as we can. The alewife population in the St. Croix went down as low as 900 in the year 2000. I think I got that right. It was either 2000 or 2001. 900 were counted. There's a fish counting place in the town of Milltown, Canada, just across the river from Calais. At the power station they have a trap there where they count fish. They only counted 900 that year. Now, well last year it was up to like 16,000 and the year before it was like 30,000. But that river has traditionally been able to produce millions because the headwaters are very productive alewife spawning areas. So we're hoping we can bring the population up so that the fish can recover. I think we will be able to. I think it's going to work. We need the cooperation of Maine people and Canadian people to make this better. This fish is important. It's not just important to people. It feeds everything. All the fish that feed off of it. It's called the fish that feeds all. It feeds everything from little tiny bacteria in the water in the streams to eagles, ospreys, bear, mink, whatever. There's a lot of different animals that rely on this fish. And we're thinking, the science tells us that this fish, when it recovers, gets to be in the millions, back to what it used to be, the ecosystem will then be able to rebound and recover as well. Which means more animals. More productivity. More of everything. And, yes, humans can take advantage of that and harvest them for whatever purposes, either they want to eat them or use them for lobster bait or who knows, maybe they'll make a food product or something in the future. I don't know. But they're very healthy fish to eat.

Julia: So on the phone we were talking and just now you were describing the ways that you personally use them, or have used them. Can you describe some of that?

Ed: Mostly I try to make sure they can survive. That's my primary work is to find where the blockages are and help them get past that. Like if the fishway is blocked I would fix the baffle or whatever it takes to get that fishway to work. But I have harvested them in the past to eat them personally. They taste fine. They're good, a little bony, but you just pick the bones out like any other herring, because that's what they are, river herring. If you do it right they'll all come out at once. And just this year I've harvested probably 30 or 40 of them, maybe more, to put in my

garden. They're in the garden now. I've smoked them before.

Julia: Is that how you normally prepare them when you eat them, is to smoke them?

Ed: No, I don't really. That takes a lot of work, to smoke them. But I guess if I was to think about preparing food for like in the wintertime, if I didn't have a freezer that's what I'd do. That was the traditional way to preserve them. You smoked them or dried them. Smoked alewives taste really good. I love sardines and stuff like that. A smoked alewife is basically like that.

Julia: And you were saying your dog likes them too?

Ed: Oh yeah. I had a dog who would come with me here. She'd still be out there trying to catch them if she was here today. I had two dobermans. They would tag team up trying to catch one. The male would actually eat him. The female would catch him and then let him go. She didn't much care to eat them. She just wanted to chase them all around. But that was pretty cool to see them do that.

Julia: Can you show me your net that you use?

Ed: Oh, my makeshift net? Oh my god!

Julia: Is that what you normally use?

Ed: That's just to test the water, like when I took the fish out of the fishway. That's what I use to see if there's fish there and then I dump them back in. I don't really use much of it after that. It's starting to break up. This is an old drum hoop from a drum kit, like a bass drum or something. It's busted here. This is an old paddle, a rowboat paddle that I took the paddle off. And this is old fish weir net. So I sewed it up together and put some, I don't know what that is, silicon on there. It works. It's not the best looking thing.

Julia: So what do you normally use when you're harvesting?

Ed: I usually just take them by hand. It's fun. I don't get that many. I don't eat that many. So if I wanted a few of them I would just go in the water right here and take them by hand.

Julia: Is that difficult?

Ed: No. It would be today because there's few of them in the little pools. I wouldn't be able to catch them today, but when this place is full of alewives it's easy to just reach down in there and feel them touch your fingers and slowly just grab them and pull them out of the water. You don't go [*makes a squeezing gesture*] and try to chase after them, like the dogs do. They have fun doing that and chasing them all over the place. But me I just try to reach them, feel them. Sometimes they'll swim in between my fingers and I'll just close my hand. So it's that easy if you don't spook them.

Julia: Oh. Cool. Do other Tribal members harvest them in other ways?

Ed: Yeah. There's Tribal members that use them for bait, for lobster bait and halibut bait, commercial fishermen that I've talked to that use them. They go to other rivers and buy them. They prefer that bait because it's better than the stuff they can buy that's shipped in from other places. They're hardy and it's fresh. I don't know if he told me that, I can't remember, yeah, it's just that it's fresh. It lasts longer in the water. It's not frozen or cold fish, but freshly caught.

Julia: I heard that from a lot of the halibut fishermen that I talked to as part of my masters thesis research.

Ed: I've never done halibut – well, actually I was with an elder and he did catch a halibut, but I've never personally done it. We went out hand lining. I don't know what he used for bait.

Julia: So what time of year do they usually start showing up around here?

Ed: Right here at this river I'd say rule of thumb, Mothers' Day. And they'll stay in the river for about a month going up and spawning. The stragglers will take a month to get here. And then it's done after that. Then wait a month and the little ones start to come down, millions of them.

Julia: Were those ever used for any purpose?

Ed: Not that I'm aware of. The adults are our primary focus.

Julia: The big, fat, and oily ones.

Ed: Yeah.

Julia: So I've heard that there's two types of river herring, there's the alewives and the bluebacks and that they're really difficult to tell apart.

Ed: Yeah, they probably are.

Julia: Do you pay attention to the differences?

Ed: I've looked at the pictures. I haven't really seen them live to show me what the differences are. I can't remember what the differences are. I think one is darker than the other.

Julia: Yeah. I've heard that if you cut them open then the meat on the blueback is darker than the meat on an alewife.

Ed: Well we call them both *Siqonomeq*. We call them that, both of them. "Spring fish".

Julia: How do you spell that?

Ed: S-I-Q-O-N-O-M-E-Q. And that's the name of the video.
[http://www.wabanaki.com/st_croix_alewife.htm]

Julia: Oh. Do you notice if there's been any changes in recent years? In anything about the run? Like is there more or less of them? Are they coming in at different times? Different sizes?

Ed: This river?

Julia: Yeah. Or this area.

Ed: In general?

Julia: Yeah.

Ed: The only changes I've noticed is that human activity has created change. Meaning that if the water is not accessible for some reason, diverted, or if it's polluted, or if the fishways aren't working, then they'll struggle. They'll all congregate below the fishway and they can't get up. Those are the changes. Alewives, I haven't noticed – seeing how we haven't been able to count them here in this river, but we have counted them in the St. Croix - I haven't noticed in the smaller rivers anything beyond what is like – blockages are problems. I don't think that the weather over time has really changed their migration. I think it's pretty much stayed on. They're coming here around Mothers' Day. That kind of thing.

Julia: What sort of blockages? Are they mostly man-made blockages?

Ed: Yeah. The fishways are not maintained properly. That's why I've chosen to get involved in the Perry fishway to make sure that it's maintained properly. Pembroke, for example, same way. But I don't get involved in that one. I guess now they have people that are working on that, which is good. There's others, like the Orange River south of here near Whiting, that used to be an alewife river. Well, the fishway was wooden. It got rotten. This was long before I was born I guess. I was told there was a fishway there. It rotted out. The fish stopped coming there because they couldn't get up. Nobody bothered to put them over the dam. And so now I hope that they'll go to some effort to bring them back. I'm fully in support of reintroducing alewives wherever they used to be.

Julia: It seems like that works too.

Ed: It does. Oh yeah. It's a success story. Providing they can get back up the next year.

Julia: So what do you think is the biggest threat to the alewife populations, in this river in particular or in general?

Ed: Well, I understand that – I'm not speaking from experience, only from reading this, is that offshore a lot of alewives are caught in the big fishing activities out there. In the big nets as a bycatch I guess. It may not the target species, in the herring fishery or whatever fishery they're doing. They're catching alewives. I understand that that is a problem and needs to somehow be controlled. I think that Maine needs to rethink its position with regard to how many days alewives can be harvested. At least, the way I understand it, I'll speak from this river, the town of Perry has a permit from Maine to harvest four days out of the week and open it up to the other three. To me I think that's bass-ackwards. It should be the other way around. That's the way I think. I think four days is too much. Because you can have a really good four days of perfect runs and a lot of fish going up, every single fish is going in someone's pickup truck, but when they pull the screen and the fish are able to go up the other three days it could be bad days, raining, no run. And then when the rain is over they're putting the screen right back in again. So the timing can be really devastating to the run. And I don't think that we should be doing it that way. So that's just me personally. I'd like to see a three day harvest if you're going to harvest at all. Three days and then four days let them run. Pollution, for sure. Pollution. They've got to clean that up. Fish aren't going to swim through a bunch of crap. Man-made obstacles. Water quality and man-made obstacles. That's it, really.

Julia: What do you think is the most important thing that we could do to solve those issues?

Ed: There's not one that's most important. I'd change the consciousness of the people that are working around the fishery and get people to understand what nature has got out there. People don't even know about alewives. They don't know what they do. People take the rivers and the streams for granted. They're just driving by in their cars, looking down, and they don't know what's down there. Tossing a bottle or a can, those type of things. We all have to play our role and be stewards, you know? Each individual has to become, as much as you can, stewards of the environment and be mindful of what we're doing and how it's going to affect the resources. Not just take, take, take and ignore, ignore, ignore. There's going to be a breaking point if we keep doing that, where the ecosystem will not recover without some serious work like restoration, putting fish back in, or fixing habitat, or whatever it is. So I don't think there's one fix but if you really want to say one thing, change the minds and the awareness of people, educate them.

Julia: That's part of the reason why we wanted a big part of this project to be education and outreach materials, making videos that hopefully a lot of people will watch.

Ed: Tell the truth! The truth about our natural ecosystems and the way they used to be and the way they are. Show the differences. Show us *[inaudible word at 0:23:41. "Timescales"?].* If people didn't know the truth about this environment, especially the St. Croix - the things that I found out about the St. Croix. It's just shameful, the way that that river system was treated for the past two or three hundred years. Yes, totally destroyed. And then people try to re-write history, about, oh yeah, this is the way it used to be. This is the way it always was. It's not true. I'm not going to just believe the hype about these ecosystems. My gut tells me that something about an environmental area, that tells me something about that ecosystem, and someone tells

me different, I'm not going to just believe it. I have to find out for myself. We need to be telling the stories of the old people, the real stories about what these ecosystems used to produce. Make those documents available, those reports that were done back two, three hundred years ago by the Fisheries Commission, those kind of things. They're not easy to find but if you find them it can be very revealing.

Julia: Are there stories that were passed down from older generations, in your family for example, that help you know what it was like before?

Ed: Well, alewives, there were stories about using them in gardens and stories about eating them, yeah. But the story that really got my attention as a youth was a story that my father told me. It's not about alewives. It's about fish though. I don't know if it applies.

Julia: Yeah. Go for it.

Ed: My father was born and raised at Pleasant Point, on the reservation. He was born in 1929. He told me that when he was a kid, so I'm thinking maybe 12 years old, that would be 1941. Before the war. Is that accurate? Just before the Second World War. He would go down to the shore. It was his playground, right? This was before technology and all that stuff. Kids played outside. So he's one of the kids playing outside. Part of the tradition of the Passamaquoddy during the spring and summer was to keep an eye on the water, to watch for when the fish come close to shore, see the water rippling. When they saw the schools of fish coming close they'd really take a good look at it and see what was going on. And what was going on is that the little fish were swimming away from the big fish. And those big fish were swimming away from even bigger fish. The food chain in action! It just so happened that they could tell when it was time to go down there as a community and wade into the water and grab the pollock by hand, pull them out of the water and feed the community.

Julia: Wow.

Ed: That doesn't happen any more. When he told me about this I was a kid. He said he did that as a kid. I wanted to come to the reservation and do that. I was naive. I never asked him, 'Well, do they still do it?' No. I thought they still did it. So when I came here in the '70s, late '70s, I expected to see the fish schooling up and everything, but no. That wasn't happening. So it was around his time, maybe in the '40s and early '50s, when those kinds of pollock runs, the big ones, stopped happening. I don't know if anyone told you the name of the Passamaquoddy. What does it mean?

Julia: Something about pollock. Those who catch pollock? Spear pollock?

Ed: The people of the pollock. Yeah. Some people say people who spear pollock or people of the pollock, whatever. It's about pollock. If you break the word down, Passamaquody, that's, I'm not a fluent language speaker, but the way I understand it is that *peskotom* is the word for pollock. And the way to say Passamaquoddy is *peskotomuhkati. Kati*, the ending means people.

So it's pollock people. Right? Makes sense to me. So we got our name from that activity of eating pollock. This is a pollock bay pretty much.

Julia: Were you catching them from boats? Were they close enough to shore –

Ed: You didn't have to!

Julia: You'd just walk out there and grab them?

Ed: We had weirs. The fish weir is a Passamaquoddy traditional trap. It was invented by native people. It's been turned into bigger weirs with the Europeans who came here to catch a lot more. The weirs we used were small. Not real big. I understand that there were some tribes that actually made weirs that blocked off whole coves. We might have done that too. I see some of the old remnants of the fish weirs that we have still that some say are maybe thousands of years old, stuck in the mud. You can see the poles that are busted off, you can see them. They're not very big. Maybe 50 feet, 70 feet. Not very big. Now the weirs are huge. If you could catch them by hand why would you need to go out in a boat? Still, people did go out in boats and catch other things. We lived off the sea.

Julia: What sort of other things?

Ed: Well, we had porpoise. Our people were harvesting porpoise. There's evidence of swordfish. Seal was a big part of Passamaquoddy culture and diet. Flounder, cod, haddock. Just about anything that you could catch. Lobster. We had a lobster pound right where 190 is, Route 190, a natural producing lobster pound, breeding ground. All you had to do was go up and wade into the water and reach down and catch a lobster. We've heard stories. Right now I could take you to where that lobster breeding ground was. Right now you have Route 190 over the top of it. So it's not there any more. Clams, big time, a lot of clams. Shell heaps everywhere. Everything.

Julia: It's crazy to think that all those things used to be so abundant that you could walk down and catch a bunch in a tiny weir or with your hands. I think it's easy to look at this and be like, oh it's so natural and untouched, and Maine is pristine! But it's really not at all.

Ed: I don't know how to do the math, but productivity, percentages - compare today to back in the past. I've seen some of those charts, productivity charts. We are not very productive when it comes to fish anymore. Man has done it. It's not the fish's fault that they're not here.

Julia: I think you answered all my questions. I have questions about the cultural importance, but I think you answered them all without me asking.

Ed: Well, I want to just state culturally, the Pasamaquoddy entered into an agreement, well, several agreements over time with the newcomer governments. Treaties, I guess if you want to call them. Agreements, that's what they are. And in those treaties there's references,

sometimes very explicit to fishing, hunting, trapping, fowling, and traveling. Other times there's no reference to them. The tribe has what is called reserved rights to be able as a community, and it's tied into culture, reserved rights to access the fishery. To access the resources that it has traditionally, culturally been able to access for thousands of years. The settlement act that we have entered into, the Land Claims Settlement Act, references those treaty rights. Also, in the discussions that we've had with the United States government, even recently with the Settlement Act, there were commitments made to the Tribe that nothing in the Settlement Act is meant to degrade the culture of the Passamaquoddy. That was a specific question that was asked. What's the Settlement Act going to do to the culture? Because you're talking about a big change. And the response was, from the federal government, nothing in the Settlement Act is mean to degrade the culture of the Passamaqoddy. Which means, what is our culture all about? It's about access to the resources to be able to survive. My work, what I'm doing currently with alewives and river restoration is to make sure that the environment is capable of holding those resources so that future generations can be able to access and to survive off them. And I think that the United States government should understand that that is really central to our continued survival culturally, spiritually, and physically. Culture is not just a ceremony. It's not just spirituality. It's not just language. It's more than that. Culture has to do with being able to live the way, as much as we can, the way we used to live off nature. The Tribe lived very well before Europeans came here. It wasn't a hardship on the Passamaquoddy to survive in an area that was like a Garden of Eden. It was easy to live and there was a lot of leisure time. People don't understand. They think that living off the land was hard. Back then it wasn't. It was easy. There was a lot of leisure time, a lot of play, a lot of socializing, a lot of everything. So when the Europeans came and changed the economic environment from subsistence hunter-gatherer-fishing to now we've got to go out and find a job to make money, that's not our culture. That's what I'm trying to educate people about. To make sure that people understand that our culture is more than just what people might think, you know, ceremony, and language, doing things, making baskets, or whatever, crafts. That's just a tiny tip of the iceberg about what the culture is. So if you don't have any more questions I'll wrap it up with one thing. I was fortunate to be brought up in a household with a Passamaqoddy father and a non-tribal member mother. So I was exposed to both cultures. But I was always gravitating and my attention would towards the Passamaquoddy side. I was brought up in kind of an urban environment. I was exposed to that and didn't really much care for that kind of environment. Nature always appealed to me so I said I'm going to live with the Passamaquoddy, my father's family. And when I made that choice I made the choice kind of naively to not rely on jobs. I tried to live as much as I could off the land and the sea and everything. For about a summer I didn't have a penny to my name. I might have kept a penny in my pocket just for good luck. But I didn't have anything. I was able to live off clams, mackerel, periwinkles, other fish that I got directly with my hands. And so I was able to see what it was like. It wasn't easy but it wasn't really that difficult either. For a whole summer. I resorted to eating squirrels and little perch and things like that too. So I know what it's like to be without money. So it's something that I don't recommend for people to experience unless they absolutely had to. If I took that summertime experience and had to extend it for the whole year, that two or three months was fine, but would I be able to harvest enough in the two or three months to take me through the next nine months? That probably would have been impossible for me at that time in my life. So I think that we need to make this

world productive enough, the ecosystem productive enough to be able to allow people, or enable people, to be able to get the kind of resources they need in the time like the summer when the land and the waters are productive, when the sea-run fish are coming up. To be able to put aside enough food for the next nine months so they can sustain themselves and their families. That's the way it used to be. And I know they used to go hunting too in the wintertime and the fall. So that's my experience that I draw from. Would I have been able to do it myself? It would have been hard. But in the old days it wasn't. Let's try to make it so it's not so difficult for people. Who knows how long this economy is going to last? We've been told by our elders and prophecies and other tribes telling us too, they have prophecies, that we need to look out for the future generations in the manner where they may need to have access to the resources so they can survive. Because capitalism may not last forever. But the ecosystem will last a whole lot longer than the almighty dollar. It's a clash of culture, really if you think about it. Capitalism doesn't help with the natural environment. But we can try to make it work. I don't know if I'm making any sense to you or not, but you have a responsibility to try to make this work for all people, not just the Passamaquoddy. If the world goes to hell in a hand basket everybody's going to want to rely or need to rely on nature to help them survive. And if we're not prepared, if there's not enough resources in the rivers and the streams and the woods and the earth, people are going to be struggling and suffering. It's important that we try to make our environment as productive as possible.

Julia: So there's lots of good reasons to do it, it sounds like. You have your cultural ways of interacting with the environment and you can have it just in case everything goes to hell you can have it to rely on.

Ed: That's what it's about. Some people don't want to hear that story, that message.

Julia: Yeah. It's scary.

Ed: Yeah. But looks what's happened with the banks collapsing in Europe. The dollar is always on shaking ground. I try to follow politics. I try to follow as much as I can the state of the affairs in the world, but when all is said and done at the end of the day I think we need to do something to try to help our immediate surroundings as much as we can. And maybe even out further, start to help others if we can. I don't know what else to tell you except that I think it's noble and worthy work to try to help the ecosystems recover. Wherever they are, whatever we see in front of us, if it's not as productive as it used to be, try to help it. Find a little way to make it more productive. And if you can't, at least talk to people. Be educated. That's what it's all about to me. It's not about making money. It's not about anything like that. It's about just getting something meaningful out of life and doing this kind of work is meaningful. I'm 58. Hopefully future generations of Passamaqoddy will want to get involved in this kind of work and continue to struggle and clean up the environment and make the environment more productive for the future generations. We talk seven generations. I don't know if anybody's realized how many generations we've actually been here.

Julia: More than seven, right?

Ed: Take a guess. The Passamaquoddy, how long have they been here?

Julia: So, a generation is like 20, 30 years? And you've been here for – Hugh was telling me - or were you telling me?

Ed: Not me.

Julia: 13,000? 16,000?

Ed: 16? Well, if you do the math it's a lot of generations, right? I would say easily 500 generations. Before that you might have had a mile or two of ice above here. But when the ice sheets receded that was about 10,000 years ago. If you do that math that's about 500 generations. Versus how long have – and the ecosystem was in good shape – how long has the Europeans been here? Every hundred years is about four or five generations. Let's just say 500 years times five. Twenty-five generations versus 500. And I can even go further back if you want to. Where were the people when the ice sheets were here? They had to be here somewhere. The level of the water was a lot lower because all the water was in the ice, right? So there was mile and miles out into the Atlantic where the water and the ice met. There was a zone there where there was no ice. There were people there. There had to be. There were camps, villages, along the ice and the water.

Julia: Still living off the water, just in a different place.

Ed: It was miles out into the sea, where those camps were. They could have been out there 20,000 years ago, 30,000 years ago. Who knows? But you know, giving credit to the Europeans, they were out there too where they were living off the land. They were living like native people were back then. It's just food for thought, that's all.