

Project **Women in Alaska Fisheries**

Interviewee Lindsay Layland [LL]
Interview date July 28, 2018
Location Dillingham, AK
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Transcribed by Anna Lavoie

AL: This is Anna Lavoie with Lindsay Layland in Dillingham Alaska on July 28th 2018. If you'd like to share your experiences as a fisherman, or fisherwoman, how you learned to fish and the things that we talked about.

LL: Sure. And feel free to ask for more detail if I don't provide it.

I grew up in the commercial fishing industry set netting, gill netting here in Bristol Bay. My dad purchased his first permit the year I was born actually, so that's kind of what got our family into it. So my mom and my dad started set netting in 1991. He fished a little bit before that with some other people. But yeah, my folks bought into the set net, you know, industry here in Dillingham and as a young child my brother and I would jump on board with him and be deckhands and I thought I was pretty intense because I was making twenty bucks every time I went on the boat, which was once or twice a year. But just throughout my childhood I grew up fishing for my dad, as I know many people in Alaska and in this region do. And when I was a teenager I was kind of doing it full time with him as a deckhand. And then finally, you know, working my way through college, after leaving the state and going to college, and kind of realizing that this was something that I wanted to do more seriously, or at least kind of commit to—I kind of started taking over for him and running the boat and in, about four or five years ago, I got a new boat built and purchasing a permit, and so I've been captaining a set net operation for five or six years with a crew. And I guess in a nutshell that's about it. But I learned how to fish from my dad and fish with my family for my whole life. I've done a couple other gigs around the state, including seining and long lining and other small trips, but for the most part yeah, Bristol Bay set net. And that's about—that's it in a nutshell I guess.

AL: So your set net, is the net you have now, you use a skiff?

LL: Yeah, so I've got a 24, 25-foot skiff that I have. It was built in Homer actually. And I was fortunate enough to be able to drive my skiff from Homer across Cook Inlet then take the road, you know, from Williamsport to Lake Iliamna and cross the Iliamna and then up Bristol Bay to Dillingham. But yeah, I have a skiff and we—I now partner with my brother. He took some time off from fishing, but he's back fishing with me again. And we run a crew, about five or six people, and mostly it's rotating since we have my boat, which is a little bit larger than my dad's from the nineties. We're able to kind of shift out and do a couple crews and basically just fish around the clock 24-7 when we're open. So yeah! It's been a really great improvement to be

able to have a boat that has the size and the power to do what we need it to do these days, especially with some massive salmon runs the last couple years.

AL: So set netting with the skiff, how is it different from set netting off the shore?

LL: Yeah, good question. So you know there are a couple different types of set net fisheries—I know at Ekuk beach, right, they do it—they bring their nets up the beach and pick them right there and then they re-set them. But with us, since we're on a different stretch of beach in the Nushagak there we have a cabin on a spot called Nushagak Point, and then from there we get in our skiffs and drive to our sites and set our nets. So pretty much all of our work is done out of the skiff. I mean we're constantly setting and re-setting our nets, moving with the tide.

And on our stretch of beach, which is really long and flat, you know, we have maybe a quarter mile or half a mile of mud flats that get flooded and then the tide goes out every day, so we have to move our gear quite a bit. So we're really actually not on shore very often, like the majority of our time is spent on the skiff. And it's really hard to explain to new crew members or to people, you know from the States, what it's like because, you know like, How many times a day do you go out? Well sometimes we go out for, like, twelve hours or sometimes we go out for thirty hours, and it's just, you know, we're there and we don't stop. Yeah so it's pretty much just always in an open skiff and we get our naps on the boat when we can. Otherwise we go to the cabin for a shift change and get a few hours of sleep at the cabin. But yeah, it can be cold, and long, and wet, but it's pretty thrilling at the same time.

AL: Yeah, this is interesting because we haven't gotten a chance to talk to many women who have skiffs, set netting. So for you, what do you think is the primary difference between that and the drift?

LL: Well, yeah, compared to drifting, I think there's a pretty dramatic difference. And actually one thing—when I was really getting into fishing, my dad said, Don't be a set netter, be a drifter, you know, go make some real money. But I get seasick so I can't be on a big drift boat, you know, so I stick to smaller set net skiffs. But the difference is, I mean you know, it's just like we—at the end of the day or the end of the shift we can't take our rain gear off and go inside the cabin for two hours and warm up or take a quick nap. It's like, you know when— unless we drive all the way to the cabin and, you know, plan on having three or four hours at home. It's just like, we just stay, we just stay out there. So that's kind of, I guess, the major difference. Set netting is, in my opinion, a lot, sometimes a lot more challenging work because it requires a little bit more physical labor than drifting does since we're hauling anchors, and moving nets a lot more frequently, versus drifting where, you know, you set the net a few times in a period and then just pick the fish and reset it. You know, we're physically just moving a lot more. But then again, you know, one of the beauties of set netting is that at the end of the day, or the end of the shift, we do get to go to land and get the cabin and hang out and socialize maybe for a minute or two, but, whereas drifters are sometimes on the water for four or five weeks at a

time, which is pretty impressive to me. But yeah, I guess there's a pretty big difference, but I also wouldn't necessarily want the burden of having to own and maintain a drift boat because if my engine blows up it's not a hundred thousand dollar difference (laughing), so.

AL: So, we've had a lot of women talk about how physically taxing it is. Do you want to share more about that or? You said you're hauling anchors.

LL: Sure. Yeah! Actually it's funny too because as I've been a captain and I've been running the boat, I've gotten a lot weaker over the years because I'm not doing as much deck work. When I was a teenager and I was the only person on my dad's skiff as a crewmember, I was like, Man, I feel pretty good. I'd get really strong every year, because it was before we had hydraulic rollers and we were just hauling nets and hauling anchors ourselves. But, so now I am actually not probably quite as strong as I used to be, and I've got these big tall boys to do the work for me.

But yeah, I mean when you're on deck, you know, in a single hour, for example, you could be doing as much as hauling, you know, a 66-pound anchor with 50 pounds of chain up from the bottom of the, you know, the mud flats, and hauling that into the boat and bringing it into the back, and then bringing in, you know, 50, 300 hundred feet of net by hand, and stacking that, and then getting the other anchor on the other end of the net and loading that up. So, it's just a lot of kind of hustle and bustle. Sometimes set netters, when we do want to take a little bit of a break, we'll drag the net up the beach for a flood, so that we can set the net on the beach, the water floods and we can go home, right. And so that's another big, like one of the most strenuous activities, is just dragging this 300 pound lead line, and this cork line, you know, 300 feet up the beach to stretch it out for the flood. So that's a lot of work. And it's challenging. One of the things that my crew and I often joke about is we have a really hard time regulating our body temperature because, you know, we're in these chest waders, and we have—it's the middle of July and we've got long johns or fleece pants, and wool socks, and you know, fleece sweaters and life jackets, and because it's long cold nights but then you do 30 minutes of hauling anchors and you're just sweating like crazy. But then you have to be prepared, right, for another hour of doing nothing.

So, it is a lot of physical labor, but I think that's one of the things I really appreciate about it too. I think that one of the worst parts is the wear and tear on my hands. I really like—you know, I'm only 27 and my hands have already gone through some pretty tough times. So I think it's actually better that I'm captaining from the back of the boat and driving the skiff instead of hauling all these nets and anchors all the time.

AL: Yeah, ok. So you transitioned to being a captain, and can you share how that makes you feel and what it means to you?

LL: Yeah, definitely. It's pretty interesting, you know, I went from crewing for my dad, and for a couple other captains in other fisheries over the years, to basically running the show, you know. One season my dad got injured, so unexpectedly he was out and all of a sudden I had to be the boss, and there's definitely a big learning curve there, you know. I think especially, as a kind of fresh out of college, early twenties, learning, not only how to safely run and manage, you know, a boat and equipment, and try to catch fish and make some money. But also learning how to manage people and crew, and get, you know, a group of people to maybe get along, and if they're not getting along, at least to work together, and to be safe, and so. And just how I interact, you know as, as a young woman with these, you know, with these big strong guys and, you know, kind of demanding like a level of respect but also wanting to be—you know, have a good working relationship so that we can joke and have fun, and enjoy our time together. That was a really big piece of me becoming a captain. And I still struggle with it. And, you know, I've had one guy fishing with me for six years now and every year I'm—I say to him, I'm still learning how to do this man, cut me some slack, you know, and he's really good about it. But, it's really interesting; it's like one of the most challenging, but also one of the most rewarding pieces, I think, of all of this. And I've learned a tremendous amount about how to, you know, just be with people, and to coach people, and to teach people in the most effective way possible. And you know, my style, my style of doing it is a lot different than my dad or my brother or other captains on the water. And it's just, it's kind of just you know, who we are and what we're doing, but I think finding, navigating the right way to do that has been really pretty cool.

AL: So from your perspective how is—do you think there is any difference between men's and women's experiences fishing? Do you think—in that world do you think there is some equality in terms of how—

LL: You know, I'm sure that there is (sigh). It's really hard for me to speak to other women's experiences, especially because—I mean obviously I only know mine and I've experienced mine. But you know, I don't, I've kind of grown up in this—yeah, in this male-dominated industry, but with the people that I've fished with, and the guys on the beach, and my neighbors, and my crew, you know—I've been there since the beginning, or since my beginning of fishing. And so it was never, I never experienced any, like, animosity or disrespect because, you know, it wasn't, I just grew up with it and came into it. And so these other captains and fishermen on the beach, like it was just like, Oh yeah, Lindsay's over there, she's fishing. And it's what I've been doing since I was a kid. But I'm sure men and women have, you know—

I have a tremendous amount of respect for the women who take on the roles of running a boat or even fishing on a boat, you know, that just has a bunch of guys. And sometimes it can be challenging when, when you're really just with these big, dirty, stinky males for five weeks straight, right, living in small quarters. But yeah, I couldn't, you know, I don't think I'd be comfortable speaking to the differences that men and women experience just because I can only report on mine which has been pretty solid so far.

AL: Cool. So when you are fishing, how long is the season for you, and when you're not fishing what do you do?

LL: Yeah. So when we are fishing, you know, traditionally the Bristol Bay season runs from, like, kind of the end of June, maybe June 20th until mid-July. And the last couple of seasons it's actually been a lot longer. We've had these massive runs in Bristol Bay in the Nushagak, and so our season has gone a little longer than usual. So for the last two years my sockeye season has been actually five weeks long, which is a week or week and a half longer than normal. But of course with the season, a lot of prep work and a lot of clean-up work is on either end of that. So, you know, we'll have—I'll start getting ready by the first of June and then my crew shows up by, you know, June 10th or 15th. And then we'll get all our nets and our gear ready and our boats squared away and head to the cabin across Nushagak there. And then we'll just fish for three or four or five weeks straight, and then at the end of it we'll spend a week or half a week doing clean up and try to get things fixed that were broken for next year. But typically I don't actually get to that until the following spring. But so, yeah, my summer season, you know, it can last in general anywhere from, you know, a month and a half to two months, but fishing is pretty condensed into about three or four weeks.

But in the off-season, for me, I work for an organization called United Tribes of Bristol Bay, which is a tribal government consortium. It was founded about five years ago by a group of tribal leaders who kind of found, realized there was a need for a purely tribal voice to protect the Yup'ik, Alutiq, and Dena'ina ways in Southwest Alaska, so, the way of life in Southwest Alaska. So I am fortunate enough to have been with UTBB, United Tribes of Bristol Bay, for nearly two years now. And I work as their Deputy Director, and we just, you know—our efforts are really geared toward protecting the traditional way of life in Southwest Alaska that's currently under threat by some unsustainable development projects, and namely and specifically the proposed Pebble Mine at the headwaters of the Bristol Bay watershed. Yeah, and that involves a lot of work, and a lot of really amazing people who are super supportive and super engaged about the mission, so yeah.

UTBB, or United Tribes of Bristol Bay, is a pretty phenomenal organization, and they are really—at this point we're still relatively small but it's actually grown. It started out as six tribes, and we've grown. We currently have 15 tribes as member organizations. But I guess just speaking to, instead of focusing more on who UTBB is, it's more—what I think is pretty critical is maybe understanding what UTBB is about, and who they represent and this incredible mission, which I think is critical and I think is really vital actually across Alaska and across the United States, is protecting the indigenous way of life. You know, it kind of post—

A lot of years of colonialism and this kind of understanding that white people come into a place, and they dominate it, and they take it over, and they spread disease or they try to civilize people into this western way of living—is pretty challenging and

has lead to a lot of negative consequences over the years. And so, just to have the opportunity to work with, and to learn from some of the most incredible native leaders that I think there are in this state and in this country has just been phenomenal.

I think that one of those—looking at the big threat or at a big threat of the proposed Pebble Mine is something that—one, it's pretty scary and it's pretty challenging to really think about and to articulate clearly because it's such an emotional response, especially for me as a commercial fisherman and subsistence fisherman. And my family is originally from the States. My mom is from California and my dad's from Minnesota. But for me having grown up here in Dillingham and in Alaska and really being surrounded by the amazing culture and the bounty that just exists in this natural place—the thought, and the idea, that that's going to be threatened or that is threatened by a development project that could potentially totally devastate not only the fishery, not only the commercial fishery, but also the clean rivers and waters that feed the lifeblood of the indigenous people and the cultures. The only reason we're even here is because people have settled here *centuries* ago and survived and found a way to thrive just on their own knowledge and their own basic skills. And I think any opportunity that I can take advantage of, or that we as a people can take advantage of, is to support that, and to protect that, from going away because it's one of the greatest treasures I believe that's here in the state but also across the country, and the world. You know, there's a lot of devastation of indigenous cultures across the planet, which is pretty tragic. So I just feel really feel blessed, I think. I feel really fortunate to have the opportunity to work at UTBB and with people like Alannah Hurley and Robert Heyano and a handful of others, and all of our board members of course. But, yeah, that's pretty amazing.

As far as I think how maybe the proposed Pebble Mine or other projects are related to climate change or environmental threats—I try to think about, I'm pretty young in this whole fishing world, right? And I've only been doing it for 15 years, which sounds like a lot, but when you think of guys who have been like, Yeah, I've been fishing for 50 years, and you're like—they can actually see, and they've seen and observed kind of how the waters have warmed or their climate has changed or their seasons have changed over the years is pretty dramatic. Personally, I don't know that I can say that I've definitely observed climate change. I think I have in these—we've had a couple record breaking warm summers in Alaska. We're seeing salmon runs that are off the charts, and potentially because we've had winters that haven't been as cold for a number of years, and it's possible that's leading to this amazing growth in salmon populations. So, you know, I think that I'm observing it and seeing it real time. A lot of people, it's easy to say that it's just, Ah, it's just a fluke, it's just a season that's warm, or a summer that's warm, but when it's a few in a row and it kind of keeps happening, I think that's cause for alarm.

Just looking at small little examples and just the erosion that's happening around our community and in other communities in the State of Alaska, we're seeing that first hand. We're seeing buildings falling off cliffs, and we're seeing just whole, entire

beach ways that are kind of collapsing into the ocean because we don't have the same sea ice that we used to, and we don't have the same frozen grounds that last as long in the wintertime. So, it's pretty devastating to think about and alarming to kind of have this sense of this imminent threat that's happening right now that many people are denying that's even happening, when we're seeing it on a daily basis. But I think it's all related, and that's just one of the missions that a lot of the people in this region—UTBB and BBNA and a lot of other organizations—obviously are pretty in-tune to and aware of, is ensuring that that continued threat is stopped if not reversed, right. So it's a pretty big mission that hopefully we can educate a lot of people about and continue to make moves toward.

AL: (inaudible remarks about elder's experiences)

LL: The stories that I've heard from elders in both Dillingham and in the surrounding villages, it's been just that. Although I may not see it, they've told me firsthand what they experienced 50 years ago, and it's vastly different than what I'm experiencing now. And I think that's a direct relation from CO₂ emissions and the direct result of the pollution that we're putting into this world. Which is pretty sad, right, to think about, that there are people who in their own lifetime have seen such a dramatic shift in their environment. Pretty scary stuff.

I'd say that a couple of things that I would hope to at least highlight maybe with a project like this, or have people be aware of, is that, a lot of times, especially when looking at the commercial fishing industry, a lot of times people kind of see it as this glorified way to be really tough and kill fish and make money in this machismo world and environment. But it's really really critical that people recognize and are aware of the history of this place and the history of why the commercial fishery exists. The Yup'ik people of Bristol Bay and of Southwest Alaska were here eons before someone decided that they would build a 20-, 32-foot aluminum built with hydraulic rollers and a jet to zoom across Bristol Bay. And so, I think having an understanding and a culture of respect for the indigenous people and the traditional way of life that is tied into the commercial industry is really critical. A lot of the people, a lot of the either non-Bristol Bay residents or non-Alaska residents who come up and for every right and reason want to earn some money and contribute to this incredible harvest and do all these things—to understand that the reason this exists is because of the hard work and the longevity and the survival, the amazing—what's the word I'm looking for?—anyway, it's much larger than people coming up with big heavy equipment to make money. And it's really important that people remember that, or at least learn that and recognize that and that we really respect our, the ancestors of this place and the indigenous cultures of this place because I think those are what are going to be hit hardest when our environment is no longer able to sustain us. So, that's it.

AL: And so, for you, how do you foresee the future of commercial fisheries here in Bristol Bay? Or fisheries in general?

LL: Yeah, that's a good question. I think that climate change or environmental change will definitely have an impact on the future of this fishery and other fisheries across the State of Alaska. I know that sustainable management is a really critical piece of all of this. So if we can continue to provide—make sure that the right groups have the right resources to do the job they need to do now and for decades to come. And it's been well managed for many years and if we can continue that that'd be great. I think it's hard to say what the future of this fishery is going to look like because you can't really focus on anything except for what you've seen so far. But I think and I hope that it continues to evolve into a more environmentally sustainable fishery, meaning people take measures with their boats or with their equipment or processing plants to lower emissions and to reduce carbon footprint. It'd be great if more of the permits, permit holders and fishermen were able to be more regional or be more local. I kind of fear that they'll continue to be more owned by more non-residents, because that's just kind of what the trends, what's been happening over the last few decades. But I think if the fishery, if the future of this fishery can continue to be brought back to a local level, it'd be pretty incredible. There are some great organizations that do that, like BBEDC [Bristol Bay Economic Development Corporation] here in Dillingham and other places.

And as far as fisheries across the state, *I don't know*. I think, I mean this is a silly answer, but only time will tell with how warm our waters get and what kind of species begin to show up in places that they haven't ever before. I guess your guess is as good as mine with what's gonna happen in the future.

JL: Did you—I was curious, when you were growing up did you foresee that you would be captaining your own boat when you were older, or was there a moment when, or sometime where you made that decision and what went into that?

LL: Totally, great question! Because when I was a kid—so my mom was a schoolteacher, and my dad was a carpenter and a builder and a commercial fisherman for a month in the summer. And, so when I was a kid I was like, *Yeah, of course*, I'm gonna be a teacher during the school year, and I'm gonna be a builder in the winter, and I'm gonna be a fisherman in the summertime. Like, that's what I'm gonna do, probably like every kid, ever.

But, growing up I was fine, I was just kind of making money, making money through high school and college and was into it. And then when I got to school I—first got to college at the end of high school, I was like, I don't want to do this anymore, you know, I'm kind of done, it's not my scene. And so I told my dad that. I was like, I'm gonna get out, you know, I'll fish for you for a couple years just to make money through college, and then I'm done. And so, hearing that, and knowing that my brother was also—he had a full time job and he wasn't really fishing anymore—my dad was like, Alright, well we'll start to sell our boat and our permit and get rid of things.

And then a couple years later, I just did a full 180, and I think it was kind of near the end of college when I realized that playing Division III women's basketball wasn't the most important thing in the world, and fishing was awesome, and it was this incredible way for me to live and to spend my summers. And so, yeah, I went from absolutely having no interest in fishing for the rest of my life to deciding that it was something that I wanted to do, and I wanted to commit more of my time and energy and money to. So that's (sigh)—so I did. So when I was 23 I said, All right—or 24, 23—I'm gonna buy a boat, build a boat, you know, find a way to get a loan and build a boat. I'm gonna move back to Dillingham—I grew up here and went to high school in Homer. But moved back to Dillingham, don't have a job but I'm going to commit to fishing and figure out a way to make it work, and I did, and I have. So yeah, I totally didn't want to do it, and then I totally did, and now I'm doing it. So, I'm in I guess.

LL: You know, every day is a little bit different with my crew. We've had some—definitely had some ups and downs, and had some really scary experiences, you know, set netting and a couple of instances where I was just like, Man, if we make it back to the cabin— and none of these boys go overboard and the boat doesn't sink, I'm going to be the happiest person on the planet. So, some pretty tough times. But, I don't know that there's been anything, you know, too— there are probably stories I could come up with, but nothing that comes to mind right now, yeah.