

Oral History
Leilani Luhrs
Togiak Alaska

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Interviewers: Kim Sparks with Anna Lavoie, Jean Lee, (PSMFC, NOAA Fisheries AFSC), Kitty Sopow (BBNA Project Intern).

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.

Kim Sparks: Alright I'm here with Leilani Luhrs and this is Kim Sparks, we're at the Togiak cabin and it is June 11th, and thanks so much for being here.

Leilani Luhrs: You're welcome

Kim Sparks: And I'm just going to start off by asking, how you got involved in the fisheries?

Leilani Luhrs: Like from the beginning, beginning?

Kim Sparks: Beginning, beginning

Leilani Luhrs: Well, I was born on a boat, just kidding, no I wasn't but I started commercial, or subsistence fishing since I've been born, like I've been on a boat as basically a newborn. And from then on I've been fishing—I helped my mom and my family subsistence fish until I was nine years old and that's when I started commercial fishing—

when my mom couldn't commercial fish anymore—with my dad. Yeah, with my dad. It was me and my sister—she got my mom's permit first—then we just commercial fished from then on.

Kim Sparks: It sounds like you fish with your family, what was that like?

Leilani Luhrs: It was awesome. We got into a lot of fights, but we had a lot of fun. And my mom's Native—and my dad's white so—um—there's a lot of racial things that goes on with that, does that make sense? Like since this is a Native community they really did not look at them in a positive light, you know? Um—(sighs) uh commercial fishing with my dad was pretty awesome. We were the only girls in the bay for as long as, until we turned like eighteen or nineteen, and that's when we started seeing kids our age, like starting to fish. We're like, Woah! Who's that? There's another young kid out here! We'd be super excited. And we were the only girls out there for a really long time—like the only young girls—there's few older women, but not as much as—I guess, until later. Until like more recently.

Kim Sparks: What was it like being the two young girls, the only two young girls there?

Leilani Luhrs: Oh, we were spoiled rotten out there! We got free ice cream, free dinner, free coffee or just free everything. And then when we got older, we started getting a lot of other stuff. Like, Oh, you wanna come on my boat? you know, that kind of stuff. And I was like, Noo, no way! No no, we heard about you guys. We don't, no. It was—it's really fun.

Kim Sparks: Yeah

Leilani Luhrs: You don't see the difference until somebody points it out. I don't know

Kim Sparks: Who taught you to fish?

Leilani Luhrs: My dad—unwillingly (laughs). Cause I did not like killing all the animals. I do not like that. My sister is the opposite. She will—kill anything, with anything, and I'm not like that. And it's hard for me to fish. For money. I could fish subsistence cause its going to our family, you know, but I can't fish for money, its—its heartbreaking for me, if that makes sense. But I'll do it if I have to, and I still have to until my boys are old enough, that I could just give the permit away [laughs] so—there's that.

Kim Sparks: Well, what kind of fishing do you do?

Leilani Luhrs: We fish subsistence for kings and reds, and then we fish across there at Anchor Point for reds primarily—we set net. Um—in a tiny little boat. Well now we just bought a new, bigger boat—like a twenty four foot Atek, like an aluminum boat. And we fished in a small, tiny little Lund for a while—um (pause) I don't know—I guess that's what it was like.

Kim Sparks: Who do you fish with when you're doing the set net?

Leilani Luhrs: My sister

Kim Sparks: Oh, your sister?

Leilani Luhrs: Just me and my sister.

Kim Sparks: Okay. And who taught you how to do set net?

Leilani Luhrs: My dad

Kim Sparks: Oh, your dad did too? Okay

Leilani Luhrs: Um—hm, yeah my mom—when, she tried once to fish with us (long pause) like as a whole family unit and, Ohh! My gosh, just too many clashing things going on! She was more worried about our life, you know—like, falling overboard or something like that, and it was just—too stressed out. Like she stressed us out. So we're like, No, mom you gotta stay on the boat. You gotta stay at the cabin. You can't come. You could watch the kids now. (laughs) Oh my gosh, you know what a mom is like, you know—they want—to make sure you're safe and everything. And that can be overbearing sometimes when you're in a rush or something. Yeah.

Kim Sparks: Were there any like major safety concerns going fishing?

Leilani Luhrs: Yeah, there is. There's a lot, like we've swamped how many times. We've—gotten, like our motor broke down—one time the anchor dragged and it was really stormy and we woke up and we were right next to the rocky shore. My dad fell overboard a couple times (laughs) my sister—one time we were driving our boat and we didn't realize our skiff got loose. And were in our cabin boat, and we had—like circle the boat until we got close enough so that she could jump off, and go get the skiff. And that was pretty scary because it was pretty rough out. It was a lot of fun through, I mean, our dad—he taught us how to ride the waves, like surf on top of the like twelve foot, twenty foot rollers, just surf on top of them with the skiff. And we did that. People would call us crazy, because we were the

only ones doing it (laughs). They used to call him the crazy white guy, because he was—he's pretty—he wasn't crazy, he was just a big risk taker I guess. Like he was in there to make the money and get out. And that's what we did. Yeah

Kim Sparks: So how did you start fishing with him? Like what prompted you to go on the boat?

Leilani Luhrs: (sighs) I remember my mom saying, I can't fish anymore, because her back hurt. And she was like, I need—do you girls want to fish this summer? And my sister was like, Yeah! Yeah! and I was like, Okay. I guess we could fish this summer. Um—and so we did it. And we were—I was ten and she was uh—seven or nine, nine. And that's when we started. Yeah.

Kim Sparks: And what did you do when you first got on the boat, like what was your job?

Leilani Luhrs: Uh—I, no I won't say it, but you know, we were, we were deck hands, so we—you know, we picked the fish. We put them in the bag and then we delivered them—my dad made us—he taught us how to like get the lines ready, get the anchors ready, get the buoys ready. How to hang nets. How to mend nets—like just general fishing stuff. (pause) When we were the only nine years old—we were the only nine year olds, like we were the youngest ones out there since we can remember. And now, well—not anymore, but we were like the only girls out there for a while—like out at the Point. But yeah, there's this other lady here in town, she fished when she was seven months pregnant. Seven months! By herself! At the Point! Where there's like super strong—if you want to talk to a crazy lady, she's crazy. Talk to her. I'll hook you up with her (laughs). Oh my gosh, yeah. Another question.

Kim Sparks: Yeah. So do you think your dad—took you because he just needed help or did he want to um—like why? Why did he think it was good girls if no one else was going?

Leilani Luhrs: Cause he didn't have any sons. We were the only two daughters, my mom wanted to keep the permit in the family, so that's what she did. Um—she didn't, I don't think she trusted anyone else, like to have the permit, you know, and keep it back in the family or something, I don't know. But, we were his two girls that were raised basically like boys, so—I mean he took us hunting and fishing and—we knew how to do stuff that boys do, so—pack water, dump the honey bucket, all that fun stuff.

Kim Sparks: So that was pretty natural to you guys?

Leilani Luhrs: Yeah, yeah I mean when we subsistence fished, at our fish camp—down the coast we were—I mean, we'd go check the net, since we were little, like we'd be in the boat with him since we were—like three or four years old.

Kim Sparks: Wow!

Leilani Luhrs: Yep, I remember—I was, I put a little line out, on the back of our cabin boat, just to catch like a fish, just to try, and I was like four years old. They left us alone at the boat. Four years old! Like me and my sister by ourselves, when we were four. On a Boat. By ourselves. And—I remember checking my line and I almost fell overboard, like I was like (motions falling) like I was hanging on the boat with feet and I was like, Uhhhh, and yeah—my mom—they drove by at the perfect time, because they saw me hanging out on the side of the boat. They never ever left us alone on the boat (laughs), and I did catch a

fish though. I had a tiny little smelt on the end of my line. It was pretty cool. But, yeah I think I'm going to do the same with my two younger ones. They're six and three. My six year old comes out with us—every once in a while, not when it's rough though (pause) cause I don't...

Kim Sparks: Do they enjoy fishing?

Leilani Luhrs: Yeah! The oldest one does, the younger one does not. He doesn't like getting wet. He doesn't like any cold. And he doesn't like touching fish. So we'll see if he's going to be a fisherman when he's older. The older one loves it though. He cries every time we leave him on shore. But yeah

Kim Sparks: What was it like—can you tell me more about your set net?

Leilani Luhrs: What do you mean?

Kim Sparks: What was it like to—to do that, how does that work?

Leilani Luhrs: Ummmmm, like physically or?

Kim Sparks: Yeah!

Leilani Luhrs: Well, it's extremely—physical, like you have to be pretty fit to fish I think. Um—I don't know, its life. That's my life I guess, it's hard to describe your life I think, well for me anyways.

Kim Sparks: Like walk me through—like for a stranger, what it is, what does it feel like, what is your first thing you do when you set net?

Leilani Luhrs: First you get the lines ready, the buoys, the anchors. You make sure they're all clipped in the right spot—and then—when you are setting your net—you throw the anchor first. You make sure the anchor line's coiled up nicely and make sure you're foot's not in the wrong spot, or you're going to go overboard with the anchor—which has happened. To me before, cause I'm an idiot, but then—you throw the anchor out, then you have somebody driving the boat backwards, and they set the net. They throw the buoys out, then the net goes out. And—then you wait until—you make sure the lines don't—the net doesn't twist over and overlap on itself or else you're going to have a hot mess when you check your net. And you try to set it in a straight as line as possible on your set net site and then—you throw the last anchor out, the buoys and the anchor out. And that's how you set your net. It's pretty stressful the first couple times. The first time me and my sister did it, we were shaking so bad cause we were just—it was kinda rough out. It was like our first time by ourselves, and you're just like, How are we going to do this—and we did it. Just do it I guess. But, yeah.

Kim Sparks: And how long have you been doing the set net now?

Leilani Luhrs: Oh by ourselves?

Kim Sparks: Um—hm

Leilani Luhrs: Since I was eighteen

Kim Sparks: Okay

Leilani Luhrs: And I'm twenty seven. Is that nine years? Nine years.

Kim Sparks: Yeah

Leilani Luhrs: Yeah nine years.

Kim Sparks: And do you do that always with your sister?

Leilani Luhrs: Um-hm, well this year she's pregnant. Well, I got pregnant first, so she had to fish with somebody and—she fished with her cousin. And then I got pregnant again (laughs) so she had to find somebody else again. And then now it's her turn to get pregnant I guess, and for me to find somebody to fish with.

Kim Sparks: Okay

Leilani Luhrs: And we did. We'll see if we get along this summer. Cause I'm used to being captain on my boat, like what I say goes and—well me and my sister—what we say goes (laughs), you know, and it's going to be different dealing with someone else. I think that's why me and my husband kinda don't get along, cause he's the captain on his boat, and when we're home—who's the captain at home? It's me. (laughs) oh my gosh—I don't know—we wanted to fish together, um but I don't think—no.

Kim Sparks: That doesn't work

Leilani Luhrs: Unh-uh, unh-uh we barely get along anyways, I don't think we'd get along (laughs) on a boat, I think we'd—like throw each other overboard—or something—I mean, I've already tried to, so (laughs) Get off the boat! (laughs) okay.

Kim Sparks: That's funny. So who else in your family, fishes?

Leilani Luhrs: Everyone. Uh—my mom—well not anymore, not since we started fishing. She used to fish. My aunt has a permit, but she gave that up to her daughter and then my uncle had a drift permit. My other uncle had a drift permit. My uncle has a set net, and my other uncle, like we all have, our whole family fishes.

Kim Sparks: Okay

Leilani Luhrs: And my grandpa fished, my grandma fished. Um—he was one of the first fishermen here in Togiak. So, yeah.

Kim Sparks: Wow. Do you have more stories from him?

Leilani Luhrs: Um no. He died when I was around two, but I hear a lot of stories from my mom, and my aunts. The first time he met my dad—they brought him out fishing one time, and because he's a white guy—they did not want him to go back home (laughs) so they told him how to set the net and—they just said, Throw it out. That's all they told him, and he did. And it—he got wrapped around the anchor line and almost went with the whole net, like he was—I was just like, God, you guys wanted to kill him. So bad. But he lived, so—that's why I'm here. But they, they fished for—a cannery here in town—Peter Pan Seafoods.

Kim Sparks: Um-hm

Leilani Luhrs: Um-hm, and another one I can't remember, but right now we fish for—North Pacific and Copper River Seafoods.

Kim Sparks: Okay.

Leilani Luhrs: Well, being the only girl—or me and my sister being the only girls out there—it was—everyone would be like, Wow, you know, you're really doing it—and there goes those two girls again—cause we'd be the first ones out in the morning, the last ones in at night. And we'd be the first boat to head out, head across there. Like we would just—because we just don't take no bullshit, you know? (laughs) I was raised with like a swearing dad, so if I swear and cuss during the whole entire thing—I'm sorry.

Kim Sparks: Oh, you're fine.

Leilani Luhrs: It was—I think it's quite a life experience I guess, um—there's not really much to say because it was my life, I mean how—its just pretty basic

Kim Sparks: Just how it was?

Leilani Luhrs: Yeah, it was pretty standard.

Kim Sparks: Okay

Leilani Luhrs: But when I tell people like outside, like in Anchorage that I'm a commercial fisher, they're like, Oh yeah, who's your deckhand? Isn't your husband—and was like fuck off. I do it myself! Hello. Like my coworkers did not believe me that I was a commercial fisherman. And then I showed them pictures, and I was like, This is me! By myself! And, but yeah—its pretty great I guess.

Kim Sparks: That's cool, yeah can you talk more about being the captain?

Leilani Luhrs: Oh my gosh! What do you mean?

Kim Sparks: Well, just it sounds like that's a lot of responsibility and

Leilani Luhrs: It is, you gotta make sure their welfare, like you gotta make sure you like, if we have a deckhand, you gotta make sure they're okay. They're fed. Prepare all the safety stuff, like the life jackets, the flares, the whistles—it's a huge responsibility, but if you want a deckhand it's worth it.

Kim Sparks: Yeah.

Leilani Luhrs: Well, me and my sister, we both look out for each other when we're out there, like she'll tell me if my line's wrapped around my ankle, which I do all the time. Or um, we're sinking, which usually happens every once in a while (laughs). One time we were just sitting at the buoy just—you know, hanging out listening to music and I was like, Why is there a shit ton of water in here? There was like two like the seats, and I was like, Oh my god. We're sinking, Stevie. We're idiots (laughs). I think she was driving, and she forgot to put the plug in—before we stopped. And we were in the water. But, we made it. We just started the motor and just went full board until all the water went out.

Um, but we do get a lot of help out there—like when its really rough and we can't pull the nets in ourselves—just this last winter—no summer, last summer—it was maybe twelve foot rollers and we only had our dinky little skiff because our bigger skiff was getting worked on. So we only had like a sixteen foot Lund, and—a tiny little motor, and I was just like, no, no, like the waves were as big as this [check video for gesture], and

we were going up and down—we went to the net, and then we (breathes in) I grabbed onto it, and I was like, Stevie, we can't do this. We can't. She's like, I know, we can't. We gotta go ask for help, (laughs) so we asked our uncle for help, and they helped us out and did it. But—we do always get hit on by the tender men and everything—all the time. Like its nuts. Oh my gosh—no! Oh my gosh, no. But, if you get—yeah I don't know—when my dad was alive it happened a lot less—because he would just, you know, give them the stink eye. Like these are my girls, nope. But yeah. Anymore?

Kim Sparks: Yeah, so sounds like you did fishing for salmon, do you guys do any other fishing?

Leilani Luhrs: Herring a few years, but we—spent more money than we made, so we quit herring. It just wasn't worth the effort I think. We do kelp, herring roe on kelp. Uh halibut, just personal use. Um—herring, well I already said herring. Smelts if that counts?

Kim Sparks: Um—hm

Leilani Luhrs: Yeah, just whatever's in the bay I guess

Kim Sparks: Okay, and what do you like to bring home for subsistence?

Leilani Luhrs: Everything (laughs). Um, my mom's focus right now is kings and she wants kings now, so we're going to try—I mean, we've been trying, but they're just not coming in. I have a feeling, well last year as soon as these processors and trawlers left the bay, we started hitting kings hard.

Kim Sparks: Oh, okay.

Leilani Luhrs: And (sighs) I just feel like they're overfishing out there, and that's probably why we're not getting any fish in here. Because I mean—three, no five years ago, we were fishing kings this early, and we were catching boatloads. And ever since they opened up the bay to the trawlers—its been—like dismal. There's nothing. I don't know, we'll see—cause usually, I think these are the same companies that were fishing up—up there. You know, where the Kuskokwim district is?

Kim Sparks: Um, no.

Leilani Luhrs: No, well they were fishing up there, and then they closed the waters up there to the trawlers, and then as soon as they did, they started catching kings up there. And ever since they opened the bay to trawlers down here, we're not catching kings. And I'm just like something's going on.

Kim Sparks: How long ago was that?

Leilani Luhrs: Just a few years ago, like five years. And they dump a whole bunch of their shit in the bay, like all their waste and everything, like the waste from—whatever they're catching out there, I don't know, flatfish, sablefish. Yeah, I think that's what they're focusing on up out there. So.

Kim Sparks: So that's impacted the health of the bay?

Leilani Luhrs: Yeah, I think so, I mean we're getting a ton more flounders, like the feeder fish on the bottom. And a little bit more cod, which I've never caught cod on my gear out there until last year. Cause cod is a deep water fish, and they feed on, you know, shit on the bottom

of the ocean. So—it's like, why are we getting, like my net had like 20 cod on it, and we don't get one ever. So, I don't know. I don't know. It's something to look into, I guess. Yeah.

Kim Sparks: Yeah, well any other—that goes nicely into—what changes, if any, have you seen over the last couple years while you have been fishing?

Leilani Luhrs: Oh my gosh, tons. Can I say tons?

Kim Sparks: Yeah.

Leilani Luhrs: Um—well lately we noticed last year we've been catching a lot more fish with a lot more growths in them, like tumors and like even lumps of black stuff on their, in their—underneath their skin. Um—a difference in runs. Some fish are hitting earlier than others. Like last year we caught—tons and tons of pink salmon, and we never, like we've only caught like maybe a thousand pounds the whole season. Last year we did over twenty thousand pounds in pinks. That's a lot of pinks. And—its just, the fish are a lot smaller—like we had to go down a gear size. Its normally five and three eights [mesh size], and we've been fishing five and a quarter [mesh size] this last year and—I don't know, maybe the fish are smaller. The summers are really hot, like 89 degrees—it was 90 degrees here. This is friggin Togiak, it's normally like 40 degrees—this is normal right now [raining outside]. And it's just nuts. I mean, we've had our first tundra fire ever, um we have lighting storms. I can remember—when I was younger we had one lighting storm, and my grandma, she was like, We've never had them growing up. And now we're having them—were you guys here for the last lighting storm, just this week?

Kim Sparks: No.

Leilani Luhrs: No? Yeah, we had a lighting storm, and we don't have those. Ever. And that's different. It's just crazy, like the weather patterns are a lot faster now, like storm after storm comes in and, we're used to—storm and then a break. Storm and then a break, now its storm, storm, storm, storm and we've had to adjust—I don't know—how we fish. Or you know, adjust—like the safety precautions that we have to take—it's a lot—more stressful I think on us. (sighs) I don't know, I don't know it's just—you can feel the change, I mean you could feel it. I think anyone with a mind can feel it, you know—you can't deny it, I think, you know? I don't know. I don't know, and the brush is a lot higher, like they were tiny little bushes, now they're trees. And I'm just like—

Kim Sparks: Really?

Leilani Luhrs: These are not—this is supposed to be tundra, not trees (sighs). I don't know, there's just so much. There's so much different, like it's just changing a lot more rapidly than it was in the past.

Kim Sparks: And when have you started noticing these things? Like—couple years?

Leilani Luhrs: No, well I've been—I'm pretty observant. I'm one of those earthy people (laughs). I'm coined the earthy person in my family, and I've always kind of been in tune with nature, that kind of stuff. And—I feel like it's changed a lot more rapidly in the last five years than it has ever. It's been like a gradual change, like gradually getting warm, but within just like bam, like different. I don't know. Even my grandma mentioned that its different,

like she's just—she's ninety years old, I mean, she has like— ninety years worth of like traditional knowledge and—(sighs) I don't know, it's changing. I guess we gotta adapt to the changes, you know. There's really nothing else we can do.

Kim Sparks: Right. How does that impact—fishing? Besides you said, the safety concerns?

Leilani Luhrs: Um, the fish—like they run different. The waters are a lot warmer, so our fish are getting older a lot faster. I mean, we had this guy come in and measure the temperature. It was 55 degrees out there. That's—boiling.

Kim Sparks: So we were talking about environmental changes that you've seen, and that they've just gotten a lot more rapid and that the waters getting warmer—so the fish are —

Leilani Luhrs: They get softer faster.

Kim Sparks: Do they? Okay.

Leilani Luhrs: Yeah, and they don't hold as well, like when we're delivering, cause we deliver them—the faster you get them to the processor, the higher your prices, so the colder is fish is—but the fish are coming up hot. Like 55 degrees hot, so there's no way we can get them down to, you know, 44 degrees without icing them. And we're in a tiny little boat—if we put ice on our boat, we're not going to be able to hold as much fish. Um—but yeah. Its—like the guy, I remember he was like, What the heck. We could go swimming in this water right now. And one day was even like, I think it was like 65 degrees, like the water—dropped hot, and he was like, What is going on here? So he shook out his thermometer, tested it in cold water, and then put it—let it, you know, air out or whatever, then put it back in the ocean, and it was hot. And I was just like, What is going on here? It should be cold. It should be like, you know, 44, 34 degrees and it wasn't. It was pretty hot. Um, but we've had to deal with that. I mean, we could go swimming. Its fun. Its fine (laughs) um, we'll see about this year. Its supposed to be a colder year this year—a different weather pattern. We'll see—it started of pretty—its kind of warm, but it's not as warm as last year. I mean, last year we were basically in bikinis and on the beach. This year we're in sweaters and rain gear. But.

Kim Sparks: Makes for better fishing?

Leilani Luhrs: Um no, its about the same I think

Kim Sparks: Okay

Leilani Luhrs: Well—the fish will be colder hopefully, unless the water's hot again. But, fishing is fishing. You never know what you're going to get, even if they predict—a bomb year, it will end up being like a crappy year, so—I don't know. I don't know, you never know (laughs).

Kim Sparks: Yeah. How do you deal with that uncertainty?

Leilani Luhrs: You don't, just kidding.

Kim Sparks: Yeah (laughs).

Leilani Luhrs: You get a degree, and you get either—like go to trade school or something in the wintertime, and you work during the wintertime if you have a bad year. Uh, like one

year—I mean for like a couple years, we only had forty cents a pound, and we were only making ten grand, twenty grand, and that’s not enough for a whole family. And (sighs) I remember my mom and dad were talking, and we could hear them, they were in the bedroom, we could hear them talking about what are we going to do? So my mom decided to pursue her masters degree, no her bachelor degree in psychology, so we moved to Anchorage. And we did that. She got a degree, and started working at the school as a counselor. Then my dad, he started working with the school district (sighs) as a delivery guy or something. But he made more than a teacher did.

Kim Sparks: Oh, okay.

Leilani Luhrs: Pretty good, pretty good job. And the good thing about that was that he got to take the summers off for fishing. And—that’s why we moved to—we moved from here [Togiak], we used to live here, and then we moved from here [Togiak] to—Anchorage for education. And I think that’s what I’m going to do with the same—with my boys. Cause my six year old, he’s reading at like a third grade level, and he’s doing math at a third grade level. I feel like if we move back here, we just crash, burn. Cause they stay steady here, they don’t—it’s just—they’re doing like basic algebra in twelfth grade. I’m just like that’s not—no. So, I think we’re just going to—live in the city for now.

Kim Sparks: Will you come back for the summer?

Leilani Luhrs: Yeah! Every summer. I’m not giving this up, ever. You’ll have to pry it from my cold, dead hands (laughs). Boat life is my life. I live in the ocean, you know, it’s my home. I don’t feel at home in the big city at all. I mean it’s just so dirty and stinky and smoggy and—I don’t know. This is home. Yep.

Kim Sparks: Do other people around here have to pick up jobs to keep fishing during the winter?

Leilani Luhrs: Yeah. A majority of them do. Most of them—I think the school is the highest employer out here. Plus there’s odd contractor work sometimes. (sighs) Yeah, its hard to get a job here in town. I mean, I had a job, but I had to basically beg for it. And its not — its not fun working with the Tribe here. Nope. (laughs) I don’t know, you know, small city politics. Fun times. Is Sitka like that? Can I move over there (laughs). I don’t know, but yeah. Should I try and answer, or have you guys looked into birth rates? Like statistics like that? Like how many men, male children were born and survived into their—

Kim Sparks: No, not a whole lot of that yet

Leilani Luhrs: That would be something to look into.

Kim Sparks: Okay, why is that?

Leilani Luhrs: Cause a lot of guys die, and all that’s left are daughters because they’re the ones that stay home. And that could be a reason why they have higher percentage of female fishermen.

Kim Sparks: Oh, okay

Leilani Luhrs: I don’t know. Oh, and child support. Like a lot of men will transfer their permits to their wives—so they don’t have to pay child support. Or it won’t get taken away.

Kim Sparks: Really?

Leilani Luhrs: Yeah, from the State.

Kim Sparks: Okay. Is that for commercial or?

Leilani Luhrs: Yeah!

Kim Sparks: Okay.

Leilani Luhrs: Yeah. I was just thinking of ways, how women acquire permits. You could look into how many males are born into the family. I don't know.

Kim Sparks: Would you say, we talked to some people who say that set netting is primarily done by women. Would you agree with that?

Leilani Luhrs: Yeah, I would not drift (laughs). Its—I don't know, one hundred and fifty fathoms of net is a lot of hard work. I prefer fifty. We do hard work, but it's a lot easier work—to me. I personally would not want to drift.

Kim Sparks: Okay. Because it's a physical —

Leilani Luhrs: It is SO hard. Like that's one hundred and fifty, unless you have a reel, that's super easy, you just shake the fish off. But if you're pulling it by hand, that's a lot of hard work. Plus you move around a lot—I don't know, I just wouldn't want to drift. You make a lot more money though, but—you work a lot harder for it. I don't know.

Kim Sparks: And then going back to your family, how did your—like how did your dad get into fishing? How did you guys get permits?

Leilani Luhrs: Oh, my grandpa and my grandma had the permits to begin with. My grandpa gave it to my dad when they got married—or when he couldn't fish anymore. And then my grandma gave it to my mom when she couldn't fish anymore. But how my uncles and aunts got their permits is when they were giving out permits. They signed up for permits. Yeah, its how our family got into permits.

Kim Sparks: Okay

Leilani Luhrs: And then how I got my permit is when my dad died. I got it, and then my sister—got my mom's when my mom couldn't fish anymore. Yep.

Kim Sparks: Is that usual for each family member to get their own permit?

Leilani Luhrs: Yes. When they first issued out permits, a while ago—did you guys research that yet?

Kim Sparks: Um-hm, a little bit

Leilani Luhrs: Yeah, yeah that's how they all got—like they all signed up for permits to begin with. And I know that one of my uncles sold their permit when it was the high of the season and—I have no idea what my other uncle did with their permits. Well, one of them gave them away to like family, extended family, because he couldn't fish anymore and he didn't have kids. Yeah.

Kim Sparks: Is that common for people to gift their permit to family members?

Leilani Luhrs: It's giving. They give back money every year (laughs) until they die I guess. Like my grandma, she still expects a couple grand every year. And I don't mind, I mean, she's my grandma. Go ahead, have the money. Even though we probably paid like twenty times the amount of the actual permit (laughs), but to me, money's nothing, I mean, it's just a piece of paper, so I don't care.

Kim Sparks: So I guess my next question is, it sounds like you have this connection to the water, if you want to talk about more—why you fish that would be really cool.

Leilani Luhrs: On why I fish?

Kim Sparks: Yeah

Leilani Luhrs: Because I'm forced to (laughs). If I didn't fish—I tried not to fish one year, and it felt like I was shunned in my family for not fishing. And I was just like (sighs) Oh my god, I really don't want to fish, cause I don't like killing all the animals, you know? I just don't like doing that for a profit, I mean, I do it to eat. I don't know, you just have a beautiful connection with the land, and the water surrounding you, and I think that's natural—because you're a being of the planet, you know? I don't know, that kind of stuff.

Kim Sparks: Yeah.

Leilani Luhrs: I sound like a crazy hippie to most people, so I'm used to keeping it in there (laughs).

Kim Sparks: And how long have you been in Togiak?

Leilani Luhrs: My whole life.

Kim Sparks: Your whole life, so you were born here?

Leilani Luhrs: No, I was born in Anchorage, and then—here, lived here my whole life. We do go back during the winter time, now, because of school (sighs) but—yeah. My husband really wants to move back here. I do not. There is just too much of a drug problem and it's just kind of gotten out of hand.

Kim Sparks: And you said your husband is from a different village?

Leilani Luhrs: Um-hm, he's from Manokotak, and he's a set netter. Yep, we both have differing views on what to do. When to do it. And how to it. Oh my gosh! No, no honey, no. We're both wrong, apparently. Like he's wrong and I'm wrong, so we're just going to be wrong. We don't even look at each other when we're checking the net (laughs). But yeah, I don't know, are you married?

Kim Sparks: I am.

Leilani Luhrs: So you know what I'm talking about

Kim Sparks: I do (laughs).

Leilani Luhrs: It's the same (laughs) everywhere. Yeah, we tried setting the net—I mean, we've been setting the net since the day I got here, and—oh my god. No, no, no! No—we just have different views, you know? He wants to set it over there, I want to set it over—he wanted to set it over here, and I want to go over there, cause this place is nasty. This whole bay, cause there's a river right there. There's going to be branches and everything coming

out—and I wanted to set it on the ocean side where there's just—water and fish. Not, no bullshit. And he's just like, Oh my god honey, just listen to me. And, no of course he didn't listen to me, we had to listen to him. So—it's the way it works on his boat (laughs), cause it's his boat. He bought a boat last winter, so he's like, This is my boat. And I was like, Okay fine. You pick the net then, I'm going to sit here. I'll look at you (laughs). That's how it's going.

Kim Sparks: That's funny. So do you have your own boat?

Leilani Luhrs: Um-hm. I have my own boat, my own motor. He has his own stuff now, we can't get along on a boat. Oh my god, nope.

Kim Sparks: And you would think that you have the—you know the area better?

Leilani Luhrs: Yeah, I do. He doesn't believe me though. Cause I'm, no. Cause apparently I don't. I'm a girl, so I don't know anything. I guess that's how it works.

Kim Sparks: Okay, did you ever get that from anyone else besides him?

Leilani Luhrs: No

Kim Sparks: No, okay.

Leilani Luhrs: No, just my husband (laughs) well, yeah I guess so, like my uncle—like, he'd be like, he'd try to tell us how to do things, but we learned from my dad how to, you know, do things. And he showed us how to set our net, where to set it, and how to set it when the tides going out. When the tides coming in, and our uncle who's never fished that site before tried to tell us, and I was just like, No! Just because we're girls doesn't mean we don't know anything. And we're right, because we get the most pounds. So, that's how it works, I guess. We just usually brush it off, or don't listen to them to begin with (pause) when they try to tell us what to do. Yeah, I don't know.

Kim Sparks: You can share stories, anything you want to say about changes you've seen, your role as a fisherwoman—

Leilani Luhrs: I honestly don't know, there's so much. I don't know

Kim Sparks: What would be like the top one or two things for you?

Leilani Luhrs: Uhh, I don't know, just closing your eyes and just feeling the ocean just splash onto your face, that's the biggest thing I think. I don't know what the top one or two things would be, honestly, there's so many.

Kim Sparks: There's so many, okay. What would be some other ones?

Leilani Luhrs: (sighs) like what do you mean?

Kim Sparks: Um, just things that are important to you, about fishing.

Leilani Luhrs: It's my life. My lifeblood, it's in there. I'll stay in there forever.

Kim Sparks: And what do you mean by that?

Leilani Luhrs: It's who I am, I don't know. I mean, who are you? (laughs)

Kim Sparks: Yeah (laughs).

Leilani Luhrs: Who am I? I mean, this is who I am, like you look out the window, and that's who you are. I get super emotional talking about it I think (whispers). Yeah.

Kim Sparks: Yeah. Is it like your family connection too?

Leilani Luhrs: Um-hm, I mean as an Alaskan Native, I mean that's who we are—I mean if you take that away, we're nothing. (sighs) I'm going to cry.

Kim Sparks: No, you're fine. I guess my question to you would be with all these changes you're seeing, how do you feel about the future of fishing?

Leilani Luhrs: Oh my gosh. I feel like it's pretty unstable at this point, I mean (sighs) I mean, that's why we have jobs in the wintertime is to—I don't know. In the future—I honestly, I will tell my kids that they need an education or at least go to trade school. So they have something to fall back on, if there's fishing no more, I mean. (sighs) With the warmer waters—well, they've had conflicting reports on whether or not the salmon are coming back. Or the salmon are migrating—well, they are migrating—I mean, they're fishing in Barrow, like they're getting fish up there—and how is that going to affect us—as a whole, as a people—I don't know, it's hard to say. We just have to adapt.

Kim Sparks: Okay.

Leilani Luhrs: That's all we can do.

Kim Sparks: Yeah, yeah. And how about set netting and getting your subsistence?

Leilani Luhrs: What do you mean?

Kim Sparks: Do you see that changing—or do you feel pretty good about that?

Leilani Luhrs: Yeah, I guess. I mean, as long as they're there we're going to fish them. I mean—if they try to like limit—like how they do up north—I have a feeling a lot of people are going to say, fuck that, and just fish anyways. I mean, I would. That's what I eat. I don't eat—well, I can't eat like processed foods. I have to eat whole foods. And that's how I feel. And I'm not going to have something shoved down my face—like down my throat, you know, like here's an alternative and—I don't know, you know, that's what I eat. That's who I am.

Kim Sparks: Yeah, yeah. Totally fair.

Leilani Luhrs: Okay.

Anna Lavoie: You were talking about its who I am, and you got emotional, so my question was how does it feel to be a—a fisher—I don't know how you identify as a fisherman or a fisherwoman.

Leilani Luhrs: I'm a man! Just kidding, I'm a woman (laughs). (laughter)

Anna Lavoie: So you asked about physically, but for me, it's more the—psychological, mentally—

Leilani Luhrs: Um-hm

Anna Lavoie: You said it's who you are, and all of that, but like do you feel proud?

Leilani Luhrs: Yeah, of course I do! I'm a friggin grown women, you know, on my own—fishing, you know, on a boat—which is technically a man's world. And—you feel empowered by that because you're doing it, you know? You feel like a real woman I guess, I don't know. I don't know. Yeah. Maybe expand on that. I don't know, I honestly—I guess you feel empowered, you feel strong. You feel like you could do anything. I do stuff that, I guess, I don't see many women doing—like I take bigger risks, during the winter season I mountain bike. I climb mountains. I don't see many women up there, you know? Yeah. I guess you could call me a bigger risk taker, like a guy would be, you know? I guess, I don't know. I don't know. Yeah

Leilani Luhrs: I think it kind of changes you mentally, like how you think maybe (sighs) well, for my mom it's the opposite, like she's completely opposite, I guess it depends on the person. She's not much of a big risk taker, she's more of a—'hold on a minute, let's think this through,' kind of thing, maybe. And maybe because we started younger, we're just like, Fuck it, lets go, you know, that kind of mentality. And usually women, generally are—hold on—well, I know when I'm doing it with my husband, I'm like, 'Dude, you need to think this through — just think about it, but when I'm on my own—without him, I am—lets go, you know, kind of thing. I don't know, yeah.

Kim Sparks: You know what you're doing.

Leilani Luhrs: Yeah, I guess (laughs). We all kinda don't know what we're doing, but we do, you know, kind of thing. Take it day by day.

Anna Lavoie: One more? Cause you mention you do subsistence, and so I was curious—because we've talked to other people about who's preparing the fish and the processing for like smoking, or curing or whatnot.

Leilani Luhrs: Oh we do, and my mom.

Anna Lavoie: You do it?

Leilani Luhrs: Um-hm. We all cut the fish, even though we're bone dead tired, we cut the fish. Hang it, smoke it, yeah. We put away—this last winter we put away five hundred fish for personal use—and that's to feed like the whole family, like so my grandma, my aunts, cousins, everyone. Yeah.

Anna Lavoie: And then in your family, would you say it's the women's job or do the men do it also? Cause it seems different everywhere.

Leilani Luhrs: Definitely it's the woman's job (whispers). I make my husband do stuff with me. I'm like, Dude if you don't hang this fish, you're not getting any this winter, and he does it. Well, I tell my boys—you need to help mom or help grandma with this, this is how you're going to learn, you know, you're going to cut fish. You're going to do all of this. And they do it. Cause it is how they're brought up. And I feel that it's important to do that, as boys—especially as Alaska Native men. Cause they don't—they see it as being women's work, or weak, you know, to do that stuff. And I make my husband pick berries with me, you know, all that fun stuff, and if he doesn't—then no berries for him. (laughs) I don't know.

Anna Lavoie: That's great.

Leilani Luhrs: Well, I grew up with a dad, well he was white, so he would help my mom with everything. And my uncles, they would see that as something lesser than that, you know, I don't know. Different cultural stuff going on.

Kim Sparks: So is berry picking more of a women's role around here?

Leilani Luhrs: Who do you see picking berries? Anywhere I think. Anywhere, it's always the girl. I don't think guys have patience to pick all those millions of berries, I mean, I barely have the patience to pick berries, but—I get it done. He does come for bear watching, like to make sure a bear isn't going to come get me, but I could do that by myself, so—normally I leave him behind and let him watch the kids while I go pick berries. But, yeah.

Kitty Sopow: You said you tried not to fish one time, and you got shunned.

Leilani Luhrs: Um-hm

Kitty Sopow: What does that mean?

Leilani Luhrs: They wanted me to fish, and I was like, No I want to take the summer off and go to, you know, UAF [University of Alaska Fairbanks] for the summer just to go dink around cause I never had that opportunity—and they were just like, You needed to fish. My sister was like, Why did you leave me with dad all by myself? and I was like, You could deal with dad, I'm not going to deal with that shit. And, so I did. And then one summer, was like an ADF&G [Alaska Department of Fish and Game] intern and—I got—they're like, Why did you leave? you know, that kind of stuff (sighs) You need to be free sometimes, you know, you need to take your own time, and not—cause it's a big family thing, like we all fish together. We all subsist together, so—it's a huge family effort to feed a family. Yeah.