

PROGRAM #2: “WITNESSING CLIMATE CHANGE IN HUSLIA ALASKA”

FOR THE ATHABASCAN NATIVE PEOPLE LIVING IN THE KOYUKON RIVER AREA, WINTER HAS ALWAYS MEANT EASY ACCESS OVER LAND BY SNOW MACHINE OR DOG TEAM. HOWEVER, A WARMING TREND OVER THE LAST 40 YEARS HAS CHANGED THIS DRAMATICALLY. WILDLIFE BIOLOGIST AND HUNTER ORVILLE HUNTINGTON IS WORRIED ABOUT THE WELFARE OF FISH AND GAME, AND HIS PEOPLE HUNTING FOR FOOD. HE SHARES HIS CONCERNS:

“Orville” Huntington: “I think the biggest thing is these little cold spells we have used to last a lot longer. Around Christmas back in the late 60’s it was 60 below for a month at a time, and now we get it for like one or two days. It will rain into November now where it never used to do that. But in the 80’s you start noticing it was starting to stay warm a lot longer. A lot of places where we trap, those lakes are not there anymore, they dried out because permafrost isn’t there so the lakes just drained, so all the beavers move to the rivers. The bears were having a hard time because of climate change. The fish weren’t there so the bear started starving out and when that happened the bigger brown bears started coming in and actually killing off a lot of moose and black bears. The fish when it doesn’t come back, really causes a lot of problems for us because that’s what we rely on for our winter food. Nothing’s been really where it is supposed to be. So it’s happening right out there now, but a lot of us aren’t seeing it unless you’re out in the woods.

HUNTER AND LONG-TIME HUSLIA RESIDENT, AL YATLIN, HAS NOTICED BIG CHANGES IN THE PERMAFROST ALONG THE RIVER BANKS, WHICH HE SAYS AFFECTS THE FISH AND WILDLIFE, AND HIS ABILITY TO CATCH THEM. RECOGNIZING THAT CLIMATE CHANGE IS OCCURRING IN THE ARCTIC, HE EXPECTS WARMER AIR TEMPERATURES IN THE NEXT 10 YEARS. AL EXPLAINS:

“Al” Yatlin Sr.: “On the river, the permafrost is melting on the banks. And I noticed some places out in the flats where there’s island and a lot of times those islands are on the permafrost and sometimes those islands completely disappear. Well, there’s less water in the lakes and because there’s less water, animals that depend on that water, there’s fewer of them. Like muskrats, there used to be lots of muskrats when I was growing up, but the last few years, there’s big decline in their population. We have a fish net- when we catch fish during the day because the water is so warm, the fish cooks in a few hours, it turns mushy and it spoils after that. It seemed like especially this year, it’s a lot warmer than it was in the past. Well, I think it’ll just keep on warming up and I don’t know what’s going to happen after that.”

RESPECTED HUNTER ED VENT IS OUT ON THE LAND ALL YEAR PROVIDING FOOD FOR MANY ELDERS. HE SAYS HE HAS SEEN CHANGES IN THE CONDITION AND NUMBERS OF THE GAME THAT HE HUNTS. HE ALSO SEES SIGNS OF CLIMATE CHANGE, LIKE THE DRYING UP OF LAKES AND SPRUCE TREES TURNING BROWN. HE IS HOPEFUL THAT HE CAN STILL HUNT SUCCESSFULLY, BUT THE FUTURE SEEMS UNCERTAIN:

“Ed” Vent: “There seems to be a lot of new fish around that people are talking about. There aren’t much geese in springtime like there used to be. Used to be hundreds flocking in, now a days there’s maybe five or six at a time. The weather got something to do with the bears- what kind of shape their in. If there’s no rain in the springtime, than we don’t have no blueberries, and when there’s no blueberries, they don’t even get fat. I heard stories where they said moose get in the snowdrift and they get stuck there and they die. This deep snow really affect them right now, yeah, they are having a hard time getting something to eat.

And wolves, they know that they can't move around; pretty-easy picking for them. I noticed the changes on the spruce trees last summer that they're all brown on top from about three foot down. They don't get enough water and the weather was so hot this summer that dried the top of the trees up, even the green trees. I don't know about that weather- getting dangerous, you got to watch when you are traveling. Old Native people used to have their own laws. If you know, I think you better keep it in mind. I do.

I'M HIGH SCHOOL SOPHOMORE, ATHENA SAM, FROM HUSLIA, ALASKA

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