

Witnessing Climate Change: Native Voices from the Heart of Alaska

An audio slideshow programme designed and produced by the Athabascan community in the small, remote village of Huslia, Alaska.

SECTION 1: Introduction & Spring

Effie Williams speaks in her Native language about climate change: *“In our Koyukon Athabascan language, the word for climate is Jaajetnaaw Hawdeelta. Both long ago and today, it is the climate that rules the seasons, our wild foods, and our way of life. Changes in the climate over the last 30 years have greatly affected the land, animals, and people of Interior Alaska. As a community, we have witnessed the unpredictable nature of these changes throughout the year. For the sake of all future generations, we want to share our observations.”*

Catherine Attla: “All our old people study the weather changing in Alaska. This one old man that was living here, Chief Henry, he say ‘My grand-children, you live up to a warm weather that wouldn’t be the right place at the right time’.”

Rose Ambrose: “Weather is getting too old to control its own self. It’s going to get out of control; that’s exactly what Chief Henry meant. Koyukuk River, the water is above the bank. Terrible, terrible, terrible - it was exactly like ocean. The water was so high, so high.”

Tony Sam, Sr.: “It’s getting warmer and warmer all the time. All the rivers that I travel many years change quite a bit because the erosion is not only out here. I think in 50 years, all those peoples out on the bank will move 1000 feet back.”

Jack Wholecheese: “We’re getting really early springs. If you ever go out to the river, you’ll see permafrost melting and hits the soft sand out here in front of town. And that’s where it’s cutting in.”

Section 2. Summer

Sarah Oskolkoff: “My son was milling around with a thermometer, and he put it on my back stairs and that thermometer read 108 degrees in the dead air. You know, that’s the hottest it’s ever been.”

Stan Ned: “When you live out there, you know, that’s like your farming ground; where you harvest. The fire takes away part of that because it burns a certain amount of area. And there was no beaver for a while because all the birch and the willows that the beaver lives on was completely burned. So they died out; muskrat died out; the fish in the lakes died out.”

Marie Yaska: “All the birds have songs for us. The one song that we notice that’s really changed is the robin. It just sing half its song and then it go ‘ha ha ha,’ - wonder why?”

George Attla & ‘Ross Sam’: “Yeah, we’ll go ahead and put the fish net in first. ‘OK.’ Wait Ross, let’s get some of this rope. ‘This is the front.’ If we need more rope we could just tie these. ‘Yeah., there’s the other end of it right there. It don’t look that bad - could see most of the floaters.’ We’re getting there, Ross. Just step on it. ‘Right here?’ Yeah, there you go. Hey, that’s a pretty good-looking fish. ‘Curled itself right in here.’ This one isn’t, this is a pale fish.”

Ross Sam, ‘Al Yatlin’ & ~Eleanor Yatlin~: “What’s up, Al? ‘Hi Ross.’ When we catch fish because the water is so warm, the fish turns mushy in a few hours and it spoils after that. ‘Throw them in there when you’re done.’ ~So I took these down from this middle pole and then I spread them out so they can dry a little bit. Well, this box isn’t long enough, Al?~ ‘Yeah.’ ~I guess I just have to fold them up. Taste pretty good, huh? Some might be a little bit smoke. Have a good smokehouse - that’s one thing.~

Al Yatlin: “On the river, the permafrost is melting on the banks. 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.”

Virginia McCarty: “This is not the same kind of land we grew up in. No matter where you walk, it is so far in between the berry bushes. There might be a lot of berries this year, but this is the least amount of bushes I have ever seen. These grasses are way higher than they have ever been. Since the weather is changing and everything, I don’t know. That’s how we used to clean berries; let the wind blow it all.”

SECTION 3. FALL

Butch Yaska: “I remember islands were pretty big in the lakes. Now their permafrost melted and some of those islands are getting smaller. I notice a lot of grass lakes nowadays.”

Thomas Henry: “Back in the 50’s, where you see the grass, that was all water. They used to paddle here to hunt fish-ducks. They don’t have that no more. All these lakes under the hill is dried up like this.”

George Attla: “You see that duck? Right in front of you? OK, you just paddle your heart out towards that. Hold it - hold it. We could have a feast tonight; all we got to do is pluck it. This is not a fat duck - he’s not fat like he’s ready to make the long journey. I have a few more to go. I’m not going to quit until I’m done. Seems like the last feather to burn is the ones under the arms.”

Ross Sam: “*Ut-Ut-Ut!* Let’s go lay him straight back - that’ll be easiest, I think. OK, pull it. Fat, anyway. Ah, I just got to find a soft bone in there.”

Josslin Olin: “That used to be the potlatch part, long time ago. I really didn’t learn this on my own. I watch those old people; Steven, Tony, Cue Bifelt. That’s where most of the information is at.”

Angeline Derendoff: “Everybody’s excited about what’s going on. It’s warm. No snow. Raining, how many years now? So I dream about it. And I thought, “what’s going on anyway?” It’s scary; scary winds come.”

Alda Frank: “The way the weather is going, we don’t know what will happen. In my days, the Elders said everything will change. And they used to talk about there’s going to be two summers and two winters together.”

Section 4. Winter

Hudson Sam: “It was a lot colder when I was young, months at a time. This weather nowadays is unpredictable; it just comes and goes anytime it wants to go. Even trapping is unpredictable now.”

Steven Attla: “Long time ago by this time, it used to be really cold weather; dog tail used to freeze right off. But the way people used to make it, there was lots of rabbits. Any time in the winter.”

Cue Bifelt: “Beaver: It’s hard work to trap beaver. When we were in our prime it was just an everyday thing. Country is changing; I don’t know what direction, nobody knows. Stephen and I, in our lifetime, there’s a awful big change.”

Al Yatlin & ‘Catherine Attla’: “Back in the 50’s, there used to be lots of ‘oonyeeyh,’ we called them. ‘Black fish?’ Black fish. ‘Ah-hum.’ There used to be lots of muskrats when I was growing up, but the last few years, there’s big decline in their population.”

Ed Vent: “I noticed the changes on the spruce trees, that they’re brown. They don’t get enough water and the weather was so hot this summer it dried the trees up, even the green trees. I don’t know about that weather; getting dangerous, you got to watch when you are traveling.”

Wilson Sam: “From about 10 years ago maybe, it never really freeze-up that hard, and ice is never that thick, and it’s just been warm most of the time. That’s what I mean by big change, big difference.”

Angeline Derendoff: “Up north, I heard that ice melted. They say it never melted all these years. And then I thought, ‘OK, it’s going to change, but little by little.’ And I hope it’s not that bad, but it might change the world. I really miss that snow.”

Section 5. Credits

All audio and visual content of this audio slideshow program was approved by the Huslia Tribal Council, which holds the legal copyright © 2005. Funding for this project was provided by the WORLD WILDLIFE FUND (WWF).

Elders, tribal council members, and community members worked with the students of Huslia to produce this audio slideshow program. Production consultation and studio services were provided by Kathy Turco of *Alaska's Spirit Speaks: Sound & Science*, with technical assistance from audio engineer Ed Smith and programmer/graphic artist Roger Topp of *General Systems Vehicle (GSV)*.

Recordings were made by:

Huslia students LeAnn Bifelt, Ryan Olin, Sheila Esmailka, Kenny Sam, Athena Sam, Dustin Nollner, Teri Vent, Willis Derendoff, Leah David, and Aimee Nollner. Thanks to Sharon Strick, John Christian, Annette Watson, Shannon McNeeley, and Julie Vadnais for assisting the students. Natural sounds and subsistence activities were recorded by Kathy Turco.

Voices of the following individuals were included in the soundtrack:

Effie Williams, Catherine Attla, Rose Ambrose, Tony Sam, Sr., Jack Wholecheese, Sarah Oskolkoff, Stanley Ned, Marie Yaska, Ross Sam, George Attla, Jr., Al Yatlin, Eleanor Yatlin, Virginia McCarty, Butch Yaska, Thomas Henry, Josslin Olin, Angeline Derendoff, Alda Frank, Hudson Sam, Steven Attla, Cue Bifelt, Ed Vent, and Wilson Sam.

Photographs were provided by:

Catherine & Steven Attla, Annette Watson, Eleanor Yatlin, Sharon Diane Strick, Stanley Ned, Virginia McCarty, Kathy Turco, and the Archival Collection of the Rasmuson Library at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Thanks to Ryan Olin and Patricia Kriska for photograph labeling and organization.

Special thanks to:

The Huslia Tribal Council for their guidance and review; Tonje Folkestad, Climate Change Officer for the WWF International Arctic Programme, for her unwavering support; Mary Shields and Nancy Van Veenen for use of their ‘Year Round Alaska Wall Journal’ on the title slide; and *Marc Brown and the Blues Crew* for use of their popular song ‘Indian Rock and Roll.’

