

WITNESS SUMMARY

Thomas Alexis

Background

Thomas Alexis is a former Chief of the Tl'azt'en Nation of the Carrier tribes. The Tl'azt'en Nation is a member of the Carrier Sekani Tribal Council.

He lived in his home territories most of his life and started out in fisheries as a fisheries technician doing enumeration work in the Stuart Takla system.

Mr. Alexis is involved with the Fraser River Aboriginal Fisheries Secretariat (FRAFS), the Upper Fraser Fisheries Conservation Alliance (UFFCA), and the First Nations Fisheries Council (FNFC).

Traditional participation in the fishery

Mr. Alexis describes historical weir and trap fishing, and how these methods compare to gillnet fishing, which he believes may be one of the reasons for the decline in sockeye. He explains that a hundred years ago his people fished sockeye using weirs and traps. However, back in 1911, DFO outlawed weir and trap fishing, which the government of the day referred to as "barricades". Mr. Alexis' grandfather was one of the Chiefs who signed the Barricade Treaty, which forbade them from fishing with weirs. They were forced to take down their weirs and use other fishing methods, such as gillnet fishing. Mr. Alexis says that the problem with gillnet fishing is that it catches everything, which is not sustainable. By comparison, weir fisheries were very sustainable because they were selective, any excess fish were released (there was no by-catch), and when they were finished fishing, the weirs were taken down. Also, weir fisheries were done over a short time frame. It would take 2-3 weeks to get fish for the winter. Today, with gillnet fishing, it takes over two months for community members to do their fishing.

Mr. Alexis recalls stories from elders that describe how their fisheries were controlled before any reliance on calendars to determine when the fish would come back. Instead, they would look out in the systems to see if there were sockeye, then wait ten days before setting up the weirs. The hereditary Chief determined the fisheries; they dictated when to start fishing and how long to fish, depending on abundance. As one went up along the river systems people used to talk to one another and say "what do you think we should be doing?" and "how was the abundance?" People understood what abundance should be going back to the spawning grounds; it was very sustainable. There was collaboration within the systems. The weir system allowed them to have a communal fishery, where everyone in the community went to the weir to gather their fish and preserve it for the winter. Now, with gillnet fisheries, it is an individual effort.

Mr. Alexis explains that in their territory 6-8 types of fish traps were used. Some are individual fish traps were made out of wooden poles strung out in the river system to block off a portion of the river where the salmon migrate. The weir was set up at a certain angle so that the fish were steered in. Once they were in, spears or nets were used to capture them. However that was for a shallow water system. In a deep water system like the Stuart River or the Tachie River, they would use a deep water weir system.

He described the box trap used for night fishing made out of willows, which is about 15 feet long by 6 feet wide. Instead of using spears and nets, there would be a trap door on top of the big box trap from which the fish would be gathered. Whatever they did not eat at that time was let go. So, for example, if over 500 fish were caught and people only needed 300, only 300 were taken and the rest let go. There were no hands touching those fish. It was all natural, no net marks or anything impacting the fish.

He describes another type of trap called the big cone trap that looked like a big funnel made out of willows for the shallow stream systems where the people would set it down right at the confluence of the stream. Those traps were used to catch maybe a hundred fish at a time. Those were taken out too when the people had enough fish for the winter.

But weirs and traps have not been used since the 1911 signing of the Barricade Treaty, which outlawed the use of these traditional, sustainable techniques. Since then, Mr. Alexis' people have primarily used gillnets for fishing.

Observation of historic abundance levels and of decline

Mr. Alexis explains that two sockeye stocks come back to their traditional territories. One is the early Stuart run, which is the first run and is prized for its fat content; the other is the late Stuart run.

With respect to historical abundance, he may explain that even today people could tell you that the fish in the river used to be so abundant that you could walk across their backs. At one time, the Stuart Takla system used to carry, in each stream, over a 100,000 fish to the spawning grounds. The smaller streams used to carry 100,000 fish and the main streams would carry over a million fish. Today is drastically different. The Stuart Takla system is comprised of over 100 streams, and over 50 streams have been decimated through development, and fish no longer return.

Mr. Alexis recalls hearing stories about a year when fish were not abundant back in 1869, which his people refer to as the starvation time. In response, people kept out of the water and did not fish; winter was hard that year. Mr. Alexis recalls hearing that from 1870 to 1911 (when weirs and traps were outlawed), abundance of salmon in their territory was consistent. The biggest abundance in the past hundred years, and the only one in Mr. Alexis' lifetime, was in 1993 when over a million early Stuarts returned, and over a million late Stuarts returned. At the time, Mr. Alexis was working as a fisheries technician doing enumeration at the spawning grounds, and could see fish all along the place. However, elders at the time told him that the numbers were even higher in the past, which means he may not have witnessed a true abundance in 1993 - more like a partial abundance.

In the past 10 years, the abundance of the Stuart stock has diminished, and his people have not met their food fish needs. Historically, the sockeye would sustain his people through the spring, but recently people have gone through several winters without fish.

In 2009, only 30,000 sockeye came back to the spawning grounds, and most returned during the early Stuart run when the fishery was closed. The fishery was also closed during the late Stuart run because

of low abundance. This meant his people had to either go without fish or go to other places to fish, like the Babine river system. In 2009, Mr. Alexis recalls that he fished for two weeks and only caught 40 fish.

Impact of Decline

Mr. Alexis describes the negative impact of the decline on his people's health and the health of the whole ecosystem. He explains how his people depended on the ocean for their nutrients for generations over thousands of years. In times of abundance, people were healthy, but now, with less fish and fish oil, rates of diabetes and other diseases are rising.

Mr. Alexis explains how the recreational fishery and tourism in his area have also suffered. There is no recreational fishery for salmon in his territory, but there is for char, rainbow trout and whitefish. On Stuart Lake alone, there used to be 6 or 7 lodges that catered to recreational fisheries during times of abundance. There was an abundance because the sockeye would bring nutrients into the river system, which helped sustain other fish species. But the drop in sockeye has led to a drop in the species that used to support the recreational fisheries. Today there is only one lodge operating on the system. The lodge owners spend more money maintaining lodges than catching fish, and tourists have stopped coming. Mr. Alexis' father was a professional guide in of those lodges for over 20 years - when it closed down he had to retire.

Cultural significance of the Fraser sockeye and fishing

Mr. Alexis explains how the sockeye are revered in his territory. They have legends about protecting the fish and that teach sustainability and respect for the fish. One of the legends involves a widower and goes as follows:

There was a man, a widower, who was fishing sockeye. He had depended solely on his wife to do the fishing and putting away for the winter and processing but this time he did not have that. This person ended up doing all the work himself, processing the fish, putting it in the smokehouse to dry and he was mad because other men had other things to do like hunt and other things to do on the land and he had to sit there and do his food fishing in the summer. He did not like the idea of just sitting home and doing straight fishing. One time when he was angry about having to sit at home doing the smokehouse, one of the backbones of the fish that he hung scraped him on the head and he got angered by that. He took the fish backbone and threw it out in anger, back in the corner and stomped on it. Now this was in July/August, when it does not snow yet in our territory. But in this story, the fish god or salmon spirit was angered by the man's action and made it snow on him. It snowed until it covered the whole smokehouse and that person perished. The moral of the story is to respect the fish regardless of what it is. That is the story that has been carried down for generations.

Mr. Alexis told another story involving an orphan child who wished to know where the fish or sockeye are coming from:

One year the child went down to the river and he talked to the fish, asked them questions and what not. Where are you guys coming from? Where do you swim to? This orphan child was so interested in the fish and its lifecycle that one year in June the young boy went down to the river to ask more questions and what happened is he got turned into a salmon smolt and swam out into the ocean with the rest of the smolts that were coming out of the system. And he found out for himself where the fish migrated to in the ocean systems and four years later he came back and turned back into a person and told the story. So that's how our people know the lifecycle of the fish.

Traditional knowledge and worldview

Mr. Alexis feels like he had his training in biology even prior to his formal education, and is grateful for that. He still knows his language today. His elders taught him all about the land and waters before he was six years old. His grandmother used to look out in the system in April and say in their language, "the fish are coming out of the gravel now". In those days his people had no formal training or knowledge of biology, and his grandmother did not speak English. She indicated to Mr. Alexis in their language that she hoped the fish would make it back in four years. They would pray to the gods that enough fish came out of the gravel to feed them. They knew these things by the legends and the lifecycle.

The elders knew that the ecosystem requires abundance. The trees in the system need the ocean borne nutrients to make sure that they grow and shape the river systems. The bears need it; the eagles need it. However, Mr. Alexis relates how the biology taught in schools today does not reflect the holistic management that their people used previously. He believes those lessons need to be used today to ensure sustainability in the whole ecosystem.

Mr. Alexis explains that his people are river people. Their Carrier language has a calendar based on the timing of fishing season. For example, "talo ooza" means the time of the sockeye; "gesul ooza" means the time of the Kokanee; "bit ooza" means the time of the Char, and so on. This way his people would know the timing of the returns, as well as which types of fish were spawning and in which rivers. Now, because of the low abundance of sockeye, the nutrient levels in their systems are down and affect all the fish. For example, the char, a predatory fish, used to depend solely on the abundance of sockeye, including the dead ones.

Mr. Alexis explains how his people value everything. They preserve everything and do not waste. To make sure they are fed well, they keep the backbones, the heads, the flesh, and some innards. They do this with all fish species. If they do throw anything back that will not be used, they put it back into the system. For example, a fish that is not used goes back into the river or lake, so that the other fish can make use of the nutrients. The same principles apply to terrestrial animals. They use every part of the animal including the skin and whatever they do not need they put back out on the land.

Mr. Alexis contrasts this "waste not, want not" way of life with modern ways.

Referring back to the story of their starvation years, Mr. Alexis explains that sometimes the backbones of the fish would be left in the smokehouse for other people to use. If people were hungry, they could

go into anybody's smokehouse to get the backbones to boil them up to make good soup. The backbones would not rot, since they had been processed and dried and so were preserved very well, for others to eat. The same could also be done with terrestrial land animals – they save the bones and marrow.

Importance of traditional knowledge in the management of the Fraser sockeye

From Mr. Alexis' perspective, there is no such thing as "overescapement", nor has there ever been. He explains that fish are smart animals and they know where they are going. There are enough systems in our country to accommodate these fish. If there is a stream that is overfilled or overpopulated the fish look to an empty or less full stream. For example, in Takla there are over 100 natal streams alone that the salmon go back to. If there was high abundance then all these hundred natal streams would be filled up and fully utilized. If there is low abundance then only a portion of those natal streams would be utilized.

Historically, with the great abundance, there were fish in every stream throughout the system. Even if some of the fish do not spawn, they still provide nutrients for the ecosystem, and make the ecosystems more productive. The bigger the resident fish, the fatter the bears will be and the healthier the eagles. Mr. Alexis' people generally take a holistic approach and do not jump to the conclusion that there could be too many fish spawning so they have to be killed before they hit the spawning grounds. Instead, they know that the eggs that are over-spawning in that system will just float out of the system and feed other animals.

Collaborative processes with other First Nations

Mr. Alexis describes how First Nations, both historically and today, communicate amongst themselves. When he was a Chief, he used to meet with lower Fraser tribes individually to understand what salmon runs they were planning to access. He used to encourage Chiefs from all along the river to stay out of the water when the early Stuarts were going by, and the majority of them complied out of respect for one another.

He explains how, even back when there was abundance, there was communication amongst everyone in the river systems, which let them know when things started to happen and provided the information they needed to make decisions about sustainability. Historically, there was a messenger who would go back through the foot paths to the other tribes and gather stories to bring back to his people. This messenger would have special qualities, such as knowing different dialects in order to understand the Carriers, the Shuswap, the Chilcotins - all the way down the line.

Today it happens differently, through email and cell phones. Before such technology, Mr. Alexis had to travel personally to each one of the tribes and meet with them to find out their plans. He would sometimes encourage different tribes to stay out of the water and not access the fish.

Today, Mr. Alexis participates in fisheries related matters through his community, the Carrier Sekani Tribal Council (CSTC), the UFFCA, the Fraser River Aboriginal Fisheries Secretariat (FRAFS), the Intertribal Treaty Organization (ITO), and the First Nations Fisheries Council (FNFC).

- **FNFC**

Mr. Alexis was appointed as a council member on the FNFC when its present structure, including its constitution, bylaws, regulations, etc., were established. Today, 13 of the 14 regional seats on the FNFC are filled, which Mr. Alexis takes to mean that people are showing interest in and support for the work of the FNFC. (The regions represented on the council are the North Coast, Central Coast, South-East Vancouver Island, Lower Mainland/Lower Fraser, Upper Fraser, Transboundary-Yukon, Haida Gwaii, Northern Vancouver Island, West Vancouver Island, Fraser Valley, Mid-Fraser (2 seats), Upper Skeena, and Transboundary-Columbia. Each region can choose its own process for appointing representatives.)

The FNFC's role is broad and includes: implementing the BC First Nations Fisheries Action Plan; holding regular province-wide fisheries forums and assemblies; supporting regional and watershed-based processes as they deal with local and regional issues; developing collective fisheries strategies and policy perspectives; sharing information on fisheries issues with First Nations; supporting improved data collection and sharing; supporting First Nations in developing and implementing fisheries and aquatic resource plans; and building effective relationships with First Nations, governments, and others. The FNFC is currently working on developing and supporting joint-management approaches, increasing opportunities for economic access to the fisheries, and generally promoting sustainable use of fishery resources.

- **Intertribal Treaty Organization**

Mr. Alexis sits on the board of the ITO, which is a Fraser watershed organization. Approximately half of the Nations in the Fraser watershed have confirmed their ongoing support for the implementation of the Intertribal Treaty. In Mr. Alexis' opinion there is space for technical bodies like the UFFCA and FRAFS to feed into the ITO, which could then feed into the FNFC.

Mr. Alexis has observed that since 1989 there has been a shift in mentality with bands becoming increasingly concerned with who and which organizations do or do not have authority to speak on their behalf. Some tribes have split away from their Nations and have become independent, and that has caused stress for the ITO, which wants to establish a representative watershed organization.

Historically, there was good collaboration between Nations and bands, but Mr. Alexis has observed that the divergence surrounding government funding and AFS agreements has split people into factions.

There are some in the watershed that do not care to take government funding and others who do. This challenge must be overcome to ensure the ITO has a full mandate.

Interactions with DFO

In enumeration projects, where DFO captures around 50-100 salmon from each of the natal streams to get scale and flesh samples, Mr. Alexis is concerned that there is unnecessary killing and throwing away

of fish. Those doing the enumeration often kill fish in the process and do not throw the fish back in the river; they leave them piled up on the side of the beach to rot.

Mr. Alexis advises that one of the frustrations for First Nations is that the fish are left on the riverbank and not cycled back into the system, which is not how he was taught. His people know that if fish come from the water they need to be put back into the water to feed the system. But DFO is not doing that - they throw the fish on the river-bank or in the bush and the nutrients are not put back into the system again. Throughout the whole system, if they are going to capture 100 salmons for sampling from each stream, that will add up to thousands of fish for the system or watershed as a whole. Mr. Alexis is concerned with this waste.

Mr. Alexis advises that First Nations have asked DFO to use that fish for consumption, but have been refused. In Mr. Alexis' opinion, it seems like DFO would rather see the fish thrown away than put towards feeding people who are in need.

Visions for involvement in the management of the Fraser sockeye fishery

Mr. Alexis thinks that the FNFC and the ITO is the way to go for broader fisheries matters. – Mr. Alexis believes that these organizations should be mandated to make good decisions in their peoples' best interests. He believes that First Nations need to get DFO to understand that people are very dependent on the salmon and on all the systems. He thinks that the FNFC is a good conduit to move towards communication with higher levels in DFO management to try to steer their decision-making, and that the ITO could play a pivotal role in Tier 1, 2 and 3 processes.

Mr. Alexis notes that his people support the National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) and would like him to be mandated to make decisions, which are then vetted down through to the local areas. If the National Chief takes their message up to the Minister, then the Minister should realize that he has a mandate to make decisions in the best interests of their people.

In Mr. Alexis' opinion, the FNFC should be dealing with the Ministry of Fisheries and all upper levels of DFO management, not local DFO representatives.

Mr. Alexis anticipates that DFO would say that co-management already exists because they deal with the FNFC or other representative groups. But in his opinion this is not truly co-management yet. DFO still fails to grasp First Nations' vision of managing for sustainability as opposed to managing for commercial interests.

Mr. Alexis explains that First Nations in the watershed have been requesting terminal fisheries for many years to alleviate aggregate stock management. Some stocks are returning to the streams in very low abundance. He cautions that DFO managers do not comprehend that weak stocks will be decimated if they continue to manage in aggregate stock regimes. In his opinion, DFO is not heeding this warning.

Mr. Alexis would like to see commercial operations operating as terminal fisheries. He thinks that if salmon return to historic abundance levels there will be opportunities for other interests, not just First Nations. He believes that if traditional knowledge had been listened to, then these stocks would still be

abundant today. Mr. Alexis believes that there has to be a change in the way the government manages sockeye – not just for profit, but for sustainability.