

WITNESS SUMMARY

Dr. Ron Ignace

Witness Background

Dr. Ron Ignace was the elected Chief of the Skeetchestn band from 1982 to 2003, and served as Chair of the Shuswap Nation Tribal Council for several years. He holds a Ph.D in Anthropology from SFU, and his dissertation is entitled, "Our Oral Histories are on Iron Posts: Secwepemc Stories and Historical consciousness."

Dr. Ignace's Indian name is Stsmél'ecqen, which means arrowhead on an arrow, so as he says, he "will try to aim straight".

Dr. Ignace's mother is from Skeetchestn. She is the granddaughter of a medicine woman whose name was Julienne, pronounced Sulyen. Sulyen's uncle was Joe Tomah, Chief in Skeetchestn, near Kamloops back in 1910, and one of the Chiefs who met Sir Wilfred Laurier. His great grandmother's brother was also a Chief. On his father's (Francis Jules') side, Francis' great grandfather was a war Chief in Skeetchestn, and was elevated to political Chief after the great plague that killed a lot of people. They lost 75% of their population by the late 1800s and were weak and struggling to survive.

Nation

Dr. Ignace is a member of the Secwepemc Nation. The Secwepemc Nation has a land base of approximately 180,000 square kilometres. The Fraser, North Thompson, South Thompson and Horsefly rivers, and the significant fish runs in these rivers, are all in Secwepemc Territory. The Secwepemc people have been the producers and caretakers of great runs of salmon for thousands of years.

Aboriginal perspective / worldview

Dr. Ignace believes this land was provided by our Creator (Tqeltkukwpi7), the Chief on high. He tells the following story that reveals certain traditional beliefs and values:

The Creator had a helper by the name of Coyote (Sk'elep) who was sent down first to prepare the land so that we would have a place to stay. He lived in the highest mountains above the ice packs and when he came down off the mountain after the great flood there was hardly anything on the land and so he took a tree for a wife and so the trees are part of our relations. As Coyote was doing his work, two transformers came up from the coast and met Coyote and they tried to transform Coyote into stone. (We have an ancient word in our language which literally translates into "using energy to transform matter" and because of that we say that no man's knowledge ought to stand in the shadow of another and we have been for far too long in the shadow of another.) Coyote then asks why the transformers are causing him harm, are they not put on the land like him? He tells them, "I will allow you to pass through my country quickly, but you will not be allowed to stay., Also you should not interfere in my work nor should I interfere in your work." Coyote also stated that they should be friends. That is the first law

(supreme authority) that was given to us by Coyote. That law is founded on kinship. After Coyote finished his work, the Creator came down and gave us our homelands.

Dr. Ignace will say how when the first white men (Seme7) came amongst us, "They found the people of each tribe supreme in their own territory, and having tribal boundaries known and recognized by all. The country of each tribe was just the same as a very large farm or ranch (belonging to all the people of the tribe) from which they gathered their food and clothing, and of course, fish which they got in plenty for food."

Dr. Ignace further explains his peoples' belief that we are part of nature, unlike the Europeans who view themselves as outside of nature. The trees are part of our families. The trees and plants we use as medicine and food are like mothers looking after their small children.

To illustrate this point he relates the story of a young beautiful woman who gave up on all suitors, and then they all gave up on her. She married biscuit root (Qweq'wile), and had a son who was a transformer who traveled and grew in Shuswap territory. Thus, the plants, trees and fish are also part of their relations.

Dr. Ignace will say that for Secwepemc people, historically everything was based on kinship ties. If you have kinship ties then you were allowed to access the land and its resources. If you are married to a person from a neighbouring Nation you are allowed to, for example, hunt and fish with them in their Nation's land and vice versa. However, if you do not have this kinship tie, you would be severely punished for entering into another Nation's land without express permission and proper protocol.

According to his worldview, everything is alive, even the table has life, the molecules in it move and everything is in flux.

He continues with a story of Coyote to illustrate a point about the current fishery situation:

After the ice age and all of that was gone, Coyote had a hankering for fish. So he went to the river. First he transformed himself into a feather and was blown around by the wind. Then he transforms himself into a rock and falls to the bottom. He then transforms himself into a leaf but he gets caught up in a whirlpool. He then transforms himself into a beautiful stick and floats down the river. There were two medicine women (T'kuik) who found the stick in their fish dam and they took it for firewood and when they threw it into the fire, Coyote transformed into a baby boy who they saved and thought to raise as their own. He stayed with them for four days and four nights. (Four is an important number for us. If something dies you jump over it four times and it will come back to life.) So he stays there for four days and four nights. (So when we go for a vision quest we stay for four days and four nights and so we strive, also, to have the power that transformers have and elders could and did attain that. We talk about parallel universes, moving from one universe to another, we had that power, transforming from one animal to another, we had that power. That's who we are. It's our real. Einstein and all of those people have nothing over us. We were there we done it all.) So when Coyote left, he left the women with child and he summoned the salmon up stream after he broke their dam and broke

their power. Because you cannot keep food from your relatives, he made them relatives of the Shuswap people and he broke their spell from withholding the salmon from us.

Elders to this day say that you could see Coyote's tracks along the shore of the One River (Thompson) across the mouth of the Deadman Creek. He brought the salmon along all of the rivers there.

Then he called a great meeting of all the Chiefs in the Nation to feast on the great accomplishment that he had achieved. So he made a great drying rack and started drying salmon and while he was drying salmon he went around hastily thinking about how proud people would be of him and how they would honour him; his ego was getting bigger and bigger and when he was doing that salmon would get hooked in his hair and he would kick them. Since he was disrespecting the salmon, they all jumped off the rack and ran back into the river. So when all the Chiefs came to see the big accomplishment, all they could eat was the slime on the stick. Because that's all that was left. All the salmon had left.

Dr. Ignace ties this story to the present and explains that the salmon have left because they were disrespected, which is what he believes is happening now. He points out that we have disrespected the salmon with all sorts of harms to our environment.

Dr. Ignace thinks it is important to figure out how to protect the environment of the fish, since they are our children. He thinks we must consider how we are going to live seven generations from now. He wonders what will happen one day when we wake up with no salmon and no water and he says: "try to eat that dollar bill and see how that feeds you."

Traditional knowledge and cultural significance of salmon and fishing

Dr. Ignace explains that their elders say "the salmon (Sqlélten) are our first children and we need to protect them and honour them always." According to their law, if you honour someone, they will honour you back. There is reciprocity. This is even embedded in their language. For example, one cannot speak highly about oneself. When one speaks about oneself, only the diminutive will come out. But when one speaks about another in great honour and great praise, they believe that that other person will then give back when needed. That way they keep a balance.

The word "Sqléltén7uwi" (sockeye) means "the original salmon."

Dr. Ignace believes that with the depletion of the salmon comes the depletion of his culture - and it breaks his heart. Young people are lamenting that they cannot practice those ways anymore; they do not know how to make the proper spears (manet) – all because of the mismanagement of the fishery, in any event, in the Deadmans Creek there are no salmon to spear. According to traditional fishing practices and laws, for example, a particular spear is used to hunt spring salmon (shéni7). But no one makes that kind of spear anymore because the spring salmon stocks have been decimated. The Secwepemc have different technologies for different types of fish, seasons, and locations.

Similarly, his people do not make dipnets as much as they used to. Dr. Ignace will say that in order for his people to use their traditional fishing methods such as dipnets and spear, the salmon must be much more abundant. Dr. Ignace sees the loss of these fishing practices as the loss of knowledge.

Dr. Ignace relates how his people had fought CN Rail for the salmon, when they wanted to double-track the rail line destroying all sorts of wetlands and rearing ponds in the process, and causing erosion to the riverbank and bed. They sought a permanent injunction because of how much they value the salmon. They worked to do so in alliance with the Nlakapamux and Sto:lo Nations

Dr. Ignace explains that over thousands of years, his people have maintained sustainability not just with salmon, but all the surrounding resources, like forests, berries or medicinal plants and trees.

He also explains that salmon are survivors. People think that the salmon go to one river, and come hell or high water they will go back to that river. While true 90% of the time, if the conditions are too bad, the salmon will go to other rivers. He notes that before the Europeans came here they said you could walk across the backs of the salmon. Now, they will push themselves out into other rivers and streams and scatter themselves, which is what we want because that ensures survival of the species.

Collaboration processes with other First Nations

In Dr. Ignace's opinion, cooperation must occur on the level of Nations, not bands. At a broader level, once they have something to manage, Dr. Ignace thinks that something could be worked out on the Intertribal Treaty scale. This is definitely something his Nation would support.

Dr. Ignace thinks First Nations would work together if their real power and authority was recognized. He describes how his people would formulate a plan for their Nation, then take it to other Nations to see if they could work together. Together, the Nations could choose someone to sit at the international table who can express their collective vision for what is needed to bring the salmon back.

In his opinion, First Nations have to get away from the localized representation and instead recognize the rights of each individual Nation. Then each individual Nation would form alliances with other Nations, such as in the formulation of the Intertribal Treaty. DFO management areas now do not work because they are dividing people. He thinks that if they are going to be helped, they need it in ways that will unite rather than divide them, so that they can work together amiably for the greater good of all. For example, his people have met with people on the west coast who have agreed to teach them about fishing on the ocean. He is open to discussions with other Nations for the good of all, but only on a Nation-to-Nation basis.

Vision for involvement in the management of the Fraser sockeye fishery

Dr. Ignace thinks that First Nations should be allowed to be involved in the management of the fishery. His vision of involvement in fishery management is one of equality: equal involvement in the management and equal access to the resource.

Dr. Ignace says he is looking for co-management of fish, on terms that include terminal fisheries, selective harvesting, rehabilitation of the habitat, and the ending of fish farms or moving fish farms on to land and out of harm's way. First Nations want to be at the table making decisions as equals, as partners. However, in his perspective, right now First Nations do not have much say – they are told when, where and what to fish. That's not co-management. Instead, First Nations want to be able to bring who they are to the table and help manage the resources. But this will require a change in the overall management of the fishery.

He supports a commercial fishery happening in the river, as opposed to in the marine areas. He envisions inland these commercial fisheries being by-and-large limited to First Nations, and being based on the principle of respect, and based in each Nation's laws and in accordance with traditional practices and principles in balance with Western science. In his opinion, sustainability is achieved by focusing on inland commercial fisheries where the fish begin to sort themselves out into the various streams and can be selectively harvested using methods such as fish weirs. He notes some of the self imposed closures some First Nations, such as Skeetchestn, have imposed in order to try to protect certain species such as the Coho in Deadman's Creek, but notes that these measures have been of little assistance. He hopes that the communal fishing licenses that are being imposed now will remain communal and leave room for his people to practice their traditional culture, and to trade as they had in the past.

As for his role, Dr. Ignace explains "I can't eat my Aboriginal right to fish, I can eat a fish. So I will keep fighting for my right by fighting to save the salmon."

Dr. Ignace will provide and may refer to the Laurier Memorial during his testimony.