

Yukon Chinook Salmon for Our Future

By Jessica Hildebrand, USFWS Data Technician

My name is Jessica Hildebrand. My parents are Rodney and Celene Hildebrand; my paternal grandparents are Victor and Edith Nicholas, and my maternal grandparents are the late Leo and Delores Kriska. I grew up at a homestead located 6 miles from Koyukuk and 12 miles from Nulato. On the homestead, better known as “Last Chance,” is our family’s house, my parent’s privately owned business, our fish cutting area, smoke house, and numerous old cabins and caches. My parents also own a house in Nulato that we went back and forth to for school during the winter, but you would never catch us away from Last Chance during the summer.

This is where my best childhood memories were made and where my parents taught my siblings and I our subsistence lifestyle. In the fall we harvest moose for the winter, but my favorite time has always been fishing season during the summer. Harvesting salmon is such a beautiful experience. I love when our whole family works hard together, bonding, and putting away this important resource for Alaskan Natives. During fishing season, my dad stays out on the river all night trying to catch a decent amount of Chinook for the women in the family to work on in the morning. Seining is typically the men’s duty but when my brothers were too young to go out with my dad, I would always volunteer myself (admittedly to get out of the hard work of cutting fish in the early mornings) to go with him. Although my mom, adamant on making sure my sisters and I knew how to process salmon, would never let me sleep in when there was fresh salmon to be put away, I will never regret the lack of sleep I endured to spend my nights seining on the Yukon River with my dad.

I remember everything we talked about while drifting for hours, but one thing always stuck in my head. He told me about a time 10 years or so before when he and his friend pulled in 28 Chinook in one drift. This shocked me because we had been seining for many hours already, had drifted about 12 times, and barely caught 8 Chinook. It also saddened me to realize that our precious Chinook numbers are depleting and right before my eyes. This was when I decided that I would go to college and get a degree that would enable me to work in a field where I could help conserve salmon. So when I was 14 years old I moved to Fairbanks to receive a better education at James T. Hutchison High School, I enrolled for college with a declared major before I graduated, and I did my senior project on conserving salmon. I just completed my 3rd year at the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) working towards a Bachelor of Science degree in Biological Science, and have started my 2nd year as the data technician with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services (USFWS) located in the Fairbanks Fish & Wildlife Field Office - Subsistence Branch (FFWFO – Subsistence Branch).

I was lucky enough to have Kanuti National Wildlife Refuge Manager, Mike Spindler, on my panel when I presented my senior project and he told me to get in contact with former TCC fish biologist, Lisa Kangas. Lisa is now an environmental specialist for Alyeska Pipeline Service Company and my mentor. After I got in contact with her in November 2011, she brought me to meet Aaron Martin, the fish biologist supervisor of the FFWFO – Subsistence Branch. Aaron told me all about the internships with the USFWS and I knew that this position would be perfect for me. Words cannot explain how happy and excited I was when I got the call letting me

know I got the position. I will always be grateful for this amazing learning experience with wonderful people.

As the data technician, I consolidate the numbers of Chinook salmon, Chum salmon, and other species that pass through the fish and wildlife weir and sonar projects as they get reported in to me from the field crews daily. After consolidating the numbers, I redistribute them to different agencies. During my daily routine, the low Chinook numbers compared to other species always hits close to home for me. However, I've been able to form objectives for myself that I think may make a difference. For example, before I worked for USFWS, I was resentful towards the restrictions and regulations that were set during fishing season. Then I became aware of the reasoning for them and now have a new outlook. I want to voice these reasons to my fellow subsistence community so we can all become aware and take action together to save our Chinook salmon for the generations to come.

The restrictions and regulations are not made to keep Chinook salmon from us; they are put in effect to protect the threatened species that are important to all of us! Instead of being bitter towards the restrictions and regulations, we need to accept them and work towards sustaining Chinook together. I've already made an impact on my own family by persuading them to harvest more Chum than Chinook last year. Chum can be just as rich as Chinook in some areas and can be harvested without having such drastic effects on their numbers. My mom, once angry with the rules as well, now appreciates them and has been relaying the information I've given her to others in our village. She processed Chum the same as Chinook last year, and has been showing others that there is not too much of a difference between the two when stripped, filleted, jarred, or canned. I believe that if we all make the sacrifice of choosing to harvest Chum and let the Chinook pulses pass through to get to their spawning grounds that their numbers will begin to rise as more make it there.

Making the sacrifice now can help save the Chinook salmon from becoming extinct and the subsistence community needs to be aware of this. As a Koyukon Athabascan who lives a subsistence lifestyle, I do understand where the frustration is coming from. But it is time to stop fighting the restrictions and regulations and do our part because we, US Fish & Wildlife Service, and Alaska Department of Fish & Game all want the same thing – for Chinook salmon to last. Knowledge is power and the more people who become aware and make the sacrifice, the more we will help make a difference in saving Chinook. So voicing the reasoning for the restrictions and regulations, and persuading others to choose to make the sacrifice or even just cut back a little on what Chinook is taken, is very important to me and what I hope to achieve.

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