

Oral History Cover Sheet
National Wildlife Refuge System Centennial Alaska PSA Campaign

Name: Richard Nelson
Date of Interview: December 11, 2002
Interviewer: Jimmy Fox

Brief Summary of Interview: Richard Nelson first came to Alaska in 1961 as a student from the University of Wisconsin. He talks about doing his research projects, living in native communities, his work as an anthropologist and writer, and experiences he's had including the cruise of The Harriman Alaska Expedition Retraced which follows the route of an expedition done in 1899 that carried passengers John Muir, John Burroughs, and Edward Curtis. He talks about what Alaskans can do to help make sure places in Alaska will be around in another 100 hundred years, to utilize the public lands, and why he thinks Theodore Roosevelt and Jimmy Carter are 2 heroes of American history.

KEY WORDS:

People: Richard Nelson; John Muir; John Burroughs; Edward Curtis; President Jimmy Carter; Theodore Roosevelt; Cathy Rezabek;

Places: Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge; Kodiak Island; Aleutian Chains; Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge; Wainwright; Chelki; Sitka; Brautfort; Yukon; Koyukuk River; Huslia; Hughes; Allakaket; Nulato; Gulf of Alaska; Bering Sea; nesting islands; Bogoslof Island; Hall Island; Pribilof Islands; Saint Lazaria; Tongass National Forest; Fairbanks; Juneau;

Divisions/Titles/Programs/Studies: U.S. Air Force Pilot Survival Manual project; subsistence living; Harriman Alaska Expedition Retraced;

Wildlife/Critters: Steller's sea cow; seabirds; Storm petrel; Puffin; Puffins, Murre, Cormorant, Bald Eagle, ravens;

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Interviewed by: Jimmy Fox

Jimmy Fox:

... Press record right off the bat and just let things kind of take its course. Umm, maybe what we should get out of the way just right off the bat is an introduction and how, how I can tell me people, you know, just introduce yourself in a way that you think most Alaskans would recognize you. You are probably very multitallented and known in many different circles, but a general audience know you're an author and many other things, but introduce yourself however you'd like. But that's one consideration, is how people will recognize you on the air.

Richard Nelson:

Okay, all right, I'm ready.

Jimmy Fox:

Sure, go ahead.

Richard Nelson:

Hi, I'm Richard Nelson; I'm a writer, a 30 year resident of Alaska, and a pretty intense outdoorsman.

Jimmy Fox:

Oh, that's excellent.

Richard Nelson:

Okay.

Jimmy Fox:

You're connecting with everybody in that one. Well, why don't we get started with your connection with the outdoors and you can even... I don't have to ask you all these questions, you probably have these things in your head already but then you can lead into what brought you to Alaska and when... And I'm sure you're full of wonderful stories too.

Richard Nelson:

Okay, so just a little bit of personal...

Jimmy Fox:

Yeah.

Richard Nelson:

... Personal Alaskan history?

Jimmy Fox:

Yeah, that'd be great.

Richard Nelson:

All right. I first came to Alaska in 1961, as a student at the University of Wisconsin, and started right out in the wild country. My first summer in Alaska was in the Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge working on research, prehistory and the biology of Kodiak Island.

Jimmy Fox:

Wow, wow!

Richard Nelson:

Now let's see, guide me a little bit on other sorts of...

Jimmy Fox:

Okay, yeah. Umm, why don't you... We'll just do this like a just a general conversation. You're telling me about yourself, a little bio[graphy]... And after you finished up at Kodiak Island what did you do next?

Richard Nelson:

I spent my first summer in Alaska on Kodiak Island out in the remote part of the coast, working with an archaeological research project, and then came back in 1963, for another research project. This one about halfway out the Aleutian Chain in what is now the Alaska Maritime Wildlife Refuge. Then I spent a number of years living in native communities, learning in the Arctic up in the village of Wainwright, where I spent about a year learning how to subsist and survive on the Arctic ice. A project that was funded by the U.S. Air Force to get information for pilot survival manuals. I ended up doing more research and I guess I would say personal learning in native villages, especially within communities; Chelki, Sitka, Brautfort, Yukon... And in the Koyukuk River communities; Huslia, Hughes, Allakaket, Nulato. So those years added up for me, living in villages and that experience. Living in native communities has deeply affected my way of living in Alaska, my knowledge of how to live off the land, my commitment to subsistence, hunting and fishing, as well as my whole way of thinking about the world. All of those things have been profoundly affected by living in native communities in Alaska.

I think of myself as having two courses of education; one is the education that I got in high school and college, in the whole western way of living in the world. And the other, which is equally important to me, is the education that I got living in native communities such as Koyukan and in communities where I had a chance to learn a little bit about a completely different way of living in the world and understanding the world... And those two courses have really been extremely important in my life.

The other thing I want to emphasize about living in Alaska is my life as an Alaskan focuses, and always has focused on the outdoors. On exploring and camping and hiking and boating and hunting and fishing. Everything about the outdoors, everything about

wildness in Alaska is completely captivating to me. It's really the foundation of my life and by existence. Living here in Alaska and being in close contact with nature and the outdoors.

Oh, I suppose I should say something about profession.

Jimmy Fox:

I'm captivated, I was speechless! Very articulate. You definitely covered your connection with the outdoors, and that's very unique to point out your two different educations. Very, very interesting.

Richard Nelson:

I don't know if I should do that in a very, very brief way or if you could work with that sort of longer?

Jimmy Fox:

I think we'll work with the longer and I think, I think they'll capture these little snippets that...

Richard Nelson:

Right, right. I'm trying to remember to pause so people can make cuts.

Jimmy Fox:

Well, they're doing this all computer, and from what I understand they basically do magic with this new computer equipment, so.

Richard Nelson:

Yeah, yeah, good all right.

Jimmy Fox:

Yeah, and yeah you can cover your professional history in Alaska as well.

Richard Nelson:

My work in Alaska has focused around two things; first, being an anthropologist and living in native communities in the Arctic and in the interior, trying to record traditional knowledge of the natural way and ways of subsistence living. And the other part of my professional life as an Alaskan is I'm also a writer, and I have spent almost my entire career in Alaska, trying to write about Alaskan communities, Alaskan traditions, and the Alaskan environment.

The two, the two threads of my life, being an anthropologist and living in indigenous communities and working as a writer are completely twisted together... And my goal as an Alaskan and as a professional is to try write in ways that will capture something about the cultural and environmental richness of Alaska. And have those... In those... Capture those views of Alaska, not just for people who are living today, but for people on out into

the future. What is Alaska here at the beginning of the 21st Millennium, and how will that compare to what Alaska is like on out into the future.

Jimmy Fox:

It's hard to imagine yourself as a historian, but a hundred years from now, two hundred years from now people will look back at your work I think and be very appreciative.

Richard Nelson:

Yeah, I have a really strong sense that writing about Alaska as it is today is also creating a record of this Alaska for future generations. And I hope more than anything that the richness of culture and environment that exists today in Alaska will be there a century or two centuries from now, so the people don't read what I and others have written as accounts of lost and vanished world. That they can read it say, "This is amazing, they saw that a hundred years ago and we can still see it today." That would be my dream of a perfect future for Alaska.

Jimmy Fox:

Yeah.

Richard Nelson:

All of this beauty and richness of culture and the environment is here in a century after we're all gone.

Jimmy Fox:

Yes, it would be a great, great dream to see it come true. Wow, with all of that experience across the entire state, you probably have more stories than we have time for. But can you just relay a few, one or two or just take up ten minutes or whatever you feel comfortable with. You may have one story that would take 30 minutes, but if you can condense one or two, we'd sure like to hear those.

Richard Nelson:

We can do, we can do maybe several. One of the most powerful experiences I've ever had as an Alaskan came in the summer of 2001, on a cruise on a ship, a cruise called the Harriman Alaska Expedition, the Harriman Alaska Expedition Retraced. This was following the route of an expedition that had happened in 1899, that included many of the great scientists of the day as well as writers like John Muir and John Burroughs and the photographer who later became very famous, whose name is Edward Curtis. That voyage, the Harriman Expedition, retraced in 2001, followed the entire Alaskan coast from the southeast; all the way up along the Gulf of Alaska, partway out the Aleutian Chain, and up to the Bering Sea, and along the Bering Sea coast of Alaska... And it was a sweeping, extraordinary, mind-boggling view of the beauty and wildness of the Alaska coast.

I think what struck me most about going on that voyage up the Alaska coast was the, this string of wild, pristine places that are still so rich with life. That everything that ever lived in those places, with the single exception of the Steller's sea cow, which many

people haven't even heard of, live in that. Every species of plant and animal that have ever been known to live in Alaska and along the Alaskan coast are still here. And so to take in all of that in one voyage in just a month was one of the greatest experiences of my life.

A lot of that voyage up the Alaska coast was taking in parts of the Alaska Maritime Wildlife Refuge, and I came away from that immersion in a whole sweep of that wildlife refuge, I came away with a sense that this is one of the greatest tracks of wild land, not just in Alaska, not just in North America, but anywhere in the world... And with a sense of privilege we have to live in a place where we can still experience the world as it should be, where we can still go out in this wildlife refuge and visit islands as we did on the trip. To sit in a little Zodiac boat at the foot of a cliff that is whirling with so many thousands of seabirds, that you can't even fathom what you're seeing. And to think of having the opportunity to experience a world that really, by the lower 48 standards, is just a dream. Going to these places, these nesting islands at the mouth of Cook Inlet off the Aleutian Chains, up in the Bering Sea, Bogoslof Island, Hall Island, the Pribilof's [Islands]; seeing those colonies of birds is like being able to witness the herds of buffalo that once, you know, went across the American Plains from one horizon to the next. Like being able to see the flocks of Passenger Pigeons, you know. Those incredible natural phenomena that are gone in other parts of the United States, and they're still here today. And so I had this feeling while traveling the coast and visiting these places in the wildlife refuge that I felt like a person who had come to life out of a history book, and yet here it was, you know, 2001, and it's all still there. I don't think very many people anywhere in the world have the opportunity or the privilege to ever experience in their lifetime something like that, and we have it right here.

Now I'll say one other little story; not far from home in Sitka is an island called Saint Lazaria Island, and it's part of the Alaska Maritime Wildlife Refuge. It has about 500,000 Storm petrels; it has several thousand nesting pairs of Puffins, thousands of Murre, Cormorant, Bald Eagle, Ravens; a little node of rock, like the nucleus of an atom; all these type of protons. The birds, huge flocks of birds flying around this island, and it's just 15 miles from my front door, it's 15 miles from Sitka, one of the major cities in Alaska we have this place. And these things, having places like Saint Lazaria Island, having places like many, many hundreds of other islands in the Alaska Maritime Wildlife Refuge that are like this that you'll have these massive aggregations of seabirds is something really extraordinary, something that we need to celebrate and appreciate a treasure.

Jimmy Fox:

Exactly right. That is... You covered the entire voyage of the Harriman Expedition in one month?

Richard Nelson:

Umm hmm [Yes].

Jimmy Fox:

That's incredible.

Richard Nelson:

Umm hmm [Yes], it was, it was a fantastic experience. There were about a hundred people on this small cruise ship, and the ship was equipped with Zodiacs so that the whole group of passengers and the little cadre of scientists and people like myself were along, we can get in these Zodiacs and go up close to islands, we can ashore, we could easily visit communities, even quite remote communities. So we had the comfort of a, of a big ocean-going ship, but the ability to have a look at very, very wild places, always with a strong sense of minimal impact. Even when people did go ashore, which wasn't very often, there was a policy of minimizing impact on the land. Staying on a beach, avoiding slogging through wetlands where you would leave a lasting trace on the land. But it was also a voyage that was distinguished, I think, by good principles of minimizing impacts.

Jimmy Fox:

No cavalier glacier climbing like Muir did?

Richard Nelson:

No there wasn't! There wasn't much of that kind of stuff, you know, that was very respectful. Also respectful of communities, you know, I think one of the, one of the remarkable things about traveling up the Alaska coast and visiting these very wild places is that there are also a lot of communities, and the integration that still exists here of remote communities with the surrounding land. That is a wonderful thing, you know, the fact that people are still living by subsistence; hunting, fishing, and gathering. The fact that people in Alaskan communities are able to still do that I think is another thing that distinguishes us from the other states. It makes us more fortunate, you know, that we, we have this ability to not just enjoy the land for the beauty and it's scenery, but also to live by subsistence here and get some of our important food this way, by our own hands.

Jimmy Fox:

Yeah. What do you think Alaskans can do to help insure these special places will be around in a hundred years?

Richard Nelson:

I think one of the most important things that we as Alaskans can do is to be aware that we have these amazing treasures of land that's not only rich and beautiful and pristine in its' wildness and biological community. Not only do we have access to those things, but I think the responsibility we have, that we incur because we have the privilege of experiences these places, we need take care of them, and so for me... [I'm going to sort of rephrase this].

For me, not only am I as an Alaskan able to go out the door, get in my boat and go visit these amazing wild lands, and explore them and kayak them and hunt and fish in them, but I also feel that I have the privilege to stand up for those lands. I have the privilege to speak on their behalf, and I have the responsibility as a citizen to help to take care of

those places, to make sure that not only can I enjoy them, but so can the children of my son and his children experience those places.

So what I think Alaskans can do for our place; number one is to get out there and enjoy them and appreciate them and live in them. And remember this is where we live and this is what we have. And then second is to speak for them and to say, "I want future generations to be able to see this." I want future generations to be able live here the way I've been able to and my neighbors have been able to. So that means taking care of them.

I'm going to say a few other things about it; the wildlife refuges and other public lands in Alaska are a shining example of what democracy is about. These are lands that are owned by everyone equally. There lands on which everyone has equal right of access, we can all go there. The public lands of Alaska are not locked up, they're locked open, we can all go there and savor those things. I think that wildlife refuges and other public land are one of the greatest achievements that American has ever made. They express and manifest the genius of our democracy. They give us all these places where we can go and savor the American land. Public lands in Alaska and America are all about freedom, the freedom to wonder at will over the American lands as creation has it. The freedom to witness some of the greatest beauty that exists anywhere in the world, the freedom to elevate our soul to, to explore with out children, to take photographs, to fish, to hunt, to do scientific research, to learn about the world. These, these lands are not just beautiful, they're very, very important.

Jimmy Fox:

No, that's wonderful and while you were saying that I couldn't help but think about President Carter receiving the Noble Prize this past week. And I feel like that he signed the pen to, I mean he gave us this gift that we have in Alaska.

Richard Nelson:

Boy, that is so right, you know, I think two of the great heroes of American history are Theodore Roosevelt and Jimmy Carter because they both gave us an enormous legacy of land, of American land that we and future generations are going to be able to enjoy. Teddy Roosevelt and Jimmy Carter are both hunters and fisherman too, you know, they both understood that we need wildlife refuge for many reasons, and including places where we can have populations of game and fish that we can view. So I mean I think part of the genius of the wildlife refuges is that they're not only places where we can, you know, savor the beauty of the world and the richness of the biological diversity, but also places where we can live our lives, where we can not only explore and take pictures and make drawings that look at scenery, but also places where we can hunt and fish for the food that is really important to a lot of us.

Jimmy Fox:

Wow, you are very articulate and said the best on many wonderful things and the best 26 minutes, you've condense a lot and you made our job very easy. You didn't need any prompting. Umm, before I close this up are there any last statements or messages or just

anything that you'd like to throw in that maybe Cathy Rezabeck could make yourself on the PSA?

Richard Nelson:

Well, I think just to come back a little bit to my feelings about, about these lands for me as an Alaskan, public lands, wildlife refuges, and national parks and national monuments are the most important land in my world. I live in the Tongass National Forest, I spent time in national wildlife refuges and national parks, and for me as an Alaskan I think that these lands are as important as the towns. They're as important as the cities that I love, I love Sitka and Juneau, I love Fairbanks and Anchorage, I love a lot of villages that I've lived in, and I think these communities of people can't be separated from the community of land that surrounds us. The brilliant thing in Alaska is that we can go from our community out into all these lands with the knowledge that they belong to all of us, and that we have it in our power to protect and preserve those lands for our future. And we don't always have to confront the fear that we'll lose what we treasure because we have the opportunity to take care of it. I'm sort of wandering, but anyway.

Jimmy Fox:

No, no, it's well said, well said. You need to... no, you need to get this radio show going.

Richard Nelson:

Well man, it's my goal, it is my goal.

Jimmy Fox:

I can't wait, I cannot wait. I'll be a fan. Well, I will let you go. Richard, I really appreciate your time, and I have extended this offer to everyone that has participated in this project and that is before we release the CDs to the refuge stations to hand carry to the local radio stations, you have the option of reviewing the recording just to make sure that it sounds okay with you, would you like to get a copy of your recording as it would appear or would be heard?

Richard Nelson:

Yeah, that 'd be great. I'd love to.

Jimmy Fox:

Okay, real good. Well, I think the thought is that these will be prepared January or early February, and then go out in late February in time for the Centennial March 14th. So, expect one in January or February.

Richard Nelson:

Great, great, well that's good.

Jimmy Fox:

Well, with that thank you very much. It's been great, and happy holidays and looking forward to that radio program.

Richard Nelson:

Well, thanks a lot Jimmy, and I hope we get a chance to meet some time.

Jimmy Fox:

I do too; if you're ever in Fairbanks please come up to the Fairbanks Federal Building, and the Fish and Wildlife Service offices are on the first and second floor. Of course, refuges, the best shop and Fish and Wildlife Service is on the second floor, so come and see us!

Richard Nelson:

All right, well thanks Jimmy. It's truly been a pleasure.

Jimmy Fox:

A pleasure here too, thank you Richard.