



Native Perspectives on Sustainability: Joeneal Hicks (Ahtna)

Interviewee: Joeneal Hicks

Interviewer: David E. Hall

Date: June 19, 2007

Transcriber: Jenessa Roberti

DH: If you could start by telling us a little bit about yourself, your heritage, and a bit about your cultural identity, where home is for you and focus of your work?

JH: I'm Ahtna which is a name that identifies us as people of the Copper River. I am originally from a village named Mentasta. It is the last upper village on the Copper River system. They call us the headwaters people, because we live at the headwaters and in the mountains. My Grandfather is Fred John Sr. (deceased) and Grandmother is Katie John. Nearly 80% of the people who call Mentasta home are descendants of Fred and Katie John. Most are pretty much of the same family having branched out from her children and my mother is one of them. My grandmother has over 200 some grandchildren, and is a great-great-great grandma by now. Maybe even great-great-great-great grandma. But that is where I come from, Mentasta. Mentasta is part of the Ahtna region, which is located in South-central, Alaska. Our village population is somewhere in the neighborhood of about 150, average. Because of the lack of jobs, education, housing, many of our tribal members have moved elsewhere. If all were to come back, I would think that Mentasta would have a population of about 300 or more. Mentasta is a good village to live in; the scenery, the mountains, the wildlife, the lake, the fish, and more, make this a wonderland with lots of adventure. Younger people make up the majority of the people here or rather an age group of about 15 to 30. From 30 on, the age group dwindles and we end up with no more than 15 to 20 elders over 60, my grandmother being the oldest. There is more younger generation than there is the older one. That is just the way it is. What I am saying here is that the culture has changed quite a bit from what it used to be like 20 years ago. Back then, there were more adults over 30 whose lifestyle *thrived* on subsistence food and gathering type of activities. When compared to now, we can really see a difference where our dependency has shifted to other needs such as cars and store bought goods. The life style for this younger age but majority group is that of what we have a present, it's not necessarily about walking, about hunting and fishing, nor is it about getting ready for winter like cutting firewood, fixing up your home, and so forth. To them it's an inconvenience especially when they already have that convenience so why go backwards. In short, the lifestyle for these young adults is not about subsistence but rather a cash economy, an important change that will be reflected upon 20 years or less from now. It's changing slowly but surely. You can see it. As I had said, Mentasta is located at the headwaters of the Copper River, we are therefore called the headwaters people. The Village of Mentasta is surrounded by the Mentasta Mountains. Mentasta Lake Village is the official name of Mentasta, it is furthest north of all Ahtna villages. Mentasta also has a distinct dialect different from all other Ahtna villages. I thank my Grandfather and Grandmother for settling at this particular place. How that ever came about in terms of making it a permanent settlement back in those

days, I don't know, but they must have known something that made them pick that place as a home.

DH: can you say a little bit about the focus of your work?
(5 min)

JH: My work is kinda like two fold. I might say that up till I came out of the military I had really no perspective on what *work* was except to make money. I could pretty much cared less about what was happening around me. It was only until I was discharged and went to school that I started learning about what was really happening around me. I eventually learned about the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA), that is ten years after the fact and that I was a shareholder of some village and regional corporation. It was then that I decided to learn about it and went to work for my regional corporation. I learned about land and resource management and ever since, this has been my field of work. Like I say, after the fact, ten some years plus, ever since then, pretty much beginning with Ahtna, I have been working in the land and resource management field. Currently, I work for a tribal government, or rather Cheesh-na Tribal Council formerly Chistochina. My title is EPA National Resources Program Director. In other words, I manage several grants that include BIA as in water resources, natural resources, Indian reservation roads transportation planning, and integrated resource management planning; EPA as in solid waste management planning, water and air quality; and other Federal grants as in migratory birds, traditional ecological knowledge, and so forth. In short, I wear about five or six different hats, it all interlinks one program to another, the key being land and resource management--that's my background.

DH: Later I am going to ask you some other questions about your community and you have already spoken to this a bit I'm wondering if you could just define for us clearly, what would define your community in terms of people and places?

JH: What would define my community? I would say isolation, scenery, the serenity of it. When I think of Mentasta, the first thing that comes to my mind is the mountains, the lakes, ponds, and streams, or rather the land in general. In other words, the wonder of it all. It's beauty. It's something that make you think in terms of awe, something that you imagine only in dreams. In reality, you ask yourself, "Did God really create this area?" It's beautiful and that's the first thing that strikes out at me. I also find myself saying "hmm, you're home, Joe." Once I start entering those mountains I just feel it "you're home, you're home." That's how I would define my community, one that is a beautiful place to live

DH: so in terms of people and places then it is those near Mentasta Lake and that mountainous region?

JH: The lake...just the quietness of it, the serenity. I guess really the only thing I can say is just how beautiful it is to me.

DH: ...and then the people?

JH: Regarding people, the majority is Alaska Natives within the community as a whole or rather

a six-mile radius. As you expand that radius, the majority dwindles somewhat, but remains status quo. The population consist of young adults under 35, then children under 18, then adults over 35. Elderly make up the minority. White people are the largest ethnic group who come in two groups, those who make the area their home by setting up residence 20 or more years ago. This population remains status quo but slightly growing. Another group represents settlers by way of opening up federal lands for settlement purposes; they are like newcomers to the area. In terms of our interaction with them, it is good and conservative. I say conservative because they are the type of people who moved to the area to enjoy what life has to offer. They are not the type that take things for granted such as electricity and phone, but rather want to see growth in a conservative sense. Many are aware of their environment and surroundings and appreciate it because of its uniqueness. They are people who are willing to help one another regardless of who you are. Mentasta people and the white population fair well together. In terms of places, Mentasta is unique. Although the area is surrounded by mountains, the remainder is 80% wetlands that consist of creeks, rivers, lakes, ponds, marshes, and swamp. This type of ecosystem makes it an ideal place for waterfowl, fish and wildlife. Added together, this area can only be defined as beautiful and one that needs protection such as being included as a conservation system unit, wildlife refuge, and or so forth.

DH: Well, we will come back to that and again ask some other questions asking you to think in terms of that place and those people and within that place that you identify with as your community.

JH: okay

(8:50)

DH: The term “sustainability” is one that is being used a lot now by people who are working to address the environmental and social and economic challenges of today. I am wondering if that term "sustainability" is one that you use and one that works for you. Or is there any other terms that are better to capture...?

JH: Well, again I have to point back to my work experience again. Back up till I came out of the military, till I actually went into college I had no idea of what sustainability was. I could pretty much care less until I actually got into the work field; I started taking a look at my surroundings and my environment. And after working over 20 some years in this particular field you developed a sense of, feeling as to what sustainability is. There is no other term you can really use, for when you talk sustainability, you talk about a bunch of things. To begin, you might want to talk about conservation, preservation, and so forth. What do you mean when you say sustainability, is it sustainability of a certain resource and the environment as a whole. As you talking about a community, a village, a way of life, language? Thinking that you are talking about Mentasta as a people and as a community and way of life, I enjoy to think you're talking about the big picture as I described above. With this painting, you are asking, “how best would I sustain it given the social and economic challenges of today?” First of all, the people would have to come together and work towards a common goal. If we are conservationist as I picture we might be, then we have something in common and we then ought to strive to do something with it. There are many tools out there that we could use and if we want to begin protecting our resources around us, then we best sit down and start the planning process. In so doing, we need

to discover the hidden truths and reveal them for what it's worth. Again, we need to look at the big picture and say once and for all that we want to protect this creation for our future generations. Growth in this day of age is eminent and with it is demand. The question is, do we have enough supplies to meet this demand and my quick answer is no. Nevertheless, that demand will continue to grow until one day, someone will say OK, have at it. It will only be then that realization will become evident and there's no turning back. Comparing the facts would better give you a picture of what could happen, if we don't do something about it now. Sustaining our way of life means preserving it in a fashion that is both appreciative and respectful.

You might want to talk *sustenance*, you might want to talk...well, in the broadest sense sustainability could mean just about anything in regards to an ecosystem. Sustainability of what resources? Sustainability of what you are talking about? I guess is the best way to approach that. You say sustainability of an ecosystem, you are talking about fish and the wildlife, you're talking about migratory birds, you're talking about the scenery--you're talking about everything...

DH: so how do you use the term than?

JH: Home. If you were to ask some other people what sustainability means they might have a very hard time trying to explain it in their sense. Sustainability to me is keeping in touch with Mother Nature, valuing a resource, conservation, preservation, the *beauty* of it all. Again, keeping in touch with Mother Earth. Realizing that everything that mother earth provides is how you eat. There is a big chain. Everything serves a purpose. You take away one thing and it hurts everything else.

DH: what else comes to mind when you think about sustainability?

JH: Sustainability to me...picture Mentasta as I have mentioned it is a beautiful, beautiful place that has many resources. It has water, timber, minerals, it has fish, it has wildlife. It is like an ecosystem in itself. The issue of sustainability is to keep it like that 50 to 100 years from now. Sustainability is a means of keeping encroachment such as development in check, there needs to be checks and balances in place. It is about preserving the present state of the environment as much as you can in its natural state. It is about conservation and preservation of something that you do not want taken away because of the fact that you may not be going to get it back. Like the area around Mentasta, 80 percent of the area is considered wetlands-and when you start fooling with Mother Nature in terms of development, it hurts the ecosystem and the environment. You got to protect it.

(14:20)

DH: When you are speaking with people that are unfamiliar with this concept of sustainability is there any metaphors or analogies or brief stories you share with them to help them understand the concept?

JH: If I were to explain what sustainability is I would have to go back in the past to what people did back then 50 to 100 years ago. I kind of wish I was born back in those days, where moose

was plenty and caribou was plenty; where it was pretty much open season all year round. You had no regulations to follow. Pretty much life style was food and gathering; food and gathering type of activities. Where if you compare it to today, you're always in check. Let's put it this way: there is a recent movie that is a good example. A recent movie by Mel Gibson called "Apocalypto." I don't know if you've seen it yet, but there is an old tribal member in it where he talks about the changes that's going to happen. He talks about a certain type of man when the world was developing who is sad. At one time, animals and man lived together, but another certain type of man emerged or evolved. This type of man was sad all the time and the creatures asked him why. Man said he wanted to be strong and so forth so the creatures as in the owl gave him better eyesight, the lion strength, etc. All this in hopes to make him feel better of himself. But, this wise old owl says, "I see something that is not right. There is still a hole there. This man will never be happy. He is always going to want until such a time that the earth is going to say "I have no more to give." This movie takes place in Brazil in a setting like 300 years ago and that kind of thinking, that kind of philosophy that the old tribal member talks about is pretty much the same thing that we as indigenous people do here. Our (Alaska Native) sense of value: in terms of protecting and conserving our resources for future generations is practiced in other lifestyles around the globe, but there's no weight given it.

DH: I guess I will stick with this same question here: talking with people who are not familiar with the concept of sustainability, how do you explain?

(17:56)

JH: I would by painting them a picture of what it could be like compared to now with explanation and discussion on what other think or visualize it to be like in the future. Let them talk change in the broadest sense, and then talk about the issue of sustainability. If they identify with change and see it as eminent, then ask how would you protect it? What would you do to help the moose survive fifty years from now? I would approach it in a fashion of directly looking at ourselves. I mean if you look at the Ahtna people, for instance we are of three types. those under 30, those above 40, and just kids in general. You look at those under 30, they could probably care less about what sustainability is. If you look at those over thirty they would think, hmm, "protection" through sustainability of resources is good as in subsistence. When you talk about younger kids, it's like their mind is already made up. They are so used to cars, bikes, or just modern day technology, that it is all they think about and expect it as they get older. Their mindset is not about preserving, conserving, and given that state, will grow as a new breed of people. The demand to subsist will be much different if not gone altogether. If you are talking to younger kids you are going to have to use pretty good techniques I guess to get their attention because their minds will drift big time. Whereas when we talk to the older generation they will understand more of what you are trying to say. But when you talk sustainability try to use as much, don't quote me on it "third-grade language" so that people will understand. When you start talking big words stuff like that you'll lose them easy.

DH: Can you give some of that language now: imagine yourself talking to a group of younger people that may not be thinking about sustainability now. How would get that on their mental map?

JH: The younger group? The younger group I would...be *blunt*, be straight forward. They've had the education, they've had the schooling. Just be direct to them and tell them: what do you envision it to be like tomorrow? Do you think salmon? Do you think moose? And why, why not, why don't you care? That would be my approach-I am sure someone else would think different. "This is your culture here and you're going to lose it. This is your identity. How come you don't practice it how come you don't do this?" And then just kind of start the discussion from that particular direction-would be again *my* focus. But I know someone else would probably have a different way. I mean just be direct. That is the best way I can really say it. Just come out and say, "Why aren't you concerned about your future? Why aren't you concerned about what's going to happen tomorrow?"

(21:55)

DH: I am also wondering in the conversation here about sustainability as a concept if there have been any images, or symbols that come to mind that represent some aspect of the concept. Are there any strong images for you?

JH: You mean in regards to sustainability?

DH: Yeah, that in some way represents the concept?

JH: Give me an example?

DH: Well, if the answer is uncertainty than maybe not. I wouldn't want to impose an image for you. It is really as you thought about these different things, is there any imagery that captures what you just shared as far as what sustainability means. And if not, that is ok to.

JH: Let me think on that one a little bit.

DH: we will come back to that one then. Well this is an opportunity to take a little break...

Part 2 of interview with JH: Hicks (6/19)

JH: My idea of sustainability is to see my community remain *as it is* right now and today. I mean, we have to be susceptible to change and as this world grows you are going to see more and more of that effect. So fifty years from now I would have to envision something in the manner of *acceptance*, let's say, acceptance in that change is going to happen anyway. But also acceptance in the fact that people will come to realize that we need to protect what we got now. Meaning that if people would get that mindset now, you would be able to enjoy seeing the fish swim freely, the moose crossing the road without having to worry about getting hit by a truck or a car, the sheep roaming freely on the mountain side, the caribou running down the middle of the highway or the road. But before you can get that again you have to get people in that *mindset* to say, yes, I want to protect that "ecosystem" and when I say ecosystem I mean everything within. Mentasta is an ecosystem-it is composed of two watersheds, one going towards Tok and the other going toward the Copper River, and if one were to take a good look you would see the beauty of it, it's the serenity of it. There is so much there that needs to be protected from

encroachment. And if you don't have those kinds of mechanisms in place right now you are going to destroy it. I have seen change happen over the last twenty some years, and it really bothers you. If you can get people's minds to focus on just that, to protect this for our future, our future generations, I am sure that you would find a lot of support in that regards.

DH: let's say fifty years out we've been successful in holding off that encroachment. What is life like in your community?

JH: Well, if everything goes accordingly you would have people working together. You'd have people of the same understanding. You'd have the younger generation being appreciative of it and focusing on what they can do to keep it intact. I mean they'd be talking we need to protect this for our children. Fifty years from now a new generation takes charge. If all remained the same up to this point, I sure that you would find a place built on government, maybe a strong tribal government. If it were so, you would probably see tribal policies being practiced and enforced; you would probably see jurisdictional issues in the forefront of everyday politics. You would see practices to protect the environment through signage and advertisement.

It is kind of hard to imagine, it is really hard to imagine, but sooner or later you are going to end up seeing the city at some point. So, how do you preserve the area? I think it needs to start now. In other words you need to put mechanisms in place: be it at the conservation type of district. Be it applying for water rights. Be it designating the area as a wild and scenic river corridor, who knows. But those are mechanisms that you could put into place to protect it in the future from governmental intrusion from the economics of supply and demand. Because if you were to approach it fifty years from now, it will be a heck of a lot harder and tougher to do to get people to buy into. I mean right now I believe that you can get people if you do that. Sure there has to be a lot of education in that, but I am sure you would get the people to buy into that. Based on the concept of, again preservation, conservation, sustainability for future generations. You have a lot of other resources out there can help you in this regards and that is the National Park Service. I mean they have been working on this area for a long time. I know that they have the expertise in that regards. I mean we have a working relationship with them in the tribal government that I work for. It seems to work. We don't have to follow the same rules, the same guidelines. But like I say it is a resource out there. It's hard imagine what it would be like fifty years from now, but I guess the only way I can really say is that in fifty years from now I would like to see it remain as it is. But in order to do that you have to start things now. It's like I say you have to start the actual footwork.

(8:40)

DH: In the last segment of the interview we will talk more about those actions and strategies that need to be taken from this day forward. Let's talk more about..."yeah, we have done the actions we have done the strategies and we have been successful in preserving the natural beauty the serenity of your community." So what does that look like in terms of relationships between people and the landscape?

JH: I see people coming together, unifying. I see people talking. I see people looking out for a common goal, a common objective. I see organizations, not just a tribal government. I see state

and federal working together. I see people of an environmental type of attitude.

DH: What is that, “environmental type of attitude?”

JH: Well, when I say that today there is not very many people who are environmentally minded. I would say fifty percent or better of the people out there don't really care about the environment so they litter, pollute. They cut down trees at will. They tear up the ground. When you are environmentally minded you tend not to do that. You tend to advise saying, “hey, pick that piece of trash up--don't throw it out the window. Put that cigarette butt where it belongs, in the ash tray.” That is what I mean, environmentally minded, taking care of your junk and putting it in its right place. Does that answer that?

DH: Yeah. Would there be more to that environmental attitude in terms of the values of people?

JH: Yeah, again, it is more so in regards to education. Education is the biggest component in this whole thing. An example is that we have been trying to do a recycling program in our community for quite some time and the educational component of that is a must. You need to constantly remind people every day constantly, constantly, constantly to about recycling your cans, your paper. If you do this here, You need to explain why it is important such as have less and less trash over here. Reminding them instills a habit forming concept, and without reminders people tend to forget *so* fast. After a while, two three years or so, people just do it automatically. You don't have to remind them anymore. Like I say the educational component has to stay constant. Give them incentives. Again environmentally minded is to take care of the environment, take care of Mother Earth so that she can sustain herself for-I want to say a million more years, but at least for my future generation for my kids and their kids. That's what I mean, environmentally minded.

DH: Can you say a little bit more about education? So, what kind of education will people receive fifty years out in the future?

JH: What kind of education? I think it will be about computers, I don't think it will be textbooks or even about the use of pencils. Technology demands that everything be made easier and simplistic. Education will probably be classrooms with computers so if you wanted to look up something, it would be by use of fingers. Everyday life would be about what is most simplistic, such as fast food and credit cards. Your thoughts would not be about learning by example as in field work, sweating, tough work, and so forth, rather it would be done in the home.

Oh boy. Well, that's a good question. I have to make reference to the younger generation. They are the one that are going to be in charge of the area; in charge of where I am at fifty years from now. The educational part-at this particular age where they are right now, let's say thirty to thirty five right now, they are more inclined to seek McDonalds, to use a car...in other words, their focus is not on subsistence, their focus is not on their culture and tradition. And what it really means if that is the case fifty years from now their focus is not going to be on the environment. Meaning, if you want to preserve the environment fifty years from now you need to change that attitude of thinking. And how do you do that? That is where leadership comes in-that is where I come in I suppose. That is to teach them-not just me-there needs to be more of an environmental

type of effort giving to that effect saying, telling them they need to start thinking about protecting this place for your children and for others. It may start from just one, but we are all going to have to come together sooner or later. We can't just go our own ways. We are going to have to start speaking up now.

(16:24)

DH: Do you see formal education playing an important role in any way?

JH: Yeah, I do, but again, where is that going to come from? Is it going to come from schools? Any kind of environmental education to me comes out of college. I don't see it being taught in the high school, grade school area. I mean Alaska is a young state yet. It's what, in the last fifty years or so it has grown *dramatically*. I mean they call it the "last frontier." Fifty years from now you think they will call it the last frontier? They will probably call it the "destroyed frontier," because, again, people are not environmentally minded about Alaska. Sure they think Alaska is the last frontier now, but the way they deplete, use their resources it ain't going to be here then.

DH: Is there a hopeful alternative to that?

JH: Well yes, I would say so. I wish I was a millionaire and I would probably make it a big commercial that says ok we need to start doing this we need to start but people have to become environmentally minded. When I say that, it need to be advertised as in web sites, TV commercials and things like that. In my opinion, the State needs to get focused in that regards, rather than just think of money and economic growth. To me the people of Alaska are not represented in their views, rather it's the opposite. If I were to say that I want laws that protect the environment, the attention given it would be stagnant. But if I said I want to see a city government formed, it would be given the utmost of attention. Our people in office do not envision Alaska as one that needs protecting, rather they want to see Alaska developed without any consideration given its resources and ability to sustain itself. People elected to office have no sense of conservation because they come from Dallas, they come from LA, and that's all they think.

I know there are groups out there that think this way, I am not exactly sure if I name them right, but I know there is the Worlderness Society, you got some other of those groups that focus on the environmental part. Maybe the best way is start commercially. Start throwing out advertisements in regards to protecting the "last frontier." I would like to see that. But other than that I don't see any programs today that say that. Very few if any.

DH: Let's say that kind of thing happened and there was a mass concerted effort and they were successful. How would people than view themselves differently? How would people view their relationship with their local environments and the broader environment? I guess this comes back to that environmental attitude. What is the characteristic of that?

JH: I would say *awareness*. Awareness of your surroundings. Just paying more attention to what it is that you do. I am sure there are people out there who are aware of what it is, but don't see a reason why they should not throw that beer can out the window. You look at the lower 48, I was

in Lansing, Michigan, and if you were to throw a beer can out the window and you were caught, it is pretty strict in regards to what you would be fined with, or even jail time, get your car taken away, or whatever. Where us here in Alaska, it is so relaxed that if you throw a cigarette butt out the window and start a forest fire, it's pretty much a slap on the hand, that's it. If there was a campaign to protect the environment up here, I think you could probably be pretty successful. You might have a hard time with the sport hunters, sport fisherman. But I am sure they would buy into it if you do it right. You've got to meet people half way you know. Just awareness the more awareness the better. I mean you are not going to change people over night.

DH: What other core values would you like to help cultivate?

JH: I would like to see people talk in a tone that shows respect for one another. I mean sure you have a different cultures up here. I would like to see respect of those cultures. You know a big problem that I see here in Alaska today is that you have people coming up here from the lower forty-eight making decisions for us. The legislature is one big example of where this person is only up here for only two years and is making decisions in Juneau. He has no idea where Mentasta is at, or even South Central is, I don't understand that. Core values, respect. Respect is the biggest thing I see. Respect in the sense that there are people up here who have their identity and want to keep their identity. When I say that I mean their tradition, their culture. There is value in it from anybody's standpoint. It is just people lack that. How do you change that? You stand up and holler. In my opinion, this is how conflicts start and the Middle East is one example. You see war you see all these clashes. Just a lack of respect for people's religion, for people right to exist in this world. Somebody walks in and says nope this is mine now, and sure you are going to find people fighting to protect what they feel is theirs. People take it for granted up here. For instance, hunting and fishing that it's their God given right, they don't realize it is also a privilege. They can't differentiate between the two, what is a right and what is a privilege. Then there is also what you call the economic supply and demand, people who want, people who want, but is there enough supply. People don't think in that kind of a mindset. But the biggest values, when you talk about that, I would have to say respect, respect for one another and who they are.

(25:55)

DH: That is the biggest. Are there other core values to compliment that or add to it?

JH: The other one, you know is kinda hard to explain it, I would probably have to say spirituality. When I say that it is a big, big word also. You can call it religion, you can call it culture, you can call it tradition. Again, it also is respect. The Alaskan Native, the indigenous, the aboriginal Native; when I say the Alaskan Native that is what I refer to as. They have installed in their mind what Alaskan Native is or what the thinking or the mindset is. I mean they were born and raised in a subsistence type of lifestyle. They know pretty much what the environment around them is and how it can sustain itself. What's good and what's bad, stuff like that. That is all in the context again of what spirituality is. I know better than to cut down that tree when I don't need it. Again that term *respect* is the key.

(27:46)

DH: So spirituality and respect go hand in hand?

JH: I would think so. You might have to explain yourself as to what you mean when you say spirituality. But it all comes down to respect to me.

DH: Well can you say a bit more about what you mean when you use the word spirituality?

JH: Well...I was raised to respect everything around me. In other words, to not waste, to appreciate what you have, to share. For instance, if you were to catch a rabbit, a moose or fish or whatever, the idea was to take care of it. You were not abuse to it. You were supposed to eat *all of it*. What you did not eat you disposed of it properly. You don't just throw it in the trashcan; you don't just throw it on the ground. If there are bones, yeah, sure you can give it to the dogs. That was respect for the bird or whatever the animal that gave its body to you. That is out of respect. In other words if you treated that animal or whatever it might be, could be a tree, with respect the idea is that it would constantly come to you when you needed it. And to disrespect it, the term is called "en'gee," it brings bad luck. It is like a taboo, in other words. I was raised in that kind of lifestyle as to respect the animal, respect the rock, the tree, so it would always be there for you tomorrow. Like respect your elders. You know what I mean. It is a big term-

DH: So spirituality keeps coming back to respect for you...

JH: Well, when you think about the "en'gee" part you know like I say, you have to respect the animal. That is part of your spirituality also. I have to come back to that.

(31:00)

Part 3 of Joeneal Hicks interview (6/19/07)

DH: The question was just put forward: you are this person, an average person, fifty years out, born today. Grew up in a world where you received the proper kind of education, cultivation the right kind of values. What is your sense of self in the future and how is that captured in some "I am" statements? What do you have?

JH: The first and foremost thing that I would say is "I am Indian" I am Athabaskan, from Alaska, Mentasta area." "I am beautiful." Just look at me, I'm Indian, I'm beautiful. *I'm it*. Look around me, I managed to protect my environment to what it is today. Just like my dad lived it. Therefore I am smart. I am fruitful. I get it. I'm liked. I'm home. I can hope for tomorrow to see it that way. I am considerate, and I'm healthy. That is the mindset I would be in if that's the environment or the pristine environment of sustainability that I envisioned. That is what I would say.

(2:52)

DH: The last one you said there was healthy.

JH: In other words all the above. In other words I just said it, Indian, beautiful, smart, fruitful, I

mean that is all part of healthy living and a healthy type of life. That is why I say healthy. In other words, I say what I got those resources at my feet here, part of my life.

DH: Can you say a bit more about how those resources are a part of your life?

JH: The resources are the fish and game, the trees, the flowers. The resources are everything, like water and air. To say that it is abundant now, might be a bit immature but the fact is, we have good quality and good quantity now. Years ago, you might say that it was excellent, but times have changes that scenario. It could be said that tomorrow it will be a bit worse off and it is expected, especially as human encroachment becomes more rampant. In regards to how it's part of my life, I say it's around me for a reason, not just to breathe but to drink as well. Everything around me has a purpose and they are intertwined to help me grow. Everything is dependent on another, like I am dependent on the fish and moose and so forth. If I want to keep it forthcoming in the years ahead, I have to preserve it and allow for production in the next year. I have to be thankful and appreciative for its existence and I can't take it for granted.

Well when I say "those resources" I mean, well lets us the example right now today. We have the fish that's, don't quote me on it, *abundant*. You've got the moose, the caribou, the sheep. You've got the trees that haven't been clear-cut yet. You have the water that isn't contaminated. You've got clean air. Fifty years from now if you've still got that it's like saying, "hey, I'm still healthy. I still have that." You get the picture of what, healthy, my food, my livelihood my traditional culture is still alive. Part of my identity is still there.

DH: What about that culture piece, you know what's the role of people's culture in their life?

JH: That is changing big time.-Culture is your heritage. It is your background. It's where you come from. Culture is a way of practicing a lifestyle. Trying to keep it in tact as much as you can. Culture is knowing your identity. Knowing your language. Knowing where you come from. Culture is living a lifestyle that's different from somebody else; that's distinct. Culture is respecting one another. Culture is tribal. Culture is identity. Culture is home.

(6: 41)

DH: Are you hopeful?

JH: Am I hopeful? I would say yes.

DH: What gives you hope?

JH: What gives me hope?

DH: Maybe some example of things you see now....

JH: Well, what gives me hope is I see my son following in my footsteps. All my life I've taken him out hunting with me, fishing stuff like that. I seen him dancing at potlatches. I've seen him singing. That kinda gives me hope that he will take over after I am retired. I guess that's hope. I

am hopeful that what I just talked about that, the educational component of the environment, or whatever, will take a hold and start changing people's minds about protecting the "Last Frontier" for future generations. I am hopeful that subsistence will last. I am hopeful for a lot of things, but in reality, can you expect it, can you really be honest in that? I am hopeful that things will remain as is or change for the better, the better of the environment, the better of our surroundings. One knows it's going to change, just hope for the better of it. Hope that the change is not as significant as it would probably be. Yeah, I'm hopeful.

DH: Let's think from present reality and where we are today. What are some of the best examples of things that are happening today that are working in the right direction?

(9:45)

JH: What are examples today? Well, a good example, the first thing that would come to mind is the EPA's efforts to work with tribes to develop tribal capacity in regards to environmental programs. Whereas before it really never existed. And because of the programs that EPA offers through grants and stuff like that a lot of tribes in Alaska are utilizing those grants to better their communities in regards to, solid waste management, clean air and clean water. You know environmental type of programs that EPA offers. As you build tribal capacity in regards to that, people become more aware of the surroundings around them; like recycling reduces solid wastes and stuff like that. That is the one good thing I really see that is happening that is really coming out of the woodwork. The last five years or so we have had several other groups that have come out of the woodwork. One is what they call the Alaska Zero Waste, that is AZWAC, Alaska Zero Waste Action Council, that has recently received state recognition as a group to work with solid waste management; in other words, recycling. I have seen WRAP, Western Regional Air Partnership; extend their program up here in Alaska. You've got TSWAN, Tribal Solid Waste Action Network, that's working with tribes in Alaska that actually form another group called SWAN, Solid Waste Action Network. In the last five years or so you've seen these environmental type of groups actually taking a hold in Alaska and beginning to develop awareness in regards to the environment. I see good happening but more can be done. Again, this is the "Last Frontier" and the idea is to call it the "Last Frontier" fifty years from now, you've better start doing something now.

DH: What else can be done, let's say with in the Copper River water shed and opportunities for developing tribal capacity or support from some of these organizations?

JH: What else can done--

DH: --what *needs* to be done?

(12:54)

JH: I would just continue with the way we are going, but give more impetus into *why* it is necessary. The educational component is a big, big, big factor in my book. I remember back-I want to say fifteen years ago, but probably less than that-when the whole idea or the whole concept of watershed, the Copper River watershed, came about. Everyone seemed to have

jumped up left and right saying, “we are against it, we are against it,” because they thought it was just another form of governmental intrusion coming into the Copper River Valley. But that is just because they were uneducated about what a watershed is. Where now people seem to more understand what the concept is and what is involved in it, and what the conservation, preservation, that is what a watershed basically is, that they are buying into it. It just takes education. Education the component of that is pretty weak. If there was more effort, more funding...*more effort* on a larger scale given to the ecosystem of the Copper River Valley, or the watershed, you’d see more and more people become more and more involved in that whole idea. The people there are of a mind that they want to see protection methods or conservations types of methods put in place. That’s their home. Yes, they want to see that. Rather than see Fairbanks and Anchorage and all that encroaching on them. But somebody’s going to have to do it. And the educational component as to what’s out there and what’s available and all that needs to make a presence. That’s the big factor that I see, education again. I know I have mentioned it many times here but that is a real true factor. If you expect to see change ten, fifty years down the road, you got to start now. That’s what’s got to be done.

(16:00)

DH: Other actions or strategies to compliment education, or things that can be done right away?

JH: Yeah, well, I know that there are a lot of resources out there – put it that way. I want to say, the other way to approach this whole particular issue is through the tribal government. But again, you find a lot of people that are really *hesitant* when it comes to tribal government because they see tribal government as fixed on only one set or group of people like tribal members. They feel left out because they are not with in that context of tribal government. That is where the component of education comes in. A tribal government, sure exist here, but it doesn’t just extend to tribal members, it extends to a bigger type of branch. But people don’t understand that. Again, education. So you see two terms out of this whole interview is *education* and *respect*. But, yes, that is another particular mechanism is tribal government.

DH: So how would they be effective?

JH: Well, there’s *a lot* of grants out there available that’s pretty much ear marked toward tribal government and nonprofit type of entities. That’s one; the other ways about tribal government is that they are to an extent immune from suit, sovereign immunity. They, the people that work for tribal government, or let’s say like me, that are in the mind set of environment; respect Nativeness of the land; more keenly aware of their surroundings; what’s good and what’s bad. In that respect is why I would say focus on tribal government in regards to get the message out. Besides that, in our particular area most the land is federal anyway-National Park service and BLM stuff like that-and they are obligated to deal with tribes’ on a consultation government to government type basis. It’s the law. Whereas the state, there is no obligation. Besides that the state doesn’t recognize tribes. It is just a management type of tool that one can utilize.

(19:32)

DH: In taking the actions and strategies towards a sustainable future what are some of the biggest

obstacles that need to be confronted head on?

JH: The State of Alaska just jumps right out there. Yeah, the state of Alaska, they are very, very intrusive. As I have mentioned, decisions are being made by those who have no idea of what a culture is, or the people that they say they represent. Their mind is more so urban rather than rural. There is a big, big difference. I can talk forever on the state of Alaska. That would be one of the biggest headaches; that would be one of the biggest obstacles in the way. How do you change that, oh boy...recall the legislature, change the constitution, I don't know. I am sure there are a lot of ideas out there, but whether that will happen or not I don't know. People are probably going to have to get together to force the legislature to do something, but they have done that before on other priorities and they still failed. The legislature wouldn't listen to them. But the biggest obstacle would be the state of Alaska. The other obstacles that I see are there is no way to get away from development. Development is going to happen anyway. Change is going to take place whether you like it or not. The checks and balances is going to have to come in there, is going to have to play a role. Tribal government is going to have to become more activated and more active in that particular role. An obstacle that I would like to see overcome is that some tribal governments, say in the Ahtna region, are not active-to put it that way-are not very well organized. Meaning, if they don't exercise the authority that they have they could very well lose it. Right now they are recognized by the federal government as tribes, but because of being inactive they could lose that federal recognition status. I see that as a big challenge for some of the villages here that has changed into the quote unquote into "the white man's world." But, overall development I see that as a big obstacle that is going to have to happen anyway. When I say development, I mean under Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, ANCSA, Section 14 C-3, where it details what each village has to do in regards to future city government. I see that as a big, big obstacle and a lot of villages are not actively aware of that or actually involved in how that is going to play a role in determining what their future is.

(23:39)

DH: Is that something that needs to be changed or just people need to wake up to work--

JH: It can be changed by congress action I guess. Right now it is federal law. Again it is the educational type of component for people to become of that particular clause in ANCSA...

DH: ...and become responsive to it and organized to satisfy it?

JH: Start taking action on it now rather than wait in the future. The way the wording is...well, had you done it twenty years ago you would probably get away with giving the future city government ten acres of land. Whereas now, you probably get away with giving the future city government fifty acres of land. If you continue to wait you get away with giving the city government one hundred acres of land. So in other words the longer you wait the more land you are going to end up give away. It is just an example of the way the clause reads. The longer you wait the more you lose. ANCSA is...I don't know how many people think of it that way, but I think it was probably meant to fail. I see that as a challenge. I see that as a possible weapon to be used against you in the future.

DH: Any other actions or strategies come to mind to create a more sustainable future?

JH: Well... if the idea is the protection of the Copper River-when I say that, the protection of the tribes, let's say-cause they really are affiliated with what you are talking about. Then, the Regional Corporation, or Ahtna, has to pay a significant role in that process. You know the idea of the Regional Corporation is to make money. It is profit oriented. So what does that mean? Are you going to install conservation, preservation type of stuff for all their lands? I think probably not, not if their idea is to make profits to sustain themselves. So that right there, that is going to be a challenge right there.

DH: Would you change their purpose in any way? How do you reorient their mode...

JH: How would I? Oh boy, well I guess I don't know...Shareholders are the ones that make up the corporation. Shareholders are the ones that elect members to the board to represent them. You just need to remember that Ahtna is for profit. Their job is to make money and the shareholders expect that of them. In today's world, money is the driving force before conservation, before preservation, before everything that we take for granted. I guess you become conservational type of minded.

DH: Who are the shareholders?

(28:18)

JH: Ahtna, shareholders are tribal. They expect that. When you say you want to close this land of from development, that means, "well, you are not getting you dividends next month. Sorry, so you might want to focus on going to Anchorage and building your duplex or something." You know what I mean? It is a matter of putting your money where your mouth is. It is a hard one, I would have to think more on that.

DH: If you have more to share on that please do so in the transcript. Before closing I just want to ask whether or not there is anything you would like to add to our conversation today? Anything that we haven't touched on, or that we left out that you see as important?

JH: Well, there's a lot of other people out there beside just me that would probably give you a lot more insight than what I have given you. I mean I have focused on Mentasta area. That is where I am from. I am sure if you go down the road a ways you would find somebody else with a whole different perspective. I would be really interested in seeing what the younger generation type of thinking is in regards to this interview. In other words ask someone in the between the ages of twenty, thirty, thirty five, somewhere in there and get their thinking. 'Cause I bet you it would be totally different than mine.

(30:09) ...*transition into open conversation*...(52:35)

DH: There's one last question to come back to about whether there is an image or a symbol that represents the concept of sustainability to you in some way. Anything come to mind?

JH: I just have to say, Mentasta. And the symbol, the biggest thing of Mentasta is the mountains.

DH: Can you draw a picture here, and we're not going to judge you on your artistic skills or anything. (laughter)

JH: Mountains? (Laughs) I'm not very good at Mountains-all I know is that Mentasta is just surrounded by mountains...(drawing)...that's the highway...the lake...everywhere around it is mountains...



DH: Say again, how this place of home symbolizes, represents “sustainability.”

JH: Because it's untouched. It's not *ruined* yet. It's not torn apart by McDonalds. It's still pretty much in its pristine shape-other than the highway (drawing)...sure you have some development of housing in here...if you clean it up-it wouldn't take much effort to clean it up-then you are really back to the way it should be or always has been. I don't know how else to explain it... it's *beautiful*. You've got to see it to believe it, and when you're up there, go check it out and you'll see what I mean.

DH: thanks, that's perfect.

To quote this interview, please use the following citation:

Hicks, J. (Interviewee) & Hall, D. E. (Interviewer). (2007). *Native Perspectives on Sustainability: Joeneal Hicks (Ahtna)* [Interview transcript]. Retrieved from the Native Perspectives on Sustainability project website: www.nativeperspectives.net