



Native Perspectives on Sustainability: Jeannette Armstrong (Syilx)

Interviewee: Jeanette Armstrong

Interviewer: David E. Hall

Date: 10/21/07

Transcribed: Brianna Finney

DH: Thank you for taking your time with us today. As you know from our other conversations this project is about sustainability from the perspective of indigenous leaders and our aim is to hear from you on the subject today.

JA: Okay

DH: To start can you just share a little bit about yourself in terms of your background, cultural heritage, and your work?

JA: My name is Jeannette Armstrong. My Okanagan Syilx name means something like the light, rippling off of moving water. It's an image name. I come from the Okanagan, but my mother is from Kettle Falls at the Columbia River. The Okanagan River is the most northern area that the salmon reach in their spawn. I come from a people that were people that respected and loved salmon on the way to the Columbia.

DH: So you mentioned some of the geography and the area that you are connected with. How would you define your community in terms of geography and people?

JA: We're Salishan peoples of the interior plateau. There are quite a number of Salishan tribes in the interior Columbia River Basin area, and we're simply one of them. One of the things about the Okanagan is that, the Okanagan Lake System of course is quite a large lake system, and empties into the Okanagan River and meets the Columbia River at Brewster, Washington. So my Nation, the Okanagan Nation, is actually larger than the Okanagan valley and it was simply a name attributed to us because I guess the population of people in the Okanagan Valley was significant. But the Syilx people, which is the real name for the people of the Nation, covers a large area in Canada and a large area in Washington state. Originally our people shared eight tribal districts that were very closely interconnected in terms of the different kinds of habitat that they resided in and the unique aspects that provided food and sustenance in those different areas of the Syilx territory. Most of it around the river systems: the Sanpoil River, and the Methow River, the Similkameen River, of course, the Okanagan River, the Kettle River, the Grandby River, and the Arrow Lakes system. Those are all parts of our territory. Our people practiced a kind of harvesting method, quite different than the rest of North America, and I don't think it is very well understood. The practice of sustainable harvesting was very deeply embedded because of the harshness of our climate. We're on the east side of the Cascades, and it's very dry in our area; dry grassland, we're the northern tip of the Sonoran Desert, and the sage and sand and cactus and rattlesnakes, are all in our territory. Consequently, food is a very important resource

in terms of social responsibility, and how culturally we might have found ways to make sure that it was sustainable. So the culture that we practice, I sometimes describe it as permaculturing. What is on the land, taking care of it, stewarding it, making sure that it was producing for us each year. I don't think that's clearly understood. I think anthropologists and ethnographers have described us as *semi-migratory*, but of course we're not migratory at all. We simply move around on the territory at different seasons, and different times of the year, but we always return to our villages in the winter months after all the harvesting is done. So it's like harvesting a huge garden and it's like taking care of that huge garden. Think of the garden as being vertical, rather than flat, then you have some idea of the different seasons and the different levels of growth patterns. Migration patterns of the deer and the moose and the elk and other sources of food that live off the other relatives, and occupy our land and take care of us. In terms of being Syilx, I think that's one of the things that I really clearly think about when talking about culture and sustainability and the practice of that. Our people knew how to do that. They still practice it. I'm a harvester, all my family are hunters and gatherers. Traditional people continuously practice that. It's not something that is a *was* culture it is an *is* culture, and restoration of that culture is part of the work that I do. Making sure that in my extended family, that the children, the grandchildren, my grandchildren can go out there and harvest, can go out there and survive, without me making sure that those people in our community that have suffered under the violence of cultural imperialism, have the opportunity to learn from the traditional families and to share that, and that's the major part of the work that I'm involved in at the En'owkin Centre. The major part of the work that I'm involved in as well in terms of teaching, and working, and writing, and the activism--I guess it's called activism--is trying to tell people there's a better way here than what's going on out there. So that's the work that I do.

DH: Great. Would you say anything else about your community and how that informs your work?

JA: In a lot of ways, the community, which is in the northern part, and the southern part, which is in Washington State, has undergone a severe, severe, we could say 'onslaught of violence' to them culturally. We haven't suffered the physical violence that many others have suffered in terms of relocation and war; a lot of the legacy that you see that happened on the move, on the way westward. We were encountered on a much later date, and by that time Smallpox has really taken its toll and decimated our population, down to almost extinction. There's only twenty-five hundred of us left on the Canadian side, so we're part of the *vanishing* cultures. It's very difficult... I don't think anyone really understands the effect that has on a people, on a community. People come from diasporic cultures that really don't have community, but have collections of people who work at the same place, or make money at the same place, make a living at the same place, really do not understand community. Some of the communities of color understand what community means, and when there's a *loss* of community, it's a transgenerational loss. It's a loss of the soul and of the spirit, and when that's combined with the loss of connection to the land, the loss of the ability to find yourself within that, the community finds itself in serious, serious trouble. So that, in terms of communities was the condition, and is the condition. In Canada there was a policy of removing children (from the turn of the century) moving children from their homes and putting them into catholic residential schools. From the time they were six years old till they were sixteen years old, they maybe spent one month and a half every year in their community with their people. It raised havoc in our communities. Those

children had no parenting skills when they came back from those residential schools. They were treated as less than second-class citizens in those residential schools. They were beaten for speaking their language. They were sexually abused. They were physically, spiritually, and mentally and emotionally abused. They were disliked; they were told every day, like we're being continuously told, that we have to become like Europeans, and if we don't there's something wrong with us. That's what they were growing up with. They came home feeling like they were dirty because they were Indian; they were stupid because they were Indian. That was what was pounded into them. That was what they were meant to believe. So they came home, many of the people from the residential schools, broken. Many of them committed suicide. Many of them died. Many of them are still suffering. The effects of the second generation of that, of the internal self-loathing and hatred that this society knows how to do, and does to people of color and people of difference. It affected our community. Many of our traditional people, who are keepers of various kinds of knowledge, fought not to have the children go into those systems, and I was one of the fortunate minority families that I belonged to that none of my brothers or sisters were in that residential school system. My dad, my mother never went to the residential school system. (Neither did) my grandmothers, aunts and uncles. So we speak the language fluently and celebrate our difference and understand the beauty of that, and understand the value of that, and understand in a really fundamental way who the barbarian is and who the ignorant are. Very clearly in our community, going back to the question, there's lack of that understanding. (14:00) Lack of understanding that they're valuable and that their cultures are valuable and that they have something to contribute. So, finding a way to bring that back in a natural way, in a good way, and to try to move away from the idea of being a victim. Bringing, really clearly through education, the idea that there's value in our knowledge, there's value in our culture, there's value in our ways as a community, and that really matters, that it does make a difference, and that we cannot put that responsibility aside. And that we have to make everyone responsible for understanding that, and knowing that. That's also part of my work, to go outside of my community and make it clear that it's not a responsibility only of my people. It's a responsibility of everyone who lives on this land and that has colonized it and benefited from it, to make that right. So, a lot of my work as an activist is to go out there and say those things. Make clear that people understand that. In my community that also has changed some things, and is changing people inside of our community, as they, people who are our allies out there in that quest to find a way to resolve and make those kinds of changes and transform community, because in the end, everyone needs to come to that place, and come to that place of understanding. I think that if anything, the communities that are real in terms of long-term communities, have something to offer in terms of finding ways to embrace and bring back to community, and back to family, and back to better values those people who have been stolen from. And I'm talking about everybody who had to find reasons to move outside of their own confines, and their own violence, and I guess the making of that kind of violence. Europe for instance, the vast majority of people, the immigrants that moved here, came here because they had nothing back home. The violence on them, on an everyday level, is just as severe or worse in many cases in terms of the poverty and the classlessness, and the hierarchies that are created to maintain those kinds of systems. So you find all of those people, like the people in my community, not understanding, and not knowing that there's value in community, and there's value in family, and there's value in long-term relationships to place in relationships to each other. That's what builds strong community, and strong, healthy and vibrant people on a land, and a deeper understanding of how we need to be with each other, in order to be a certain way

with the other relatives, the other living things that are on the land. That doesn't happen in one generation, that happens over many generations. As people know if they're third and fourth generation farmers or ranchers, or people connected to land in any other way, it becomes something much deeper. (18:19)

DH: I'll return to some other questions about your community later. The term sustainability is one you've used a few times and a term that more and more people are using to speak to the environmental, social and economic challenges that we're facing today and I'm wondering how you define that term, how you explain it.

JA: (18:43) With great difficulty, because I'm a fluent speaker of my language, and if I try to translate that, or even interpret that into my language, it's not a very good word. It's a very inadequate word. Though in the intent of that, in terms of how unsustainable this culture is towards the resources on the land, then towards what community is, and what people really are, within that, the word seems to have a better meaning than some of the other words. Sustainability on one level means to be able to maintain and sustain the fullness of health that needs to be there for us to thrive, and for everything else to thrive. In that context it sounds like it fits with the way I would think about sustainability in my language. But the way in my language that it translates is sustaining the human abuse to a certain level, and keeping it at a level that it doesn't quite destroy everything. So that's not an adequate definition. We need to be able to think about the definition that our people have which maybe translates to something like: a hundred-percent sustainability (laughter) with that built into it. What that means for the Okanagan is that, if you cannot practice that, if you do not know how to practice that, then you are a danger. You're endangering a whole community, you're endangering generations of children that are coming. You have to be able to understand how to do that, and if you don't have the knowledge, and if you don't understand how to do that then you have to seek that knowledge, and you have to find a way to be able to. Otherwise, you're not living up to your human capacity. You're remaining ignorant and you're remaining uncivilized, if you cannot achieve one hundred percent sustainability of everything that you're using. So, you're lacking knowledge. You're lacking systems. You're lacking knowledge and philosophy about *yourself*. It's not just about the land, but it's about yourself. That issue in our traditional teachings is: every year, continuously, the people who are caretakers, and people who are careful of the harvest, whoever they might be, are reminded at our ceremonies and at our feasts, that *that* is what our responsibility and our intelligence and our creativity as human beings are about. That's what the gift of being human is about. If we cannot measure up to that, and we cannot live up to that, we're not needed here, and we won't be here. It's really becoming evident that we're a huge percentage in that direction of not being here. When the diseases, and the kinds of everyday things that we put our blind eye to because we feel helpless and can't do anything about; when every second person has got cancer or some disease, that's something to do with the lack of sustainability, or instability of our systems that surround us because of our use of it, or abuse of it. (23:15) So that, I think, in terms of looking at that word, and that idea--because I like words, I'm a writer, I think about words. What does it mean to 'sustain'? And if we look at the truth of what that might mean, that means that there should be no animal, or bird, or fish, or no plant that is on the endangered list, or that is on the species at-risk list. There should be no, in terms of looking at ourselves, there should be no peoples who are in danger, or at risk or disappearing, or at the bottom of the economic curve, or the social curve. All of those things are present in this society. And all of the species that are

disappearing from off our lands are evidence of that ignorance, evidence of that *lack* of civilization and that primitiveness. It's very clear to our knowledge keepers.

DH: If you're talking with someone who's completely unfamiliar with the idea of sustainability, how might you help them to understand it? Like through a story or analogy or anything?

JA: (24:52) I guess one of the things in our community is that it isn't something that is *theorized*. It is always something that is *practical*, and something that is understood in terms of what you do, and what you don't do. Some of those things are expressed in terms of our traditional laws, or our practices and ceremony. Some of it is conveyed through actual teachings, like taking your child out, and talking to them, and clearly giving them instructions about how to harvest, and what you should be doing and looking for, and what you shouldn't be doing, and what you should be aware of, and how you should be moving through the land to maintain that. Now I understand that there are issues of population. All the questions about, "if we all went back to the land, then the land couldn't sustain everyone." I don't know if that's true. I don't know if there's scientific basis for that, because it hasn't been tested, or it hasn't been tried, and in a way that makes sustainability with the human being at the core rather than commerce or issues of class or economic difference and disparity, control, power, all of those things. So that's one side of the issue, and I'm not giving any answers because I don't really know the answers. If I were to try and explain sustainability to someone who didn't understand about it, I would say: "for this whole year, in order to be sustainable, you should try living without having to buy anything. You should try either growing everything that you're going to eat, or trading for everything that you're going to eat. If you can manage to do that, and if you can figure out a way to be able to do that in a given area, then you'll know something about sustainability. You will have learned something about sustainability." In a sense, pre-Colombian history in the Okanagan, that's what you had: you were living in that condition, where if you destroyed that berry harvesting field this year, it wasn't going to produce a hundred percent next year, it produced ninety percent the next year, and the next year after that... Mathematically how many years would it take before that is totally depleted? Well, you might think you're only losing ten percent but there's a threshold for harvesting food and sustainability that makes a huge difference in terms of how much you have, how much you will have, and how much you produce. Understanding those principles that you can't even in one year decide that next year it's okay if only ninety percent comes up, you have to work towards understanding the land and working the land, harvesting the land so that one hundred percent comes up next year, and that's the best that you can do. Better than that, you should find knowledge ways, and technological ways that you can have it produce more than the one hundred percent without interfering in any of those-our people learned burn technology and techniques, and they learned different kinds of techniques that increased yields and increase production in different kinds of crops, and birds and animals and so on, without destroying the land, but enhancing the land. (29:53) There is real clear evidence on some of our people who are doing research now that that not having taking place in the last hundred years, our land is dying. Many of our plants and bird species are disappearing. Much of our area is still wilderness and undisturbed, but without the human intervention. So there's something about the *human* intervention, and the human role on land, and on environment that creates bounty, and that creates productivity, and that creates enhancement to the environment and in the biodiversity. That role is totally not understood, and totally not given any kind of opportunity to arise except in indigenous communities. So I think there is a lot of learning, and a lot of work and maybe

research that needs to be done in those areas, and I don't think any of it is happening. I really do not see it anywhere. Because they're thinking about sustainability from a whole different paradigm. The idea of sustaining a level of production for human use, and not really thinking about the fact that as indigenous people you are a part of the land. What does that mean? Taking away all of the political connotations, and taking away even the cultural, and racial, and social connotations. What does *indigeneity* fundamentally mean? And what does the human, as an indigenous person, what is that role in terms of the land, in terms of environment? And, should we not be understanding and looking at that? Should we not be doing appropriate scientific research in those areas, in terms of the situation that we are in right now? That is a really serious question that I think people have to look in the eye of and see what the human is. Because the human has, in a lot of ways, in the European cultural system evolved a view that the human is separate from, and/or dominant, and/or somehow not part of the natural world; somehow not a part of the life form of the land. I think that's one of the things that as an indigenous person, having the indigenous knowledge, and living it, practicing it, I understand is missing from the knowledge about us as human. I think there's a search for that, somewhere in the context of sustainability. Somewhere in the context of ecoliteracy, or ecological consciousness, or green consciousness, all of this is coming to a head as a result of the climate change and global warming and the real *fear* that we're in something that was totally caused by the human, and totally needs to be mitigated by the human. There is a role. There is a role; we are a part of this planet. We are a part of the life forms. That is extremely part of my everyday thinking in terms of the work that I do, the looking at restoring culture in my community, and trying to find ways to articulate that, talk about that. Not so much as though I knew anything, or had any answers, but to ask questions or even to put the thought out there. To be able to say, 'well, what about this?' Because, as an indigenous person I might have a perspective that might open some doors, or might trigger some research, or find a way to look at something from a different perspective. (34:38)

DH: Would you be able to add more to your perspective on answering that question of what is means to be human and indigenous and connected to place?

JA: We have, what I today call, a methodology. I think it's an important perspective in terms of putting a perspective on what my role is as a human, and thinking about the Okanagan perspective of that, and looking at that question...The idea of the word that we use to describe ourselves, Syilx people, is a part of that. In a sense, if I were to translate that word for you, contained in that world is the foundational instruction, or paradigm, that expresses that idea of being so indigenous, and so a part of the natural world that our humanness is an expression of that natural world. Our language is really not like English. The language that we speak is an oral language. What I mean in talking about the oral language is that the knowledge of meaning of the words is carried in the oral structure of making meaning. So orality, and understanding, and meaning are constructed in a way which can be done in the mind, with the mind computer, rather than in a writing system or in an alphabet system. But the symbols that are created in the mind are much like the writing system, very similar to the writing system. In fact, that is what I'm doing my dissertation on. I'm talking about those symbols within the words: they are like small images, like any symbol. If you were to take our language apart, what you would find is a whole series of images from the real world, from the physical world, connected together to create abstract meaning, and definition, description and so on. So this word, "Syilx" is made up of

three images basically. The middle image is “*yil*” which has to do with when you have many strands, and you twine them together (*gesturing with hands*) to make one strand. Like you twine them together to make a rope, or coil them together in a way which they’re interwoven or inter-bound together to make one strong unit out of it, and a continuous one that you coiled and coiled and coiled and coiled; like you would do if you were creating rope out of hemp or something. So that’s the middle part of the word. The beginning part, the “*s*” part would designate a noun, or a physical thing. In the physical world, because it’s an active image that the “*yil*” is part, so we have to put that “*s*” in front to designate that it’s an action, but it’s a thing that does an action. So everything is active in the language because they’re image-driven. The “*x*” sound on the end designates for our language an imperative. Like I would use the “*x*” to ask you to sit, I would say—“*mut*” is the word for sit, but if I ask or am requesting you for to sit down, I would say “*mutx*.” I put the “*x*” on the end. It’s like an imperative or a request on the end in the singular form. If I was using the plural form I would say, “*qwilwi*,” which is quite different from “*mut*.” Very definitely the ‘*x*’ is singular. So, the twining and the “*s*” person, or the thing that does this twinning, is also a request, a continuous responsibility. You might think, well that’s really interesting that the people would call themselves that, and an anthropologist would say, “well, they’re probably hemp rope makers.” (laughter) But having looked at a whole number of other words, one of the things, without going into a long story, one of the things that I’ve come to understand and discern about that is that it’s not speaking about being hemp-rope makers or anything like that. It’s speaking about the ethic of the people, the responsibility or the philosophy of the people, to continuously bind with everything that’s around us: our family members, all of our relatives on the land, and continuously maintain one unit. In other words, to be unified, to be in balance, and if we can do that, we can move forward, into the next generation as a whole. And we need to be able to accomplish that as human beings. When we unravel that, then we are in danger, because strands can break off. We can lose strands, so we have to maintain that unity and balance with all other living things. That’s an imperative about people; you can say we’re a one-commandment people. It’s imperative to know that, to practice it, to live that and to celebrate that. So, all of our ceremonies talk about that, and all of our stories talk about that. We have different kinds of processes and that we utilize in our community to accomplish that and achieve that...So I can tell you a little bit about that. (41:39)

DH: Yeah, please. You also answered my very next question, about imagery, or any symbols that represent the idea of sustainability. If you’d be willing to draw that, make a little sketch of the twinning and what is invoked for you when you think of the name of your people. If you’re in the mood for it. (laughter)

JA: Well, yeah, I don’t know, it’s just a rope. (laughter) It’s twisting strands together.

DH: Right. So, yeah, please say more about what you were just speaking to.

JA: (42:30) So, one of the ways that that can be accomplished and achieved, of course, is through how we interact with each other as a community, as family, and as a nation on the land. When I think about how we might maintain that balance, one of the things that I’ve come to understand and have utilized, and also analyzed, is a word we use in our traditional governance structure. It comes from one of our teaching stories, the first teaching that we, as a community, have is to understand what community is. To be able to sustain community, and to be able to

transfer that knowledge, and that ethic to each succeeding generation, and to be able to bring the community continuously in balance with all of the other living life forms. So *how* that is accomplished and *how* that is done really is an issue that maybe the external society needs to look at. One of the tools that we have--I would say it's a decision making tool, or a dialogue tool, or it's a tool that can be used for conflict resolution. It's also a tool or methodology that can be used for finding out what the best solution to any question might be. In our language we call that process or that tool, "*naw'qinwixw*," and it's thought about as a dialogue tool. Again, that word has a series of images that are attached to it. It comes from our high language that our chiefs used, and our leaders used, and of course our center, En'owkin Centre, is an embodiment of that process. I'll tell you the meaning of the word from the symbolic form. The first part of the word, "*naw'qin*," -'aw" has to do with water dripping in a really slow, one drop at a time, that kind of action. So that would be an image. And "*naw'qin*" the meaning of "*qin*" always has to do with the top of the head, or the top of a mountain. So there is water dripping one drop at a time in the top of the head. The last part of the word, "*wixw*," means we do that for each other. I do it for you, you do it for me. That's what the "*wixw*" at the end means. If we "*tkwinsenwixw*" and "*wixw*"--you hear the "*wixw*" on the end?--that means we are shaking each other's hands. That little image on the end means we are doing it to each other. So in "*naw'qinwixw*" the idea means that people must be able to do that for each other. And it doesn't mean dripping water, it's a metaphor, a symbol, like all symbols are, and as I mentioned earlier, the images are clearly symbols. So what the symbol is speaking about is being able to put into the mind the knowledge, to be able to let it drop in. You know how if you were to take a drop of water and put it on say cotton, and you'd see that the drop slowly permeate the cotton. That action, or that slow infusion into the whole system is what that abstract metaphor is speaking about. If you were to give knowledge in that way, then knowledge becomes integrated into the whole person: into their mind, and their spirit, and their emotions, every part of them. It becomes integrated into their family, and into the work that they do, they way that they live and think. It becomes a part of them. So when we are making decisions, unless a person can receive information and knowledge in that way, it doesn't become a part of them, it becomes something that's external to them and remains external to them. So knowledge must be brought in in a way that takes into consideration the feelings of a person, the level of knowledge or information or facts a person might have, the background that the person might have been exposed to, the understanding and the status that the person's role might have in the community itself. (48:25) So, you wouldn't speak to say a teenager and tell them in the same way you would tell my grandmother about something. So that difference in terms of diversity in the community is the primary request in our dialogue, that says, "you have to respect diversity, you have to respect that the other person never is going to think like you, be like you, know what you know, because they're not you." They have all of these different experiences. That is, in dialogue, really necessary for you to know, so you can't assume anything. So, you have to try and clarify for the person in the way that they can take it, in a way that they can understand. And that's your role whenever there is something in-between us that we don't understand. It's not your role to come and convince me, "this is what it looks like; this is how it is because that's the way I see it." Which is very disrespectful and destructive because you're not seeking clarity, you're seeking to be aggressive, you're seeking to dominant, and that's not acceptable. What you should be doing, very clearly saying, 'we have this problem, clearly, one of us doesn't understand it, and so I'll try and tell you how I see it, what I know about it, how I think about it, how I feel about it, how I feel it might affect me, or effect things that I know about, and that will help inform you. But I'm requesting

the same things from you. I want you to tell me how you feel about it, how it affects you, the things you know about how it affects you. Then we'll have a better understanding; we'll have a chance at a better understanding of what it is we need to do. We can only do that by giving as much clarity from our diverse points of view.' So, to seek the most diverse view is what *naw'qinwixw* asks for. In fact, if you withhold your most diverse view from the group, then you can be assured that your view is not going to be involved, and that in the decision that's made is going to be left out. So, one of our stories teaches us that the most important view is the most minority view, not the majority. And that majority actually is a tyranny; it actually is a violence and a violation of that principal, a violation of us within our differences, within our diversity. (51:26) In the story it was the smallest bee that was being left out--and I'm not going to go into the full story--but, in the story it's said that the circle couldn't be whole, and they couldn't bring life back to the entity, until the very smallest one, that everyone was excluding, no one wanted around, and no one thought was useful for anything--was just a pest. Of course, it was an insect (laughter), and everyone said 'you don't have anything to offer. What are you going to offer us, you're just a pest?' But, finally, they ran out of options; there was no one there who could resolve the problem, and the little insect came back and said, 'will you give me a try?' And they said, "okay." So once the insect sang its power song--in the story the insect sang and completed the whole circle. And that's what was necessary. Without that small input from that being in wasn't complete. Once that input, the minority person's interests, in other words, were brought into the circle, and everyone included and embraced that minority person, and everything was whole, the last piece was in place. So nothing can be whole unless that last piece is in place, unless the minority voice is there. And that's what makes the difference, to wholeness and whole community. So we understand in an abstract sense, the meaning of that, then you have to embody that in making decisions, in understanding what community means, in understanding long term choices and sustainability. So that process in our language, we call it "*naw'qinwixw*." Whenever there is anything that faces us that's what we have to engage, we have to take off our ego and put it somewhere behind us, and we have to say, "I'm nobody, otherwise, I could have resolved this. I could have figured it out." In fact, the chief will say, "If any of you know how to resolve this we don't need to spend time, just tell us how to do it. If you have the answer, then what are we all doing here? Do it." Of course, in a problem, no one person has the answer. So then chief says, "Well, that's settled. Everybody is equally in the circle in terms of what they are going to give." Nobody can say to the other person, "Ah, you're way off topic here," or, "That's trivial," or, "What are you talking about?" or, "What, are you crying?" or, "Why are you angry?" Here, in fact, it's suggested that the more fuller you can clarify your feelings, your understanding, your knowledge, your facts, the better for the community to be able to deal with the situation, because they have all the factors in mind, and they have all persons in mind. Because we care about each other, because we're connected: we have to be together, we have to live together, we have to work together, we have to see each other every day, that has to be the best way to do things. Understanding that, it makes life easy. It makes life secure. It makes life in a community beautiful. It makes life in a sense something that you don't want to step out of. (55:28) It's hard when you do. It's hard when you move outside of that: you don't know people, you can't trust people, you don't know where they're coming from. You have no idea how to connect to them or how you might be able to clarify yourself to them. I don't know how people can live like that. I really don't understand. But besides the emotional side, the practical side, the practice of that, transforms the community from individuals to a whole healthy organism. Because within that structure of community, there are some polarities that exist--in every

community--which create conflict. So you have to take that into consideration in that it's not just a matter of individual diversity, because you have people that, in a sense, we call them elders in our community, that are concerned about tradition and history, and know that there are good reasons if it's been done this way, that's the way you should keep doing it. There's good reasons why the knowledge that goes along with that is important, there are people who are traditionalist, conservatives, which means conservationists in its best sense. Then you have the people who are their polar opposite. The people you would say are on the other side of the house: the innovators, the creative people, the artists, the thinkers, the people who are saying, "There are other ways of doing this," "There are alternatives to this," "There's new ways," "There's new things;" all of that. You have that in every community, and that's who they're going to be in conflict with. And on both sides, if you look at those two sides, if you cannot bring them into balance, if tradition had its way, and only its way (laughter), nothing would change in order to accomplish any of the new things that come at it. It would be so rigid it would become brittle and fall apart. Anything it couldn't deal with, came up against, because they only had the old tools to work with. The same thing with innovation and change in a community; if it cannot be *mediated* by tradition, by knowledge in other words, by real understanding of why you don't just go and create this machine to do this or whatever, it can go rampant. It might be the greatest creations on earth--and that's what we're dealing with right now--the greatest creativity, and the greatest innovation, without that track to balance it, it can really go out of hand and really cause a lot of damage, within a community, within a system, in terms of the whole system, and the whole community. (58:50) There are two other polarities that we think about in a community, within that concept of *naw'qinwixw*. There are four polarities according to the story, and they are image embodied by what we call, 'four chiefs,' or the four principals that our people live by. They have names of entities in our community, but that's what they represent, those polarities in our community, and they represent the ability for transformative change and/or destruction and/or whole health if they are brought together. The other two are very much present in our community. We think of that as the male and females opposite, which are polarities, not as gender, not as sexuality or anything like that. But in our traditional community, the role and the concept of 'mother,' of being mother, mothering, has to do with the nurturing of the young and the emotional bonding of community. Mothering a person has to do with love, and emotion, and care. In other words, caring, and bonding, and relationships. So when we think about mothering, we're thinking about the ability that those people have that care about nurture, they're the caretakers, they're the nurturers, they're the helpers, they're the people who understand about emotion, and relationships, and the bonding and necessity of that. They understand community; they understand family, that's really what they're good at, that they understand. So they can stop progress from happening on a continuous basis because of the emotional feelings and their understanding of the emotional feelings, of anything that's going to take place. The fear, or the anger, or any of those emotions that people feel. So one of the things, while it's necessary, and while it's important, and while it's extremely critical to a community, it also can wreak havoc in a community if that's dominant--and of course in this society it's not, it's suppressed and oppressed to a great degree in the decision-making. The opposite polarity is what we call "fathers." The father has to do with action; has to do with knowing a strength that the community has and employing that to build, to make whatever needs to be done, done. To do the things that need to be done in a physical sense, to accomplish all of those things, and to be able just to go out and do it. In a lot of ways, it's males who fall into that category. But, in our society we're egalitarian, so a lot of females fall into that category as well. They are the people

who are the builders, they're the people who are the number crunchers, they're the people who understand logic and analysis, and can put all of that to work. They understand tools; they can pick up a tool and use it (laughter). So they also can create a lot of havoc. If you put them and the innovators together, the world can really be in trouble, the community can really be in trouble. Because the doers are really the opposite polarity of emotion, and so in a lot of ways it bothers them when people get emotional. It stands in the way of logic. It stands in the way of neat corners and lines and so on. It stands in the way of building a building, right? So that polarity is always going to come into conflict with the people who understand people and emotions and feelings, and how people get effected-psychology and all of that. So one of the things in our process, the *naw'qinwixw* process is to understand the four capacities exist within our community, and that if we don't understand that, and if we don't empower those four to work together, to mediate their polarities and differences, and to bring together their thinking, we're going to have conflict. We're going to have dissention. We're not going to have a solution. That's another part of *naw'qinwixw* as well is to create those processes in which those groups actually manifest and speak as societies. So, if you're from the elder society or the youth/innovators society, or the mother's society or the father's of society, you can participate with that group, function with that group, but you have to come bring it back full circle to work with your opposite polarity and to work within the group. So that process is really valuable, not only on the individual level, but also on the community functioning level. It's a governance process that works. (1:04:50)

DH: In the time that we have remaining, you can speak to your vision for your community and what sustainability would look like. Or, we can talk more about the actual actions and strategies that we need to take to bring about a sustainable future?

JA: (1:07:08) Well, I think it's both. I'm truly a believer in local action. You can't just do it in your own backyard, you have to practice it everywhere in the public domain. If only your family, friends and neighbors buy into it then you're just talking. (laughter)

DH: Right.

JA: If you don't practice it yourself, especially, there's no use in you talking. (laughter)

--break--

DH: Jeannette, please tell us about the symbol embroidered on your Okanagan Nation vest.

JA: (0:42) These are two of the symbols that I was talking about from the story. This one represents, the elder, the black bear in the story. Of course, I didn't tell the story, but in the story were those four principles, and the *naw'qinwixw* was given to us.... This one is the salmon, which is the second eldest. Of course, they represent different aspects: the salmon represents action, and movement, and cycles; the elder represents tradition, and long-term understanding, and knowledge, wisdom.

DH: Great. So, can you talk more about what your vision is for your community, and how to get there?

JA: (1:40) Yeah. I think in a lot of ways, my hope is that the work that so many of our people are engaged in now to restore some of these practices, to incorporate our knowledge, and to recover the knowledge and philosophy and the ethics in a contemporary life-way that makes sense and restores the stewardship, restores the community, and restores the bonding that we have with our land, that have been severed for many years. My vision in terms of that happening is already unfolding, is already happening through the work we do at En'owkin Centre. Now, in our communities, so many of our young people are understanding that this is knowledge, and this is valuable, and these practices have worth and value far beyond economics, that our very lives depend on it, and the sustainability of our community, the health of our succeeding generations and our current generations depends on us being able to manifest them in terms of priorities. So many of our young people and so many of our adult learners are coming back to that, because it's natural to them, and there's an understanding and a feeling that they know, that they are familiar with it. This is right. This is the way. (3:30) It creates celebration, it creates great pride and it creates mobility and movement. Of course, the other parts are still there: the dysfunction on wellness that I spoke about. We are moving toward that completion of bringing back the wholeness of our community. And *we will* survive. We were meant to survive. It's our imperative, and our commandment to be Syilx. So a part of that also, in one of our stories, is to find a way to transform that which threatens us, that which threatens the human on our land, on our territory. So what that has to do with, and that story and imperative has to do with also transforming the other, and the deep lack of understanding, and the deep yearning for that knowledge, and seeking of that, and the criticalness of that at this time. So our responsibility as Syilx, is also a part of that. And *naw'qinwixw*, what I described to you, as I said is a tool, And, I think, as a tool like any other kind of social tool is one that can benefit, and can contribute to how things are done, and how things are understood, and how change and transformation can take place. Many of my people are doing the *naw'qinwixw* process to look at all the different kinds of changes and decisions that they have to make in their communities at all different levels. But, we're also using it in our community that surrounds us, the community that we are embedded within; the European civilization and the mix now of all the other communities that have come to our lands. So, we're reaching out to make sure that this tool is available to those who see that there are alternatives, there is better ways doing things, and are needing better ways of functioning, and understanding, and creating, and coming to sustainability, because one of the principals that I was talking about in the four societies processes--the Center for Ecoliteracy likes to call it, rather than the *naw'qinwixw* because it's a modified version of that--we've looked at how it might create an ecological literacy, which includes how people interact with each other, but also how they interact with environment: long-term sustainability. (6:47) So, it's not just the future but also the past. And not just the things that need to be everyday in terms of our jobs, and our food, and our lifestyle, but also the things that we need like the heart: our emotion, our care for each other, and the building of community needs to be whole in terms of who we are today. As an Okanagan that's not possible without inclusion and embracing of the diversity that we're embedded in, and to try and transform that through that process, and the responsibility to maintain and make that happen--*huge* responsibility, maybe improbable. But, I think that the power of that understanding has the power to transform, because without question, you can see it's a better way to be and a better way to think. It's almost too simple in a sense, but in practice it's very difficult to move to that level of inclusion and embracing of diversity and reconciling the differences in community that are imposed through economics, or through politics, and so on.

Those exclusions that are created, and the disparities, and the hostilities, and of course the dysfunction and despair, and the need that becomes very evident in terms of how consumer societies are created and what it's created for, and how it applies itself. So, in the story, the transformation of those that would consume the humans, the monsters that manifest themselves to consume us, need to be transformed by that process. So very clearly we can see what, in an abstract sense, is being referred to in this contemporary society, and the meaning, and the philosophy, and the approach to that, and our responsibility within that. A lot of the work I see and my vision isn't just about my people because my people now includes every person: you in this room, and every person on this continent, because you are all connected to what happens in my home, and in my land, and what happens to my children, and my grandchildren. (9:35) You are all connected to me in that way, and you are all my people in that, and finding a way to be able to live my responsibility out is what we call 'love,' what we understand as love. We have to have that. But it means not just an emotion, it means giving your life to that. It means spending your time, and your energy, and your money, and your will, to make that happen, and plant those seeds wherever you can so that transformation will happen on its own. It will happen out of our knowledge, it will happen out of that same love and that same need to survive. Because, as humans, we're necessary. We're a part of this land, and necessary part of it. The land needs us, and the planet loves us, and we don't know how to be a part of that anymore, in a real sense, in a physical sense. A coming back to that is something that we as humans have to figure out together. We're all a part of that, we're all in that together. My responsibility is to clarify as much as possible from my side of the mountain, what that side of the mountain looks like and how endangered it might be. And to do it in a way that is compassionate. And to do it in a way that the knowledge becomes a part of the other, it becomes integrated as *naw'qinwixw* asks us to do.

DH: Can you say more about how you see other communities perhaps embracing this process, the *naw'qinwixw* process?

JA: (11:29) We have worked with organizations like--and I'm very careful about choosing organization that I work with--the Bioneers organization here, because it has an out-reach and it has a vision for that kind of transformation. It's not just social justice and transformation but environmental justice and transformation. It's searching and seeking, it's like a huge *naw'qinwixw* happening at Bioneers. So, that's really exciting. If we can participate in that, and contribute to that, then on my own walking down the road with my little satchel trying to give out this information is going to carry a lot further. It's going to happen in a lot more places and so on. So connecting with those kinds of organizations, and connecting with an organization like the Center for Ecoliteracy. I've done fifteen years of work with them to look at how schools might be transformed in terms of education, and how children and learners within the education system might be brought back to what community really means, and how that inter-dependence, and connection back to land, and sustainability over a long-term, is something that's learned by practice and not something that's theoretical and in books, or legislated. It's something that actually and actively happens by people doing it together, working together, and learning it together, finding ways of creating it together. So, that work--and with other organizations, of course--those are just examples. Ecotrust, for instance, and their work in the indigenous leadership program that's supported by people like Howard and Peter Buffett, creates and develops the ability for indigenous people, like myself, who are working, and giving our lives to

that work, because we know it's something that we *have* to do. It's not something that you make money at or whatever; it's something you have to do. (Ecotrust's work) finds ways to bring that to the forefront, and finds ways to give some support to that. But, more than the support to that, I think it's a way to be able to explain, and clarify, and share, and contribute to the wider dialogue that Ecotrust is about in terms of its work, and the mandate that it sets for itself--in terms of people and environment, and the idea of Salmon Nation, and belonging to a nation of people all along the coast, which we all are a part of--bringing everyone to the understanding that you are a part of this part of North America that has salmon in it, and we all have some responsibility in it. (15:00) We all have some responsibilities of including those people whom might have some long-term knowledge about those systems. So, working with organizations like that, and trying to figure out ways to communicate that, and share it without being disrespectful, and without assuming, you know, without taking into consideration that people come from all different perspectives, and all different kinds of needs, and also all different kinds of misconceptions, and lack of understanding, and trying to figure out a way to provide information taking that into consideration. Doing it from the right place inside of me, and finding a way to be able to be a part of that, to be a living part of that whole community so that I see you, and I see you, as a part of me and necessary to me, rather than any other way in terms of difference.

DH: Are there other things that we haven't had an opportunity to talk about that you think are essentially relevant?

JA: (16:29) One of the things that, maybe as an indigenous person, there are some misconceptions I think in sort of lumping all Native Americans together (laughter), into one sort of mono culture... One of the things I think about that I think is also important is that whole lumping together of Native Americans into one indigenous culture that we all think this way, or think that way... There is a commonness of being in terms of the land, and the long-term knowledge, and understanding of the land, but it's different from one area to another. I guess, one of the areas that I think about in the Okanagan, is that area of ceremony and ritual and spirituality and what that has to do with how our people think and how they, in terms of the wholeness of the community, think about that and understanding necessity and that. I look at that and I understand that I have never thought about it as religion, I've never understood it as religion, and I understand and know, and have knowledge about the ceremonies; I'm a person who belongs to our leaders that take care of the ceremonies, not only in the community but for the whole Nation. So, I know about those things, I am knowledgeable about those things, and yet, I have a mind which has to be met in terms of questions that I have about life, and death, and existence, and so on, like every human has that mind--we're gifted with that mind. I guess, one of the areas that I don't speak about very much is that lack of understanding about that, in terms of existence in life. I find that troublesome, I find that worrisome. And I find that there's a real serious denial of the certain aspect of that that Native Americans from many of the communities just take for granted; that knowledge that's there in terms of our connection to the land, and what the land is, in terms of the living, the life force, that we're a part of, and how we might see that in terms of cosmology, or in terms of our belief systems. Sometimes it's really misunderstood, in terms of deities, or in terms of those kinds of concepts that are really quite alien and foreign. (19:58) I think about sometimes how simple it is in terms of how my grandmother, for instance, or my grand uncle experiences that, and understands that, and lives within that. And, that spirituality has a lot more to do with us, and within our human capacity, to be able to understand

and know and feel at the same time, and to be able to express that. To be able to move through from the idea of being individual, and the idea of being temporary in my body, and the idea being something larger than that: part of a larger being or a larger living life force, which is what we call the “*Tmixw*,” that we are all *Tmixw*, we are all a part of that. All of our thoughts, and all of our knowledge, and all of our understanding, and all of our feelings are a part of that--no different than all of the physical parts of that diversity, we’re a part of that. So the density of that, and the complexity of that thought, and that idea of what *Tmixw* is something that I’ve been grappling with for all of my adult years, at least. Coming to an understanding that the idea of the religions of the world doesn’t encapsulate what I understand about that. To a large extent many of the Native Americans in North America have that same understanding, and that same feeling, and it isn’t captured in the religions of the world. So, there’s some clarity that needs to be done there, in terms of articulating what that is, and what that might be. Not in terms of religion that you want to convert anybody, but I think it’s helpful, or could be helpful, in resolving some of those issues that we have confronting us. Because science is the predominant religion. I use that word “religion” to talk about science because there is a methodology that is ritualized and believed in to the exclusion of essential parts of our beings as humans. Yes it’s useful, completely logical, and analytical and completely evidenced based, science is. One of the things that I can see in terms of looking at spirituality is that it isn’t about religion, it isn’t about belief. One of the things that I can say about spirituality from the Okanagan view is that it’s about knowledge. It’s about the expression, and the celebration, and the maintaining, and the sustaining of the human part of that knowledge, and moving that forward generation to generation, and maintaining, and shaping the ethic that’s required of us--that’s absolutely required of us to be able to maintain that balance, and to be able to love that whole outside of us. When I talk about love I’m not talking about emotion, I’m talking about the responsibility, the protection, the defense, and defending of everything that surrounds you, that vastness of that emotion, and that feeling, and that social responsibility, and physical responsibility. That you would stand in front of a forest and say, “No, you have to run over me, you have to kill me if you’re going to do that to my land.” And indigenous people do that. That needs to be brought into the lives of every person. That needs to be brought into the lives of every living human being on this planet, or the planet is in peril, and it is in peril right now because it’s not there. And it’s not a matter of converting people, or changing that, but a matter of something to do with knowledge about what we are as humans; the essential nature of us as human, and our role, and our understanding of what exactly we are as a force on this land and on this planet.

DH: In closing are there any thoughts from our conversation that you’d like to re-emphasize?

JA: No, I think that’s quite a lot. (laughter)

DH: Yeah (laughter). Well, thank you so much, Jeannette. I appreciate you taking the time with us today. It’s been a pleasure, thank you.

JA: You’re welcome.

To quote this interview, please use the following citation:

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