

INTERVIEW OF NEIL DARISH
INTERVIEWER IS KAREN BREWSTER
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IN MC CARTHY, ALASKA

KAREN BREWSTER: Here cause I don't think it is loud enough, but this is Karen Brewster and today is September 3, 2016 and I am here in McCarthy with Neil Darish. Thank you, Neil, for taking time.

NEIL DARISH: Sure.

KAREN BREWSTER: I know it is a busy time of year for your guys. So Neil just to get us started talk -- tell me a little bit about yourself, your background.

NEIL DARISH: Sure.

KAREN BREWSTER: Where you were born, growing up, those kinds of things.

NEIL DARISH: Well, I was born outside of Boston and I moved out of Boston when I was 17 and kind of lived in lots of different places. I homesteaded north of Fairbanks before coming to McCarthy. In 2001, I worked in Shanghai for about a year and I think in the 80's when I first heard about McCarthy I fell in love with the place and wanted to come back. I always wanted to come back and had paid off some property that a friend had -- a friend that grew up here in town. So I first heard about McCarthy from a long distance away. And when I finally got here the first time, I knew that it was pretty special, but I don't think I thought of it as special just cause of the wilderness. I thought it was all the old artifacts and that they all had a continuity to them. They had a relationship to the people from the past. And my dad when I was growing up had a junkyard, salvage yard and so I was always surrounded by all these old things and loved that, but this kind of made it a different idea, you know. It made it about artifacts, but with relationship to people instead of just a great little old object, you know, and that was really different. And so when I would think about McCarthy and plan what could I do here there was a number of things, you know. And I had to take it from a perspective that was more than just beautiful landscape because I know the whole world is filled with beautiful landscape. And because I have done a lot of travel I love beautiful landscapes. So I knew wilderness was important and I know this is nothing like camping. It's, you know, living in a relationship with the wilderness, but I homesteaded for quite a while before this and this isn't homesteading what I am doing here. So I am kind of a little bit in a weird place, you know, in the sense that I have a lot of neighbors that are living the homestead life meaning not just subsistence but living with their actions and the wilderness and the re-relationship of what that means. And there is a big satisfaction to doing something like gathering, you know, chopping down and preparing wood for burning and the time it takes to do it cause I need a fire now or because I live this life and I will always need fire. There are very different things how you cure wood, but there is relationship there that is a direct cause and effect. And I think that is what all Alaskans that live sort of off-grid and to do it here there was a different layer that I couldn't do right away, but to do McCarthy my biggest problem was how do I live here because it really wouldn't be a wilderness life for me because I wouldn't be able to -- cause mostly I wanted to restore town. I wanted the artifact stuff. I wanted the what can I do for my business world if I am going to retire and not do, you know, business, what can I do? And, of course, everything I do here is business, but it is with a purpose of either restoring or stabilizing this as a community. It

is like a whole thing. It is a small, little tiny thing, you know, this is the tiniest town in the world, but it is all of it has to be fixed and stabilized and --

KAREN BREWSTER: Can I interrupt just for a second, take us back a step which is when you came to Alaska and why you chose to come to Alaska?

NEIL DARISH: Well, when I first came to Alaska cause I was enthralled by the idea of a ghost town in the wilderness. I thought that was interesting, but my partner Doug who grew up here as kid I mean he just would talk about what it was like to live in this remote place and to actually, you know, come up here and explore the idea of living in a wilderness I don't know that I would have found McCarthy if I didn't find somebody that had grown up here at least back in the 80's.

KAREN BREWSTER: What year did you come to Alaska?

NEIL DARISH: I didn't move here full time until it was late 80's and then actually started homesteading it was closer it was like early 90's.

KAREN BREWSTER: And that homesteading was on the Chatanika River?

NEIL DARISH: On the Chatanika River, yeah, in Fairbanks, off of Murphy Dome.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah, well, yeah so how does a boy from Boston end up in this sort of wilderness lifestyle?

NEIL DARISH: Well, I mean that's a great question. I had already experienced the idea at least for me that I could go somewhere and find a way to be productive somewhere and like people that live here I think one of our secrets is we know -- we know the difference between what we want and what we need. And traveling around, you know, I was good in business and I made a lot of money, but I don't really see that as a purpose, you know. It is kind of like a -- if you are really productive -- is that working for you?

KAREN BREWSTER: Oh, yeah, yeah, I am just getting --

NEIL DARISH: If you are really productive and the stuff is happening and you are succeeding or failing and succeeding and back and forth, I mean that is not the process, but this was tugging at me from a childhood thing, you know, like my dad would take me camping and this kind of satisfies that wilderness relationship, you know. And then there is the old stuff and I just love the artifacts and the old mechanical things and that was great, but I am not afraid of modern, you know. And so I have a lot of that in my life, but not in the forefront maybe. And but what McCarthy, the path to McCarthy was about the challenge, you know, about -- it is a hard life for some people but for others, you know, it is not hard. It makes more sense, you know. If I do something with this plant, (airplane noise).

KAREN BREWSTER: We have airplanes flying by. We are sitting outside.

NEIL DARISH: It is obvious now.

KAREN BREWSTER: But part of life in McCarthy is airplanes and some vehicles going by and so thank you for taking that pause.

NEIL DARISH: Yeah. Well, okay so I knew about McCarthy because I mean -- do you edit any of this?

KAREN BREWSTER: Not if I can help it.

NEIL DARISH: Well, you are going to have some.

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, I mean for the report I will take out quotes, but if we put it online it is usually --

NEIL DARISH: Like all this pause and all that too?

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah, I might take that part out.

NEIL DARISH: Okay, good. Well, you know, I am trying to express what it is like to be -- to find a way here and my path is probably a lot different than most because I didn't come here just because of nature. I like that, but it was more because of the old stuff and I already knew I was going to live in nature somewhere so that wasn't really a big decision. And I already knew that there lots of -- I love the barrier reef. My favorite next to this is Stewart Island, you know, in New Zealand. Nobody knows about that place or now maybe they do, but when I was there 30 years ago it was like, ah, that and it is a lot like this, but, you know, not like this. And it had old town and so before I knew about McCarthy I was kind of probably predisposed to maybe something like that. I mean I don't feel like I need a whole lot of friendship, you know, all the time hanging around with everybody. So I like the lonely thing. I like being a loner and it is a very social place, but I also like the me against the world instead of me against my neighbors and lately it has been a lot of me against my neighbors sometimes. Because, you know, I do some stuff that other people's idea of what should be out here ain't exactly the same.

KAREN BREWSTER: Now you bought the lodge and Ma Johnson Hotel and the Saloon in what year?

NEIL DARISH: I had property. It was the dressmaker shop which was a pizza parlor and I had owned the building with Doug from like it was late 80's and when I moved here by the time I got here in would have been 2001 full time. You know we -- in February we were trying to acquire the main hotel, the lodge, and our problem was how do we develop town and put our whole life into it and spend a ton of money and control the charm of town? Or how do we know it ain't going to get ruined? And the answer was authentic and intimate spaces for all different size groups, you know, and so the thing I am working on now is a four year project of a big event space with an artifact fence that big group, you know, like a kind of a fourth of July, you know, or a music festival could happen and the town could absorb a big group in a very authentic space. So all these old artifacts going up in a form of a fence to the finna an event space will make it authentic to McCarthy. So that is how my version of building a big space from, you know, an empty space, that can still say McCarthy and still feel authentic and have a sense of place, but do a big event night, which if you can't absorb a group like that then you are going to feel like Talkeetna feels now. I am not saying we are ever going to get that big. My point is that you have to grow with. So the plan was to have a steady growth. That is why I haven't added rooms to the Ma Johnson's because I need it to feel right. That is more important than how much revenue can we get. I have to charge enough to keep the whole machine going. I have -- when I started we had six people. We have 40. These are 40 people that are part of a community that wouldn't be part of a community and these 40 people and the 300 others in the community that, you know, are here all summer long. It is safe because there are a few dozen people that live here in the winter. So they know how to handle an emergency. And then you have got those same 300, 350 or so people -- sorry about the -- I don't mind the mosquitoes, but they might affect the -- but I like the idea of a lot of people getting together and providing these services. It is quite a contrast to a concession concept. And so all you got to do is look through Trip Advisor at what people who experience anything in McCarthy and Wrangell-St. Elias at this timeframe what they get out of the experience and part of it is the community. And then you contrast that with any other experience in any other National Park in the Lower 48 and it is beautiful, but it doesn't have a community thing going on.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right. I mean like Denali.

NEIL DARISH: Or any of them. Any of them don't have a community in it they don't have that man wilderness like me the visitor, the wilderness and what is the -- where is the missing piece? The missing piece is -- are we really supposed to say to the world that you can't be part of wilderness. This is the last community of nonnative Americans living inside a National Park and that is the bridge between why man has never been in the wilderness. The people peeking into the wilderness and what is a healthy relationship with the wilderness. It is probably not my version. It is probably not my version. It is probably Mark Billsworth to be fair. So the version of living the homestead life. I am not saying I am living that. I am not, but this is the transition and it is because it is in this town that has a history that it makes sense to keep it going. If this town didn't exist predating the Park, then it probably wouldn't make sense to have this kind of non-concession services, but because it was a community that is the hard part. But that is also the reward. You know, the Park Service has an opportunity to allow a community to thrive and grow into what it is going to be that we don't know yet, but what it is going to be is a way using capitalization which means I got an idea, let me do a hotdog stand. Well, people don't want hotdogs, your idea kind of is crap and if people think that only McDonalds is going to win, they are wrong, you know. If you have a great, genuine heartfelt authentic of that place experience which is why all the food service, not just mine, but all of them are amazing. And they are amazing because people care. They are vested in this place. They are not from Outside.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right, that is what I was going to say. You were talking about sort of a concession that you had started a business here from the local perspective. You care about this place. You like this place.

NEIL DARISH: I have said I started with six people. I care about the place. I like the place, sure, but now I have competitors and I like it even more. Why? Because if those competitors to no small part they started because the town was healthy and it was stabilized and they actually a lot of them work for me. Not Kennicott Glacier Lodge, they predated me, but the Meatza Wagon, Joe is one of my chefs. It is awesome, you know. And Rebecca, she was one of my bartenders. When she started the Potato, when she bought out the Potato, she was still working for me and Ennis (phonetic) one of my executive chefs and they are my competitors now, but it is more cooperation than competition. I mean they -- that is what makes a healthy community. It is viable. That is different than it is a monopoly picked by the state and that is the challenge for the Park Service is it is uncomfortable to know they cannot control what a community does and so their process right now is hands off as much as they can. And that's fine. I kind of like that only because it allows the community to figure out what we need to do, but the full force of law -- this is not an outlaw town. The full force of law as it should be applies here like it applies anywhere. The difference is if something bad happens, we have to take care of it. If somebody comes with a gun, you know, or somebody comes with a bad whatever, the locals have to deal with it. You can't just lock your door, call 911, and say hey, could you come clean up this mess. So that confidence is what allows I think it to be safe for everyone else to be here in the winter. What I mean is -- I mean in the summer, if you consider that locals make it safe because they live here all winter long alone and know how to handle disaster. That when a disaster happens in the summer, they know how to handle it. That confidence that somebody at least replaces the confidence that is

there because you got 911 to call. So the idea that we are in control I think is healthier than the Park Service being the police too because they are not the police. I mean they are law enforcement, but they are not here to police the community. And I am not saying that we should or should not have police. I mean this is not in an organized borough. We don't need, you know, we don't need law enforcement here. It wouldn't be practical, but more importantly we have to have an avenue for change. That is the hard part.

KAREN BREWSTER: But the relationship between the residents here and the Park Service has changed.

NEIL DARISH: Uh-huh.

KAREN BREWSTER: Through various periods.

NEIL DARISH: Yeah, well.

KAREN BREWSTER: And so through the years you have been here --

NEIL DARISH: I talk about the years I have been here. I don't want to talk about before.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right.

NEIL DARISH: Because I didn't witness anything.

KAREN BREWSTER: So you can you talk about what those years you think have been.

NEIL DARISH: When I got here the relationship was pretty contentious. When I got here the bleed over really is not -- it is not just Park Service, it is the idea that what is the purpose of this town, you know? What is the viability of this town? Is it more or less viable when it involves commerce is my, you know, what I have got to deal with all the time because I am the commerce guy, one of many by the way, but I am a commerce guy primarily meaning I am trying to stabilize the town. I am trying to build businesses so the town can thrive and I am not the only one. It is important, you know. And when I think about what it means to have a Park Service ranger come up to me and say, hey, I want to partner with you or we want to partner with you cause I was the dialog that came from the Park Service initially. It was kind of (inaudible) because as a business guy I know what a partnership is, but I couldn't understand what was meant by that. So I thought the idea of wait a minute I didn't come here to partner with the Park Service. I don't know what that means. That doesn't mean I want to be adversarial either. I didn't know the Park Service -

KAREN BREWSTER: What would you get out of a partnership?

NEIL DARISH: Well, that isn't what I would get out of a partnership, it is no, it is give you an example. Ma Johnson's Hotel. So Ma Johnson's Hotel when we got here was four gray walls. It didn't look like it looks now and Doug, who having grown up there, had an idea of what it should look like. And I was there and I witnessed standing in that lobby in the winter, right? It is December 2001 and he goes, ah, I got it. And he laid out what the lobby looks like now. Now for us to do that restoration there is two paths as far as financially goes. We could -- because it is a historic restoration we could work with the Park Service and bring in real amazing expertise with a preservation focus and it would have been spot on and it would have been done by committee. We would have gotten a 20 percent tax credit. It would have been a beautiful thing I am sure and it would have taken a very, very, very long time because it would be a committee. Now being a commerce guy not pure preservationist first, but knowing that I have to make stability happen, I need revenue from that hotel or I don't have a business. I need revenue from that hotel. I am not rich guy not then. I had spent all the money buying all the land that I could and so the problem was do we take the 20 percent tax credit which sounds good

and then cup a velocity of money not go into business until we could all agree on what color is what. My point is that Doug did a way better job than any committee could do and we did it in months, not years and we took a 10 percent tax credit cause we didn't participate with the Park Service and we didn't have to be onerous or, you know, in contrast, but as a partnership that wasn't necessarily what they meant, but it could have been. It could have very easily been we will bring our architects and you have got great people in C. Peterson, come on, Grant (inaudible). I mean there are some great people in the Park Service that did help us. They gave us, you know, their ear, but we didn't have to commit to a committee which would have meant we would have failed. Now I have got 40 people. I have got nine business units. They are all hitting their (inaudible) targets which means they are stable. Now I am going to sell them all, break them all up. We are trying to get a CPCN for our utilities so there is a community coop and power. So all that development, all that change is being done while this guy Paul Barrett whose grandad found the town, I just had to file a lawsuit August 5th, less than a month ago because he claims he owns the streets. Now he claims he owns the streets because he wants free power and he wants money for using the streets, but they are public streets. So there are all kinds of interesting ideas of what the town should be and contention about what the town should be.

KAREN BREWSTER: So have relationships with the Park Service improved since you first got here?

NEIL DARISH: They have and the reason I bring up Paul Barrett is it is not just Park Service.

KAREN BREWSTER: Oh, I know.

NEIL DARISH: It is not just Paul and it is not just me.

KAREN BREWSTER: It is a small town.

NEIL DARISH: It is a small town, that is it and what the role of the small town, Park Service or locals, is to make it safe to have these really difficult talks. So when I go to the MAC meeting to talk about and this is just today, but it reflects 15 years ago. When I go to talk about something as important as who owns the streets is it the public or is it one man I am told no, we don't want to talk about that because we like you and we like the other guy and we don't want -- and it has to be safe to talk about these critical issues. Well, when the Park comes and talks about partnering, you know partnership, my interest and their interests they have some circles of influence that overlap preservation, but I need to keep the revenue going to keep the business alive and they need to keep the preservation so exact and that everybody is okay that they are doing their job. Well, there is only a little sliver where we cross and so if I chose to get the best tax advantage, I would have had to have gone through years of commitment and I would have lost so much money and being able to open. So it is an example where when I would think of a partnership they may not have considered what it really means because there is a sense of urgency, but only a guy who has got to pay the bills has. The people that don't have to pay the bills because they are using other people's money, they do not have that sense of urgency. Go to a post office. Go to a post office and tell me that a government employee, I'm sorry they just -- it is like you hire people who don't have a sense of urgency. It is not that I don't like people in the post office. I'm just saying that, you know, it is not --

KAREN BREWSTER: We all have different priorities.

NEIL DARISH: We all have different priorities. So I can't fault the Park Service because they don't have the sense of urgency. They are in protection mode. That is their job. So it is a

limited partnership. Later on concurrent, you know, coincidentally I mean I am figuring out what partnership means from the Park Service's perspective. They are figuring out what we mean as locals by we have the right to use this in appropriate ways with the full force of law to protect the wilderness. And those roads are really bumpy and 15 years ago they were close to impassible. (noise).

KAREN BREWSTER: I was going to ask you about relationship. We talked before about people in wilderness and how that fits in Park Service perspective on that and your perspective on that.

NEIL DARISH: Well, I mean we are not in the wilderness. We are in McCarthy. In McCarthy, you can see the wilderness from here, but it is not the wilderness and it is why we are here and not 15 miles a little further down the road. It is because we chose to be in this community not to be in the wilderness. If you want to be in the wilderness, it is the backcountry trip. So that is the coolest thing you could do is not go to McCarthy, it is go in the backcountry, but McCarthy is the gateway. So every Park has a gateway. It is just this gateway happens to be privately owned. One of the things the Park Service should consider as a statement to the locals it is a 13.2 million acre Park. Actually a million of those acres are privately owned. I own a couple of them. So really technically it is a pejorative concept to call it a 13.2 million acres of Park. It implies that 1.2 million acres that do not belong to the US Government literally are being held by the US Government somehow at least in name and frankly, you know, it is a 12.2 million acre Park. Sorry to take a million acres back, but they are not mountain. I mean 600,000 acres are unknown and I am sure they are not happy about it being claimed as somebody else's. I mean that is a nation being claimed by another nation technically.

KAREN BREWSTER: So how do you deal with the access issues with the Park?

NEIL DARISH: Well, when I got here 15 years ago there were bollards put up on a footbridge. So what is the footbridge? The train came in. The train was a vehicle bridge. There was a road bridge after the train was out.

KAREN BREWSTER: On the Kennicott River there, okay.

NEIL DARISH: And so they created a vehicle bridge that washed out. The locals created a tram which was awesome, the hand tram, but it was restrictive. And so you would have two people, you know, but the time I got here and moved full time in 2001 and all the way through 2002 especially there was so much contention between access issue of the -- road restriction. The footbridge, which actually isn't a footbridge, it is a vehicle bridge with restricting on it. And people would say it is illegal to drive a vehicle. Well, you know, there is an Alaska Statute for laws that are changed and when it takes an act of legislature to change a law like imagine Main Street in your home town, you can't just decide that people can't drive down it. It takes an act of legislature to change that. So I would ask people what Alaska Statute are they quoting to call it a footbridge that would prevent people from taking a motorized vehicle. So what would happen is they put up bollards on either side to keep the locals from driving a vehicle across which is illegal and we would rip them out. And we would say that you need to get the police here so that we can get this adjudicated because this is wrong. This is access. You can't cut someone's access off.

KAREN BREWSTER: To their own land.

NEIL DARISH: To their own land. You don't do that. And it is not up to the local community to decide what feels good when it is an access law. There is a difference. There are lots of

things that community standards can consider and should. Lots of things a community can do. I mean pretty much anything, but kicking someone off their land isn't one of them.

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, and I was also thinking access people who live here year round and maybe they have property up McCarthy Creek or at Dan/May Creek, Dan Creek and they want to get there, are they going through Park lands and can they get there?

NEIL DARISH: Well, the whole access concept, I mean, you know, I could go on and on about ANILCA and what it all means, but essentially what is different about this Park is there is a community here. It is the last nonnative community inside a National Park.

KAREN BREWSTER: And you said oldest continuously occupied.

NEIL DARISH: It is the only and it is the oldest that I know of, but there is -- yeah, because whenever the Park in the Lower 48 when the National Park Service got land, acquired land, they have always removed landowners and communities. There are lots of examples of communities, Kiyote (phonetic) was a good one. And they would regret it later maybe, maybe not, but there is this idea that protecting it from people and there is an idea of protecting it and people still use it. And there is an idea of there are parts that we protect and we don't want any people there. There is lots of concepts about wilderness. And that is not -- I am not going -- I can't resolve any of them. I am not going to try to, but the question of when I first got here what the contention was. It was based on the ideas of we want it to be this way and we want to protect. We don't like a motorized vehicle going across that vehicle bridge. It would be called that is a footbridge you can't take a vehicle across. Now why? Why would you restrict someone over there a mile from here, from town, you know, what is it about that power play and is it legal? And so once you know something is illegal you can't stand for it. So 18 times the state of Alaska would put bollards in and 18 times the locals would rip them out because they were legal. And we would ask them, we would beg them at radio shows, you know. We would put up a big stink just amongst us. Let's go to court. In the meantime, it became a game. Governor Murkowski did a radio program and we called in and once he found out that it was 35,000 bucks on average each time and 18 times it stopped. It finally stopped. And they put one last restrictor thing in, but you can at least take your four-wheelers across. You can't take -- there are some cars that could have fit across.

KAREN BREWSTER: The old way.

NEIL DARISH: The old way which still should be legal. Now what is a beautiful counterpoint to that is five years later imagine a town where half the town wants to blow up the Kuskulana Bridge, that single land bridge and half the town wants four paved lanes going through the wilderness to China, you know. And this one family buys land on both sides and has the wherewith thrall and you know the skills, the engineering skills and the equipment, to build their own private bridge and then sell passes to locals.

KAREN BREWSTER: That is the Rowland's Family.

NEIL DARISH: The Rowland's Family bridge. Now when it was a footbridge, I'd have to transfer, you know, 10, 20,000 gallons of diesel fuel on 55 gallon drums, roll them over the footbridge. A disaster waiting to happen and that is what the community standards had created. Rowland and another community member Rocon (phonetic) they built a bridge, didn't ask permission, did get engineering signoff from the NPS, the state of Alaska, Corps of Engineers, etc., but didn't ask the locals if they were okay with it. They just did it and as people heard about it, they were pissed, both sides. No, the government

should pay for the bridge so everyone can use it. No, there shouldn't be a private vehicle bridge. It is going to be a parking lot over here. No compromise. Once the bridge was up, the Rowland's were so smart it solved everybody's problem. Everybody bought a pass pretty much and the problem went away. There was no more contention. The biggest thing the Park Service and the locals together need to do is always keep it safe to have crucial conversations.

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, in that editorial which was one that you showed me was that two thousand and --

NEIL DARISH: Four.

KAREN BREWSTER: You talked about respecting the locals.

NEIL DARISH: Yeah, yeah, well, so when I look at back 15 years ago, the approach that the Park Service would have for the locals felt like from our perspective we're in their way. We obviously are going to do bad things. They are in compliance officers making sure we comply. If we don't comply, if you don't comply, you know, not that they are going to hit us. They are not going to do that, but they carry AR-15's. So there is a coercive element to the idea of compliance, you know. I mean look I believe in taxes, but they call it voluntary compliance, okay. And I have no problem with taxes. I think they should be voluntary. I know people don't believe that would happen or that would be good. But the problem with taxes isn't people paying their fair share. It is the idea that the government can force you to do something because at the bottom of their stack of papers about what you can and can't do on taxes is the gun that takes away all your property if you don't comply. So they are called voluntary compliance. It doesn't mean it ain't coercion. You can even call it necessary coercion, but it is coercion. And so the Park Service version of that and I am not anti-taxes, but the idea that it is forced whether you like it or not is wrong, especially when some of the uses are abhorrent to some of these views. Whether it is religious or military, whatever, I mean I don't think we should be in every country with our military, but that is my view.

KAREN BREWSTER: And so with getting along with the Park Service and uses and what the people are allowed to do and not do --

NEIL DARISH: Well, that is it. They would come -- they would come and coerce us by carrying military weapons, you know, cause they are law enforcement and compliance by talking in language like it is voluntary compliance or, you know, we are all in this together kind of stuff without any consideration of what it is like to actually live here cause they don't know, cause they don't live here and to try to -- it is kind of like we are working with the Park Service to get them to be okay with us just being ourselves doing what we do because we are not destroying anything, right. So we were riding our snowmachine on snow cover and you come in and you start questioning, you know, is that even possible should you, shouldn't you when really the issue is is it legal or not and are we doing harm or not?

KAREN BREWSTER: If you are doing harm not.

NEIL DARISH: It should be if you are doing harm or not we think because that -- but to back up, the problem really is there is no value to having locals here. It is seen as the harm, the great harm that can happen. That is the methodology of the Park Service management historically and this is the last bastion to change that. So the last bastion of freedom, McCarthy, is the last bastion for the Park Service to listen and understand that locals represent the humanity of protecting the wilderness by having people actually live in that

direct relationship we're showing the world that at least it can be done even if most people wouldn't want to do it. We love it. We can't wait for winter. Summer is okay, but it is really the winter that the locals want. The people that have all their shit here, whose lives are here and then there is everybody else who have their hearts here who really love this place and are passionate about it where the people that actually live here have different needs than the people that daydream about here or who come here in the summer alone. So it is really important cause the Park Service is geared to understanding the mentality of just the people visiting. So somebody from Sweden, well-meaning as they might be, has an opinion about what I should be doing on a snowmachine. Well, have you ever heard of state governors? Their whole role is to protect their citizens in their state from the well-meaning intention of people outside of their state. So people in Florida it is none of their business what kind of wood we burn in our wood stove in Fairbanks. And for people in Fairbanks nobody in Hawaii gives a crap about what kind of snowmachine you think the Hawaiians should own. There is relevance and the closer the law is to where you live the more relevant it is. The laws that the Park Service want to impart on us, especially 15 years ago, come from Washington, DC. They have nothing to do with the local needs. So you cannot have people from outside of here commenting and then having those comments turn into facts weigh the same as people that live here and that is the problem today with the Park Service is they are able to come in and have as comments from people all over the world as to what is relevant to govern a community of private landowners and their one million acres which should be theirs, but apparently there is some confusion. Well, I am not confused about it. I either own land or I don't. And I either have access to it or I don't.

KAREN BREWSTER: Now you mentioned living here in the winter, year round resident. So let's talk a little bit about that. Tell me about --

NEIL DARISH: Do you think any of that is actually going to be in the --

KAREN BREWSTER: What you just said?

NEIL DARISH: Yeah.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah.

NEIL DARISH: Well, if it isn't, there is really no point in having my voice in this anyway.

KAREN BREWSTER: No, that is why I am talking to people like you because I think that is important.

NEIL DARISH: It is okay if people don't agree with me, but the fact is that you either own land or you don't. And if you own land, you either have access to it or you don't.

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, that is why I am here talking to people is to get all perspectives and the local perspective and people like you who live here year round and that is why when I hear about what it is like to live here.

NEIL DARISH: Yeah, I mean ultimately I can give purpose to what cause I know purpose as to why it is important that people live here whether it is in commerce, but living here in commerce I am committed to it which is different than a concession or just living a wilderness lifestyle that has nothing to do with commerce. It just has to do with their own productivity for themselves. It is still about productivity. And that is what you need, you need to be resourceful. You need to be productive out here whether you are in business or not. And the Park Service if you don't have access, you cannot be productive. So they are all tied together, it is just --

KAREN BREWSTER: And there is something to say for stewardship. That is sort of what you are -- that you feel you care about the place there is a stewardship --

NEIL DARISH: I am completely invested for real. I mean people talk about how much they, you know, people surrounded by concrete within arm's length talk about oh, what life we have. We love our life here and I frankly anybody that lives here year round I don't know anybody that wouldn't say winter is way better than summer. I mean you know you are local and one, all your shit is here and two, at the end of winter you go I can't wait for winter again. That is how you know a local. It is. It is really that simple and people -- two out of three people like go to Alaska to live a bush life they will not succeed and there is no way to know until you try it because it is a human psychology thing.

KAREN BREWSTER: But that is what I say that using those local people who care about the place to help these stewards because --

NEIL DARISH: Exactly.

KAREN BREWSTER: You're here because of the way the place is and why would you want to destroy it.

NEIL DARISH: Fully vested, exactly. I am fully vested in this. Everything I own is in it. Will I make mistakes? Sure. Am I going to do something so egregious that it requires law enforcement? The law enforcement is there. I mean it may not be right here, but I am under, you know, I have got my circle of influence, my private property and once I step off of it I have, first of all, I have the laws that protect the road or the local or the federal, you know, laws that apply to me and as a private citizen in my home and outside they still apply. In a National Park, there is even more laws, but don't create laws to push us out. And don't -- don't do the oh, we're so afraid of what you might do. You know, I have got a lodge and I have to burn fuel oil instead of wood. And the reason why is because in the National Park there is a law. What they don't want are things like a big beautiful decorative fireplace wasting wood. Okay. There is enough beetle kill in this Park for 50 years for me to harvest wood so that I would have a stockpile for the next 50 years of fire that could be created -- heat that could be created in a natural sensible way that is relevant to here in a sense of place. Instead I have to get oil, you know, from two miles under the ground in the Gulf of Mexico and how much energy does it take to get that oil all the way to here.

KAREN BREWSTER: So you are not allowed to go into the Park?

NEIL DARISH: I can't go into the wood because the commercial and I can't -- and I have never been able to use commercial and I understand that. I mean the idea is you don't want to use the resource here for commercial use. But I am so afraid that the Park Service is like when they are in the mode of wanting to look for something to get rid of a local if I brought wood in, you know, they still be afraid that maybe I am sneaking and getting some local and that doesn't even bother them.

KAREN BREWSTER: Can you get wood to burn in your own home?

NEIL DARISH: I can get wood to burn in my own home because that is my life, you know, subsistence, but I don't burn wood in my own home. What I am saying is there are some choices I have to make that I think are the wrong choice, but I am not allowed. I don't have another choice.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right. If you want to stay here, you got to make choices.

NEIL DARISH: Well, I mean the lodge should burn local lumber in a responsible way. That means beetle kill that means a lot of things. Maybe it is from DNR land not from Park

land, but it is so fearful. It generates so much fear the idea and it is so not safe to have a crucial conversation about it that I got different battles to fight, you know. But if you bollards in the way then those get ripped out. If you make it an affront to the ability to fly in the town, I mean and I have been here 15 years and the changes that I have made I had lots of people that say oh, you might go too far, but I don't have anyone saying oh, no, you have ruined it because it is a natural progression and the change is happening, but it is slow, it is measured. We are just creating more space for people to be absorbed when their assets growing.

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, and it is done in appreciation with the historic and what this place means. You --

NEIL DARISH: It is a sense of place.

KAREN BREWSTER: You are connected.

NEIL DARISH: Absolutely. If you walk in the saloon, it is a commercial business, but it feels right because it doesn't have swag everywhere. It doesn't have all the little advertising for it. There is no neon. So we got a new appliance and it has got these blue LED's and I can't stand them and I got to fix them and it has been all summer and I haven't fixed them and now I am getting used to it and that is the danger of not paying attention to that. But I don't -- I am not going to let that stay in. It is just going to be winter before I fix that. And there is little details that bother me because I live here, not because the Park Service tells me they bother me.

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, that is what I want to do -- I do want to know more about what it means to live here in the winter and what life is like here in the winter cause as you say there aren't very many of you that do it.

NEIL DARISH: Right.

KAREN BREWSTER: And I think it a life people don't understand or know about so could you --

NEIL DARISH: So, sure. Life in the winter for me is probably a little different than most of my neighbors. And the reason why is because having lived homestead I know and appreciate and miss a lot of that connection. So I am living here but I feel like I am not living in the wilderness because my drive to get things fixed and stabilized I had to make choices like what do I do with my own style of living so that I can be productive in creating, you know, stability for the business units. Well, I never thought I was going to, you know, sell. I didn't think that was what I was going to do is sell the business, you know. But I have an opportunity to do another hundred room hotel in this Park do as a real celebration of wilderness. Do it in a way that is amazingly sensible to the ground. You know, very little impact on the ground. Not a conventional kind of wooden or, you know, typical log thing or it is not a factory Holiday Inn. It is nothing like any of that stuff. It is a unique property. He is an Alaskan architect who is sensitive to this wilderness improving in his abilities. You know award winning. But familiar to that project I now have to let go of this project and that means do I break it up and that is when it will do its best. But this whole town will now expand and do another mini explosion cause when you have different people owning these five or six different business units, they will all thrive a little bit more. They will be better focus. You know, they will take what I built and make it better. And I want to be able to walk down this town and feel good. I don't want, you know, people to fail on us. It is real important to me that each business unit has its earnings target and hits it and that it is run on ratios. I am giving them all structure, but

the personality, the authenticity that is the magic of McCarthy. You know, that is like these old buildings have a relationship to its past and it is still relevant today. In the day this was a high tech town.

KAREN BREWSTER: Oh, yeah.

NEIL DARISH: Totally high tech. Pete and Ma Johnson had an amazing luxury and it wasn't a phone.

KAREN BREWSTER: Hot water.

NEIL DARISH: No, and it wasn't hot water. They had running water. They could fool chickens to lay eggs because they could play with the light cycle because McCarthy was electrified before most of North America. So we were able to have up here in Alaska where there was no such thing in those days of fresh eggs in the winter especially. So we were able to have chickens in McCarthy. I say we, but, you know, having chickens in McCarthy and laying fresh eggs because they had steam heat from the power plant that heated the boardwalks and kept them free of ice. And they went into the buildings, the heat, so they could heat an area for chickens and then they could also fool them by light cycles into laying eggs. Fresh eggs in the middle of the wilderness instead of powdered eggs. Now that is luxury.

KAREN BREWSTER: And nowadays in the winter, as we say, so life in the winter I assume slows down.

NEIL DARISH: Life in the winter what I like about life in the winter is I get the town back. So for eight months a year, seven, eight months a year McCarthy is kind of I can put a chair in the middle of the street and kind of know that I got the wilderness and town and it is real quiet.

KAREN BREWSTER: About how many people nowadays stay here all winter?

NEIL DARISH: Well, downtown McCarthy is just me and then, you know, Malcom might be a mile up or not a mile, like 500 feet, 1,000 feet pass the south (inaudible).

KAREN BREWSTER: He is the one who runs the Potato?

NEIL DARISH: Yeah, yeah, owns the Potato. Mark Lats (phonetic) about a mile and a half that way. Kyle might be here this winter I think. Those are my closest neighbors about a mile, you know, that is in town. I often have an employee living in the employee house, not this year though. So I think in the last 15 years I have had the town to myself for 10 of them.

KAREN BREWSTER: And then there is like Mark Vail who is down --

NEIL DARISH: Yeah, I that might be everybody, but they might be a mile apart. I say there is about 40 people within a 20 mile radius. You have like five people up in Kennicott.

KAREN BREWSTER: How much do you guys interact with each other in the winter?

NEIL DARISH: Well, mail plane is kind of, you know, when the happenstance can happen, but socially, you know, there are a couple of things that happen in the, you know, like Halloween and Thanksgiving and Christmas, New Year's, you know, people might get together with either just a couple of close friends or with community. In the winter for Christmas usually the ladies get together and make cookies for all the bachelors.

KAREN BREWSTER: Nice.

NEIL DARISH: That is kind of cool. And, you know, I would say that there is definitely some of us are less social than others, you know. I don't really like to hang around with too many people anyway, but in the winter I am a little bit more social with locals. But, you know, I am not -- it is not really my thing to be all that worried about what to do in the

winter. I just let the winter happen, you know. And I got plenty to keep me busy. I am never bored. People say what do you do in the winter? I mean I don't know how to answer that. I don't do anything different. I mean I am just --

KAREN BREWSTER: You have maintenance to do on your --

NEIL DARISH: I got maintenance, just ideas to explore, you know, things to try out or consider or how can I do that better or then sometimes there is nothing to do. You just kind of hang.

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, yeah, it seems people who would live here all winter you seem like you would be people who are a little bit more loner. You don't need all that socialness. If you need social things, you wouldn't be here in the winter.

NEIL DARISH: I don't think so. I mean generally. I still think I am probably the biggest loner out here, but I don't know and I am right downtown.

KAREN BREWSTER: And you don't keep any of your businesses open in the winter, do you?

NEIL DARISH: No.

KAREN BREWSTER: No, not even the bar?

NEIL DARISH: I used to. In 2006, it got too expensive to, you know, to do anything so I decided that I would --

KAREN BREWSTER: So why do you keep living here and what keeps you here?

NEIL DARISH: You have seen the neighborhood. I like the impact that it has -- the town has on me and like the impact I have on the town. I really feel bad a lot of times with how people take what I do, but that has been a big struggle, you know, like people's opinions of me are really none of my business.

KAREN BREWSTER: So there has been opposition to building up the businesses?

NEIL DARISH: Oh, yeah. Yeah, well, I mean not --

KAREN BREWSTER: Maybe that is the --

NEIL DARISH: Ah, maybe that is too strong. I mean it is a mixed bag, you know. There are all kinds of flavors of contention or strife and this is pretty laid back, you know. People may not like what I am doing, but they are not destructively bothered by it because there are better things to do. I mean I think anybody knows that my heart is in this place. I don't mean them any harm. They may hate that I am abrupt or whatever, you know, or big ego or whatever kind of like, ah, we don't like that guy. And that is fine. There is the business you know. A lot of the business guy is never the good guy and all that stuff and I play professional villain on TV which is fun in itself.

KAREN BREWSTER: That is Edge of Alaska is that what that is called?

NEIL DARISH: Yeah, the TV show and but that is I mean that is a blast. I think it is just another narrative. It is not my story. It is an exaggeration of our lives told by Discovery. So, but there is a lot of stories here and there is a lot of artistic expression here. So I have a big artisan residency program. It is a big part of what I care about around here and there is a budget for it and we, you know, we like that. We like it and I want to shift that program to another entity in town before I sell all this stuff because I don't know that another commerce thing, but that is just a personal. I mean artisan would make a place hip, you know, if you think about any gentrification or whatever the plan make it gentrified, but it is hip because there are people that are passionate about their own creativity and ideas and it really works well for music and textiles and visual medium and painting and so. That is part of the community.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah, isn't diversity what makes a community? People creative and all that comes together to make an interesting community I would think.

NEIL DARISH: Well that -- the question about, you know, what makes a town a town, so I think of the tribe, you know, the where was man, you know, 10,000, 20,000, 30,000 years ago where we are today and the idea that there are communities, you know, people's last name before there was much in the way of written language the name described what you did, Mr. Baker, you know, and so people would introduce themselves based on the profession of how they could trade back and forth. That was even how they named themselves so that in an introduction you knew oh, that is the guy I am going to get baked goods from cause it is Mr. Baker. I mean that is how names they come from a profession and the reason they come from a profession is because productivity is what advances man, like it or hate it. And so productivity I would argue makes it possible for us to all -- all of humanity have a better life overall than all of humanity did 100, 200, 500 years ago and I think that is really obvious, but a lot of people don't see that. But -- getting a little sidetracked, but the premise of why should we have community is because man is more efficient in productivity when all these skills come together. So a tribe in the average tribe is about 180 and it starts to break apart in all cultures around the world in all tribal history. So that is about it for tribe size. There is no 5,000 member tribe in man's history. But there are 5,000 and 5 million member communities. What is it that is different is the communities form because agriculture allowed us to trade. It allows us to store productivity and trade it and then the velocity of trade that, you know, how fast things can happen that is how fast a community can grow. So when you have people like one of my neighbors that claims to stop trade and put up toll gates, that crushes the velocity of trade when you have people like the Rowland's, you know, making things happen like building bridges that increases the velocity of trade. So you see natural growth when I don't have to roll 10,000 gallons of fuel oil over the bridge, take two days to do it. Instead I can have one guy drive all the way to my door and dump it and leave. Dump it is not the right word, but, you know, I mean everything becomes more efficient. Communities happen to create efficiencies. The anomaly in McCarthy is that is not why this community is here. The community was here really to support the company town.

KAREN BREWSTER: The mine, right?

NEIL DARISH: Right and well, it was prostitution, gambling, moonshining and it was, you know, celebration, whatever you want to call it. McCarthy was off the charts crazy good at that start.

KAREN BREWSTER: Like you say it was commerce.

NEIL DARISH: It was commerce.

KAREN BREWSTER: It was commerce for the town.

NEIL DARISH: Well, this was mercan --

KAREN BREWSTER: A mercantile place.

NEIL DARISH: It was a mercantile town. So the idea of commerce and velocity of money it is not an evil thing. It allows hard working men and women who are productive to trade that for something else and everybody's life gets better and that is why we are in McCarthy, but it is a little bit of an anomaly because the commerce happens only because of tourism and it happened before the Park Service. It happens a lot better with the Park Service. I am not anti-Park Service, but I am anti-coercion. And when the Park Service comes in wanting to be a partner, but they don't know what that means or if they ask me if I want

to be a partner and I say well, what does that mean? And they are expressing it, well, you know, in ways that it is not the same language so I can't understand it. They may mean well, so having dialogue to where we can all understand what does it mean to be here. You know the partnership idea is really let us do our community thriving and support the visitor experience and let us as locals who live here year round thrive in the community because we don't slash and burn on our way to our neighbors and then give me this bullshit that subsistence is about hunting because it ain't. And I don't care what the judge thinks that subsistence is about killing animals. If you are going to live in a town or not on a town, you have to go visit your neighbor because you're psychological, you know, back and forth with another brain is kind of critical. So I am a loner, but I am not an idiot. It doesn't mean I don't engage so, but choosing how, you know, how we are going to go and visit my neighbor far away driving some funky vehicle. That is what it is. I am not trying to destroy the earth on the way to my friends, but that is as much about subsistence as harvesting. Now they may think that ANILCA when I say they, the Park Service, in every discussion it is always about ANILCA equating to subsistence on a killing animal or using resource agenda. And I respect that that is how they are supposed to look at it. The problem with that is it doesn't take into consideration the onerous laws they have tacked onto that and if they are going to tack on these onerous laws, like well, you know, the snow cover isn't enough and there might be a patch on your way to your neighbors so we are going to use that to coerce you. That is why I say I am the enemy of coercion because at the end of that stack of paperwork is a gun about what they can enforce just like taxes. So what I want to be able to do is I want to be able to have free movement, unfettered access with respect for the wilderness, always being able to have open dialogue about it, leave the guns at home, let's talk about what it means, understand that ANILCA really is about allowing people to be here in a Park Service model that couldn't figure out how to allow for that before. That is why ANILCA was created cause we love the wilderness world, we are Alaska. Most of us may want to hear but here we can't figure out how to let you guys in and control these Parks because we live in the wilderness. That creates ANILCA essentially and to (inaudible) in this idea that it is about Native Americans being able to get the resources that is onerous on a lot of levels and it is insulting. I think the Native people, of course, we all should have the right to subsist. But subsistence is more than just harvesting the wildlife and if you are going to put laws in place to prevent access, private land or private land or public land then you have to be sensitive to what it means to the ability to sustain your psychological, your emotional well-being as well as sustenance for food. So there is a concept out there that is implied by ANILCA which is access. And it is not spelled out maybe well enough you know, 110B and all that sort of stuff. But at the intent of the law it is as much about protecting the wilderness as it is about protecting this lifestyle. And that is what the Park Service doesn't seem to get all the time. Sometimes, sometime not.

KAREN BREWSTER: And I find it interesting that here you are a guy living in McCarthy, running your business, you also -- you have to become an expert on ANILCA.

NEIL DARISH: Yeah.

KAREN BREWSTER: This national law and management of your big backyard basically and, you know, --

NEIL DARISH: Well, it is all of ours backyard. I don't claim it as any more than yours.

KAREN BREWSTER: No, but the fact that you have to be an expert on this law, that is complicated and the rest of the people don't have to be an expert.

NEIL DARISH: Actually, I don't need to be an expert on ANILCA and neither does anybody else. All you got to know is the core intent of ANILCA is to allow this lifestyle to be preserved. Now if you question that and most people do then then find in ANILCA where it says no we shouldn't be here. And it doesn't, but I can point to many things that indicate why ANILCA was created and what the intent of ANILCA is. It was to preserve not just the hunter in a cabin, but it was to preserve the idea of man living in a wilderness in a Park unit. Within a Park unit. I mean it was really that simple. Man living like if it wasn't a Park what can they not do when it is in a Park. Well, I can see protecting the resources. That makes sense to me. I applaud that, but the fear that makes people go the next step and say let's pre-emptively get rid of everyone that's coercion. That is what has got to stop.

KAREN BREWSTER: Now, I don't want to take up too much more of your time. So is there anything else that you wanted to tell me about, you know, when I introduced myself earlier there were certain things I think you wanted to make sure we talked about. Have we done that?

NEIL DARISH: I think so. You know I wanted to make sure that the passion that I and everyone I know has for wilderness has many different forms. There is no one lifestyle. That's ridiculous. There is all hybrid lifestyles as there should be and that at the core there is none of these lifestyles are about destroying where we are and yet we are all human so people make really stupid, you know, decisions on what they can do. And so there should be a body of laws that protect. There should be -- I mean the Park Service is great model of what can be done with ANILCA applied with the intent to allow this to thrive. It doesn't mean that we can get away with any kind -- anything we want to do, but ultimately at freedom it is free of coercion and that means that if the Park Service comes and visits to have a dialogue and they bring a gun and I can't bring my gun then that symbolism isn't lost on me. I don't want to bring a gun. I don't want, you know, and I am not saying they can't protect themselves, but if it is not safe enough to have a common dialogue that is a problem. And working on making it safe to have this dialogue all the time that is really what is important and knowing that in my heart and everyone else that is going to invest themselves in this place, we may not be even good neighbors, but we sure love the wilderness.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right. And what you disagree about in McCarthy one of the things you all seem to agree on the wilderness.

NEIL DARISH: Yeah.

KAREN BREWSTER: The value of living in this.

NEIL DARISH: Yeah, no, we are here for a reason. We are not here because we have to be. Some people are, you know, born here and some people are called to be here.

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, thank you very much for your time. I really appreciate it.

NEIL DARISH: Sure.