

## **86-195-02 John Burns**

John Burns interviewed by Dan O'Neill

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### **Dan O'Neill**

00:00:11.69

Presents John Burns and state that they are going to talk about Burn's research in Northwest Alaska for the last 25 years.

### **John Burns**

00:00:27.83

He started his fieldwork in the summer of 1960 and has continued until the present. He first studied mink [comments on this research and the experience of doing fieldwork in extreme conditions].

### **John Burns**

00:02:44.82

In the 1960s dog teams were still the primary mode of transportation and subsistence hunting and gathering was still the primary pursuit. People lived off the land in rural Alaska. Burns worked out of Kasigluk and Nunapitchuk. He worked with Ray Tremble [sp?] who worked for US Fish and Wildlife Service. He later worked two books; one was called something like Tales of an Alaskan Trapper and the other was about his experiences as a game warden in Alaska.

### **John Burns**

00:05:19.83

He spent the fall of 1960 down there. He trapped, tagged and released mink. He proceeded to work with an elder trapper from Kasigluk and learned how to trap with them. They used dog teams and camped out by the Bering Inlet. They lived in semi-subterranean houses made by a frame covered with tundra moss and chinked to the mud in the fall. They were tiny houses where they butchered the animals, slept, ate and lived.

### **John Burns**

00:07:29.58

Burns never learned how the Natives navigated the land. They didn't use compasses or maps, but they always had a keen sense of direction and weather. His research objective was to understand mink ecology in the local habitat. There

was a very high number of mink in the area.

### **John Burns**

00:09:29.60

A person had to like to fish to survive in the area. They fished a lot and fed themselves and their dogs with the fish.

### **John Burns**

00:11:52.14

People used fish traps for capturing mink, which were illegal at that time. The Eskimo name for these traps was Talujak [sp?]. People like Ray Tremble questioned the outlaw of those traps. Burns questions whether the trapping method was as detrimental to certain species as believed by researchers at the time.

### **John Burns**

00:12:49.01

The traps are split-willow funnel type traps. One end is round with a funnel going into it while the other end has sticks tied together. The mink traps were made like this but with wire. Burns once checked a trap that had six mink and 12 muskrats in it.

### **John Burns**

00:14:08.24

After his fieldwork on the Yukon Kuskokwim Delta, Burns went to Nome. There he worked on walrus. The Bering Strait region remains one of the most fascinating in the world to Burns. Things migrating from north and south cross through this passage. The people however are also fascinating in their diversity. There are King Island and Diomed Island people who have essentially no fauna or flora and are specialized and efficient. On the bigger St. Lawrence Island there is an entirely different culture and relationship with resources and again on the mainland it is very different.

### **John Burns**

00:16:46.74

A sufficient resource vessel isn't available in this region. Therefore the animals that were harvested locally were also used for research [correct interpretation?]. In the earlier years biological sampling was dependent upon subsistence hunters. Biologists learned procedures and techniques from the hunters and used those in their research.

### **John Burns**

00:19:46.98

A few [Native] people have been exceptional teachers to Burns. One is King Islander Anthony Kuzona [sp?], King Islander Edward Maktoyuk [sp?], St. Lawrence Islander Vernon Slookow [sp?], Diomed inhabitant Albert Iahok [sp?]

and others. It is the contribution of local people that make research successful.

### **Dan O'Neill**

00:21:14.34

O'Neill asks if the locals' oral tradition also contributed to their knowledge?

### **John Burns**

00:21:16.47

It did. Burns remembers that he spent two or three evenings every week from the time when the ice came in mid to late November until the ice left in June, listening and learning from the King Islanders. Until recently the community hall was a very important social place in the village. They would work, dance, eat, talk and compete with each other there.

### **John Burns**

00:23:21.99

The King Islanders were the very best hunters in Northern Alaska with respect to the drifting ice. Burns himself have tried to hunt with them and being cast adrift on the ice. These men taught him very important lessons. Many of which were simple but crucial to survival [Give examples].

### **John Burns**

00:26:41.72

In 1968 the Alpha Helix [sp?] research vessel came to the area. Dr. Pershell [sp?] took the vessel into the southern region's sea ice along with an icebreaker: The North Wind. That gave a new and different exposure to the Bering and Chukchi sea marine ecosystems. They went on to working with the larger icebreaker: The Glacier in 1971. It was very much hit and miss with research expeditions with icebreakers.

### **John Burns**

00:29:18.45

In 1972 President Nixon of the US and President Podgorny of the USSR signed an international agreement for the protection of the environment. It called for an exchange of scientific information in many fields. The exchange program was good and has continued to be constructive. [Discusses this exchange and the relationship to the Soviet Union in greater detail]

### **John Burns**

00:41:13.83

The traditional Native technology for exploring the environment is fascinating to Burns.

### **John Burns**

00:44:14.06

They used dogs for their research with ring seals.

### **John Burns**

00:45:55.88

Walrus spend the summer in the far north.

### **Dan O'Neill**

00:46:15.67

When the ice retreats in the spring it generates blooming and more life in the sea - for example more walrus. Is this true?

### **John Burns**

00:46:48.93

In the ocean, plants are often single-celled [explain this in technical terms].

### **Dan O'Neill**

00:48:25.04

And do walrus do better in those kinds of seasonally iced environments?

### **John Burns**

00:48:28.02

Walrus only live in seasonally iced environments and not in the high arctic that is permanently ice covered. They overtake long seasonal movements.

### **John Burns**

00:51:43.96

On the lee sides of major islands and landmasses such as Norton Sound on the south side of the Seward Peninsula there is a system of very active ice dynamics. Also the system in Gulf of Vanadeer [sp?] in Norton Sound, south of St. Lawrence Island. South of St. Matthew Island, south of Nunivak Island.

### **Dan O'Neill**

00:55:32.01

O'Neill asks if the ice sheet roughly conform to the continental shelf?

### **John Burns**

00:55:43.49

It does in the Bering Sea [explains this in greater detail]