**NEZ PERCE KEEPERS OF THE EARTH - 1991**

**PODCAST - 2023**

**INTRO:**  WELCOME TO VOICES OF THE WILD EARTH, A PODCAST SERIES FROM THE IDAHO MYTHWEAVER. I’M JANE FRITZ.

BACK IN 1991, I PRODUCED A FIVE-PART SERIES OF DOCUMENTARIES FOR SPOKANE PUBLIC RADIO. CALLED KEEPERS OF THE EARTH, THE PROGRAMS FEATURED STORIES OF EACH OF THE IDAHO TRIBES SET WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THEIR HISTORIES, CULTURES AND INTERRELATIONSHIPS WITH THE NATURAL WORLD.

THESE MANY YEARS LATER, THE VOICES OF THE STORYTELLERS AND INDIGENOUS LEADERS ARE MORE RELEVANT THAN EVER. WE INVITE YOU NOW TO LISTEN AND LEARN FROM THE NATIVE PEOPLES, WHOSE VALUES AND PERSPECTIVES CREATE A FUTURE THAT WE ALL CAN EMBRACE.

*(NEZ PERCE DRUM AND SINGING; CROSSFADE INTO SOUND OF RIVER AND FADE UNDER)*

**Brian Bull:**  Coyote, *‘iceyeeye*, he was going upstream.

Coyote is always going upstream. He was going along and he noticed the salmon were having some difficulty there. So he says. I'll build a fish ladder so that the salmon can go up river and feed my people. And so he's busy working along there and Magpie he flies over and says. Ahg! What are you doing?

And Coyote looks up and he says, ‘I'm building a fish ladder for the fish to go up to feed my people.’

**Narrator:**  Since time immemorial the Nez Perce people have been Keepers of the Earth. Nez Perce people have honored the legends, the old stories; those stories that speak of everything connecting to everything else. From their beginnings, these legends took root in the language of a people that grew as strong as a wilderness spruce. If you listen, you will hear the voice of animal spirits, of camas roots and serviceberries, of forest and mountain streams, and the endless circle of living and dying. Storyteller Brian Christopher Bull worked summers as a seasonal interpreter for the Nez Perce National Historical Park in Spalding, Idaho.

**Bull:** I think legends form the backbone of the Nez Perce Tribe. Stories have a way of reaching people. Everyone that I've met likes a story. I think it's important that it's saved and preserved. And it's also I think one of the most easily preserved aspects of the Tribe's heritage because dancing and drumming takes years of developing the mind and the body, and the right steps. Beadwork, corn husk weaving and things take a delicate hand and a delicate eye and years of perfection. But if you put your mind to it and remember the basic elements, you can tell a pretty good story.

**Narrator:** The stories speak for themselves. Myths and legends in the native oral tradition were created from lived experience, from the life force of the people, and from the land. To the Indian, life is a woven web of symbols and images that reveal hidden meanings about the inner essence of the human dimension linked to the inner essence of the natural world. There is reverence. And there is mystery; and, the circle of life turns despite human manipulation or understanding. This is a spiritual power. And as the Nez Perce people explored life's interrelationships, Coyote, the legendary teacher and trickster character created stories for the Indian to live by. Fisheries resource manager for the Nez Perce Tribe, Si Whitman:

[00:03:39] **Si Whitman:** Coyote being the all-encompassing trickster that he was, and the being that initiated all life lessons. The reason that he was always dealing with the salmon was because of the importance it played in the diet. Coyote made sure that he taught you that you would never want for meat, never want for food because they would always be replaced because of the activity that you had done when you were on this living planet, and that you evoke the same type of reasoning and the compassion for replacing what you took. Tales of Coyote are not just fairy tales, or nursery rhymes—they are very hard life lessons; ones that serve as examples to you. Coyote teaches you that each day is something that you been given. Whatever you do in that day, tomorrow will be history, and that you dare not repeat that; you can make it better or you can make it worse. There are no in-betweens.

*[BRING UP RIVER SOUND AND FADE UNDER]*

**Bull:** And Magpie looks at Coyote and says, ‘There's no reason for the fish to go up there. The monster, *its-wat-sik,* ate the people all up.’ And Coyote says, ‘Oh that's what happened to them. No wonder nobody's been around to help me.’

So he starts up that way to find the monster. Along the way he stops to make some flint knives and takes something to start fire.

As he goes along he gets some camas and serviceberries and things like that, and he puts them all in his pack; and he gets himself on his way and he's making these ropes out of hemp. And he goes along and he's thinking of a plan.

**Narrator:** Nez Perce people were dependent upon each run of fish that came into a particular area. Each run mirrored the changes in the natural environment. Summer to winter, to summer again ensuring the survival of the people. Health longevity and low infant mortality were a direct result of this interrelationship. But today winter runs no longer exist. Some species of fish have been eliminated. And without adequate fish in their diet, health problems have increased. In 1984 native coho salmon became extinct and today seagoing sockeye salmon have virtually disappeared from the region's river system. Again, Si Whitman:

**Si Whitman**: In the past where I've gone to streams as a child I was at, I remember seeing countless, hundreds of fish going by on their way to their annual spawning. Never as a child, never realizing that in my wonderment, the survival of that fish would one day come to an end. That's when I get that sense of sadness and then it's replaced with a welling rush of anger, and then that too, then I go full circle and I feel badly because the very ignorance that people have about my people, my way of life, and those things that I hold dear to me. About those remaining fish that struggle through the dams, that struggle through the lack of flow, that struggle through the degraded, denuded habitat.

*[FLUTE MUSIC COMES IN AND FADE UNDER AND OUT]*

**Si Whitman:** There’s been degradation on the resource. We look at that as as something that is like a cancer creeping into the family, and within the circle of our families being the wing creatures, the flying creatures, those that crawl, and those that swim. We have to care for one another and within the matter of survival again we cannot continue with this. This way this effort has come at the expense of mining and logging and irrigation and agriculture and power consumption.

**Narrator:** What then is the hard reality for the Indian people of lost species of anadromous fish? Of ocean going salmon? Charles Hays, chairman of the Nez Perce Tribal executive committee and member of the Columbia River Intertribal Fish Commission explains the impact of extinct, endangered and threatened fish runs on his people.

**Pete Hayes:** Our people did not take any more fish than they actually needed and there was always a provision that they would not fish several days in a row to get their fish but would take fish from each part—from the early part of the run, from the middle part of the run, and from the last part of the run—so as to maintain a balance: to keep those fish coming in sequence that they had for centuries before we were here. They have been a part of the way of life for the Indian people for centuries; and, when something like this occurs, then that part of the history is essentially deleted from our tradition and culture.

*[FLUTE MUSIC COMES IN AS SEGUE]*

**Narrator:** And yet the story of Coyote’s creative cunning in times of great challenge and seemingly impossible obstacles continues to guide the Nez Perce people.

**Bull:**  So he gets up to the top of the prairie and he ties the ropes around three mountains, and then he ties them around his waist. As Coyote gets up to the breaks, looking into the valley, he sees the monster. It seems to be made up of many different animals and the Earth shakes violently with every step it takes. Its shadow darkens the valleys and chills the rivers and its swishing tail causes the forest to sway and break. And Coyote says; ‘Ah, I don't want him to see me right away.’

So he covers himself with clay so he's hard to see. Coyote yells out: ‘*its-wat-sik, its-wat-sik!’ Its-wat-sik,* the monster, looks around and says; ‘Who's calling me?’ He looks around over the breaks and he can't see anybody. Coyote is well camouflaged. And Coyote stands up, and he says; ‘It's me, it’s *‘iceyeeye*. I'm coming down and we're going to test our powers out. We are going to see who is going to draw each other in.’ And the monster sits and says; ‘Okay, alright, you go first.’ So Coyote gets up there and he checks his ropes and he's all tied up nice. And he inhales, and the only thing that happens is maybe a hair on the monster's ear moves. The monster laughs! Coyote yells down at him; ‘It’s your turn *its-wat-sik,* you try to suck me in.’ So *its-wat-sik* opens his mouth and inhales and the ropes break. As Coyote flies through the sky, he reaches into his backpack and throws out the roots and berries he brought with him. ‘Soon,’ he says, ‘the human beings will be coming, and they will find these and be happy.’ Then Coyote is swallowed by the monster. *its-wat-sik* lies down and he's content there; and Coyote is inside.

**Narrator:** The reality of cultural change for the Indian people has had its effects. Jaime Pinkham, forest resource manager for the Nez Perce Tribe, considers the cost of changing lifestyles for the Indian people.

[00:12:33] **Jaime Pinkham:** We are inhabitants of the Earth and we respected the Mother Earth because it provided for us and we became dependent upon it. We interacted with it on a day to day basis for food, for shelter and for worship, so that when one of those elements in the environment changes all of Indian life can change; and, a good example is the salmon. When we look at the fishing at Celilo Falls. When we put the dam in and we lost the Falls, one of the stories that was told to me by a friend that expressed it in a traditional view is that, when you change the land, or you change the fish, then you change the people. And that certainly is what had happened at Celilo Falls, because we had fished there since time immemorial and relied upon it for subsistence. But when that fisheries resource was gone what did the Indian people have to turn to next. So you know some people had to find a different way of life to make a living.

Then we look at the interrelationship and how that connects with maybe social problems with unemployment, with loss of spirituality. And so the whole thing is is interconnected. So when you change one element of the environment, we’ve got to look at the impact it has on the Indian people. For us to be strong to maintain our culture, we’ve got to make sure that we are able to preserve and maintain all important elements in the environment. Because through each animal there is a spiritual power that that animal provides us with. Or for each plant, it provides us with food source or with medicine. So we've got to make sure that we keep all those things in the circle; try not to change them so that our life can go on as Indian people in a traditional way.

*[BRING UP RIVER SOUND AND FADE UNDER]*

**Bull:** Inside the monster, Coyote gets his flints and he makes a little torch and goes along and sees the skeletons of all the animals. He says many people have been dying. He's going along with his light when his friend Fox runs up to him.

[00:14:46] ‘Fox how are you?’ ‘Fine; I was wondering when you were going to come and save us?’ ‘Well, I need some help. You go get all the animals together and you have them gather all the bones of all the dead people and put them by all the openings and then have them gather all the wood and bring it to the heart.’

And Coyote goes on.

Fox runs on and tells all the animals and they gather the bones of the dead people and they put them by all of the openings. Coyote finds the heart of the monster, and takes pitch from his backpack and starts a fire with the gathered wood under the monster's heart. Then he jumps up, and he takes one of his five knives out and starts cutting away at the heart tossing down slabs of fat for the people to eat. Smoke begins to trail out the monster's eyes, ears, nose and back; and, the pain causes the monster to bellow out. Coyote continues to cut into the heart and the monster, *its-wat-sik,* he moans. ‘Oh, I knew I shouldn't have eaten that Coyote!’

And he opens his mouth and his other openings and all the people throw out some of the bones, as many as possible; and Coyote keeps cutting, and every time he does, that monster cries out and every time he opens up, the animals throw out more bones. Coyote breaks one knife, and then another; and finally he is down to his last knife. Coyote keeps cutting away at the heart and he says to the people, “As soon as the monster opens up again, you all run out and I'll run out too, and he'll be dead.” So he cuts and cuts and finally the last knife breaks and Coyote tears away the last bit of muscle with his teeth. The heart falls, and the monster dies. In its death, mountain tops were flattened and forests shattered.

*[FLUTE MUSIC COMES IN AS SEGUE]*

**Narrator:** Like Coyote, the Nez Perce Tribe’s natural resource managers and council leaders have formulated a survival plan. And their activities closely link contemporary mainstream living with traditional values; and environmental concerns are a major foundation of the decisions the Tribe makes.

Si Whitman explains tribal objectives concerning the fisheries resource.

[00:17:39] **Si Whitman:** Why we need things like water quality, water quantity, flows in order to allow those fish to migrate to the ocean, and then flows to enhance a return, adequate passage. Whatever man in this instance meaning all of us have done to to circumvent the system, we must somehow substitute something that allows us to allow life to go on in its cycle. We would like to do it all possible but of course we have states around us and other Indian tribes that have a stake in this also. What we would like to be able to do is to ensure that we have the ability to be at the forefront of pursuing good management. And it's a collaborative effort. Life is a circle and that's basically what we seek to do is to re-instill those circles of life somehow. If technology allows us to put in substitutions for what Mother Nature created naturally, then we must do that. We must do that in order to survive.

**Narrator:** The forest resource requires a similar management style, according to forest resource manager Jaime Pinkham.

**Jaime Pinkham:** We take the traditional values about the interrelationship of all the things that the forest provides us with; and, then my job is to take it and mix it with the scientific or the technology side of managing forest lands. And so we take an interdisciplinary team approach. We'll get the involvement of the people from the Fisheries Department, Cultural Resources, Wildlife and Water Resources, so that we're not just looking at that forest value for the tree only but we're understanding that overall relationship in the forest environment. So it's a mixture of taking the culture and tradition and the marriage with the the scientific community. I don't want to put myself in a position that that we try to put a monetary value on things that we try to measure things that way and we try to decide which one will win, which one will lose. I think that's part of the conflict that some of the resource managers have put themselves into is that they look at just the economic gain of timber management and they can't recognize a value placed on fisheries, wildlife or cultural resources. And I guess when I look at the forest environment I look at them all and see how all of those can intermix and one not being more important than the other. Tribal members are in need of cultural resources, in need of practicing the traditional ways of gathering, and in need of going out and seeking their spiritual power. So that still exists today. So I think my job is is to look at all those values and to try to bring them back into play; and hopefully that by doing that, we slow the erosion that's been going on, on areas that we can go out and practice our culture and tradition.

[00:20:54] **Narrator:** Today only 13 percent of the Nez Perce reservation lands actually are invested into the care of the Tribe. However Jon Matthews, director of Nez Perce Tribal Economic Development is optimistic about the Tribe's economic future.

**Jon Mathews:** I think my contribution is that we're looking at a lot of projects that allow us to be self-sufficient; acquiring lands first, so that we have a larger land base from which we can work, and making sure that those values are around thousands of years from now. By providing jobs, providing revenues for our Tribe. That way, even if tribal treaties are abrogated within my lifetime, we'll have a land base, we’ll have businesses that will keep going, we’ll have that tribal unity because we'll have enough revenues to ensure that our organization continues.

*[BRING UP RIVER SOUND AND FADE UNDER]*

 **Bull:** And when the monster dies, everybody runs out. At this point, Coyote takes some blood and sprinkles it on the bones and those dead people come to life. Then with the help of his friends, Coyote cuts up the monster and he throws different parts of the monster's body in every direction. Where they land, nations of human beings spring up. The feet landed over toward Montana, and that's where the Blackfeet came from. Part of the head he threw over to another part of Montana and the Flatheads came over from there. Part of the tail he threw over to the Umatilla, and every place else; he was so busy throwing meat. And Fox comes up to him and says, ‘What about the people here?’ The only thing he had left was the heart and he says. ‘Oh, I forgot all about that. Go get me some water from this clear river. And he got him water and he said, ‘Now pour it on my hands.’ And Coyote washed the blood off and it dripped down and he said where this blood lands, and with this heart, will grow a people; and they'll be strong. They'll be brave. They'll have good hearts, they'll live good lives. These will be the *nimi’ipuu*, the Nez Perce, the People.

*[BRING UP AND FADE UNDER AND OUT THE DRUMMING AND SINGING]*

**Narrator:** The impact of the Nez Perce legends continues to be felt by the Indian people today as expressed by resource managers Jaime Pinkham, Jon Mathews and Si Whitman:

**Jaime Pinkham:** The stories carry the message of the Indian people. It's one way that we're going to use to take tradition to tomorrow to make sure that our traditions, our beliefs as Indian people thrive, and what better way to do it than using the traditional stories.

**Jon Mathews:** I’ve seen pictures and I've heard a lot of my elderly relatives speak of what they did as a child and how their forefathers did this. Who did that, hunted here, fished there. Or went berry picking, or went root digging. And so this greatly impacts anything that I have input into. I think the stories are strongly living today and there's no doubt in my mind that they'll continue to live throughout the advent of time. The Tribe, because of its role in society, kind of has almost a duty to lead, to be the leader in environmental areas and in things that affect Mother Earth. I think you see a lot of tribes across the nation, they accent a lot of the environmental type of aspects or historical practices that have kept them in tune with Mother Nature.

[00:25:09] **Si Whitman:** The old philosophy was, if you had that book and those pages and everything that you had to deal with in life had to be written down, then it was not worth remembering because those were just like leaves burning in a fire. They'd be lost forever. The value of teaching is one of teaching from the mind and the heart. Our whole cultural survival is based upon our predilections that the

change that is foretold that will be coming will then signal that there'll be a new life after the end of an old. And that once again we will be able to see rivers full, flowing with fish, compassion once again that will rule people's lives. And when I look at these things and they give pause: to think and listen to the water, watch the water, listen to the wind, listen to the call of the animals— with what they're saying—and it’s a matter of trying to retain that within this rush of activity and paper that pervades our very essence today.

*[BRING UP AND FADE UNDER AND OUT THE DRUMMING AND SINGING]*

**Narrator:** One wonders if there are lessons to be learned from the Coyote and Swallowing Monster legend today. Nez Perce Tribal Chairman Charles Hays thinks maybe there are.

**Pete Hays:** I guess it probably has a relationship to the present day situation. Some people say today that that monster is eating away at the creatures of our Earth today, as well demonstrated by the process of the Threatened and Endangered Species petitions that have been filed recently. In many ways that monster is probably within our present generation and attempting to devour some of the creatures of our Earth.

[00:27:28] **Narrator:** The famous Nez Perce Chief Joseph once said: ‘The Earth and myself are of one mind.’ The *nimi’ipuu* continue to value the Earth, not for what it represents in goods or money, but for its being the source of all life and for providing all the people's needs. That oneness with the Earth originated with a story:

*[BRING UP AND FADE UNDER AND OUT AT END THE DRUMMING AND SINGING]*

**Hays:** Our linkage to the Earth was when Coyote used the blood that was mingled with the dust of the Earth and created the Nez Perce people.

**Narrator:** ’Keepers of the Earth’ was produced by Jane Fritz of The Idaho Mythweaver, in cooperation with KPBX Spokane Public Radio. Native American flute music courtesy of Ken Light, and traditional singing and drumming by Nez Perce Nation.

**OUTRO:** VOICES OF THE WILD EARTHPODCASTS ARE PRODUCED BY ME, JANE FRITZ, AND ASSOCIATE PRODUCER JUSTIN LANTRIP FOR THE IDAHO MYTHWEAVER.

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WE ARE ESPECIALLY GRATEFUL TO THE IDAHO TRIBES FOR ALLOWING US TO SHARE THESE ORIGINAL RADIO STORIES AGAIN AS PODCASTS ON MYTHWEAVER.ORG, AND SPOTIFY AND APPLE PODCASTS UNDER VOICES OF THE WILD EARTH. THANKS FOR LISTENING!