

Interview an Elder or Other Community Member

Make an appointment with each interview subject in advance, making sure to explain your assignment and how much time you think the interview will take. Try to find subjects who have different experiences or perspectives (different sexes, ages, and/or backgrounds). Be sure to schedule enough time for the number of questions you have prepared. During the interview, be patient and respectful as your questions are answered. Remember to be considerate of everyone's time and to thank them for sharing their knowledge and thoughts with you.

From the list below, identify the questions that are appropriate to your interests and those of your interview subject(s). You can adapt these as best fits your needs and include additional questions that are important to you. Note: Try to ask as many open-ended questions as possible (these are questions that require more than just a simple "yes," "no," or single-word response). Also, be prepared to explain any Western/scientific terms that are not familiar to the Elders.

Begin by explaining the purpose of the interview. Here are two examples of effective introductions:

"I am doing a project for school. I would like to learn how you think our surroundings, such as the land, sea, animals, plants, and air, have changed or stayed the same over your lifetime."

"I am interested in your experience with the subsistence way of life. In particular, I would like to understand how you learned how to live this way and what your experience was like."

Here is a list of suggested questions:

1. Where were you born and what was life like there? What time of year was it? What was happening in the world at that time? (You may want to ask for an approximate year.)
2. With which tribe(s) are you familiar? With which other communities have you cooperated as an Elder?
3. Where did you grow up? Describe the place where you lived. Was the environment interior, coastal, tundra, forest, or taiga?
4. Describe the dwelling you lived in.
5. What kinds of skills and knowledge about your environment have you learned from your Elders?
6. How did you learn about the traditional names for places in the area in which you live? Please provide some examples of names and what they reveal about the culture and surroundings.
7. Why is language important in understanding the environment?
8. How did you begin to learn about fish, wildlife, and the land?
9. How were you taught to fish, hunt, sew, build, etc.?
10. What subsistence activities are you most familiar with? What were your subsistence foods?
11. What did you learn from being involved with these subsistence activities?
(For a different perspective, also ask this question of the Elder's mate, if possible.)
12. Has your way of gaining knowledge about your environment changed in your lifetime? Describe how it has changed and how it has stayed the same.
13. What knowledge have you passed down to your community?
14. What advice can you give to young people today about caring for the environment?
15. What advice can you give to young people today about preserving our culture?
16. What do you think is the most important thing for young people to learn from your experiences?