

Transcript:

RT

Hello, Mayor Mike. Thanks for joining us this morning.

MS:

Good morning.

RT:

For people that have never visited Churchill before, what do you think makes the place special or might surprise people?

Mike:

Churchill's home. It's at the top of the province in more ways than one. As we all know, it's a community that always prides itself in adventure, it's a port community, international tourism destination, home of Indigenous groups of the Cree, Dene, the Inuit, and the homeland of the nation, and of non-indigenous people as well. So it's a pretty friendly community. I think always striving for the better, the good, and just developing a friendly environment.

RT:

Excellent. Yeah, we, we love it up here. Every time we come up, we find that people are very warm and friendly and easy to talk to. So it's always nice to be up here. What does being here in the north teach you about living with, with nature?

MS:

Nature is a part of life. I mean, that's the living, breathing part of who we are and what we continue to experience, you know? So it's all part of us. It's collectively coexisting together.

RT:

Beautiful. Uh, so as we all know, I mean, Churchill's internationally known for polar bears and belugas. What are the things you think it's important for people to know about being here in Churchill?

Ms:

I mean, it's just the whole aspect of coexistence, right? It's the whole aspect of, you know, what we live and breathe and what we have and we're proud of it. I mean, coexistence, managing all of that, you know, the whole blend of life. How else do you answer that?

RT:

Well, great answer. Do you have a favorite place in Churchill, around the Bay, or in the region?

MS:

Actually, I grew up along the river. It's called the River Flats. We were part of the relocation of 57 from the closure of York Factory. That's where my parents came from, and they settled here because their older siblings were already established here. So my father selected the River Flats. At the time, it was a growing community of indigenous peoples, from York and other areas of Manitoba. So I grew up right by the river, always cherished it. I've seen the harvesting of belugas, the beauty of the sunsets, the bustle of the port (the hum of all of that), birds flying in and out. I will always remember my father coming back from a goosehunt and watching the boats from up the river and wishing that it was him, but it wasn't him. It was another group of hunters coming in and eventually seeing the boat coming in and the joy of seeing your father back and seeing who's in the boat. The flats have been really important for me to move back there, about 18 years ago. It was something that was missing. I lived in downtown Churchill probably into my 20s and went back 20 years ago.

RT:

If you could share one message with Manitobans and Canadians about Churchill, what do you think that might be?

MS:

I mean, it's a community that blends well. The community I think punches above its weight in terms of what it has and how it continues to coexist with nature. But the whole aspect of making sure that we excel in what we do. As you know, we're owners of the port in the rail line. You know, we've managed to take ownership of it. It's really about creating your destiny. It's really about creating, you know, a future, it's all about a balance. As we talk about this, we talk about nature, we talk about industry. We talk about a balance and how the future ahead is bright. We struggled with the closure of the military base and government cutbacks and all these things that come into it, then you find your way.

How do you improve on, for instance, bear management, you know, polar bear management. How do you improve on waste management? You know, how do you improve on as a community that, and I'll say it again, that, that punches above its weight in terms of being very proactive in all aspects of rebuilding not only a community, but a region.

RT:

Conversations are kind of picking up about protecting the bears, the belugas, the birds, the habitats. Why do you think they're more prominent right now than they have been, let's say, some years ago?

MS:

We put together a polar bear working group, for instance, as an idea. And that was really to do better, do a better job of managing polar bears. Making sure that they were being respected as well. Making sure that, you know, how they live, we've gotta coexist with them. You know, how do we do it better in all aspects of it? You know, as we look at a national marine conservation area, how do we find a balance to this? How do we continue to coexist collectively together?

When I was growing up in a flats in the summer, I witnessed the harvest of belugas. There was a whaling factory not far from the house that was harvesting. And then came along, you know, the whole aspect of tourism came into the picture. I recall my uncle Jimmy Spence, motor over top his back and taking it to his boat that sat along the shores of the Churchill River and off he'd go with his tourists and taking people to the fort of Prince Wales. And then after that, the live capture of belugas, and then tourism, to really showcase the economics of the community, but also to demonstrate that we can coexist. So how do we as a community, you continue to excel? But excel means the balance. It means tourism, it means industry. I think that's with the government wanting to put together protected areas. So nationally, Churchill is ready to display that I think we can put a model in place and work with the government. But at the same time, you know, as indigenous, non-indigenous community, we'll partake and we'll, we, we'll, uh, discover that.

RT:

So speaking of indigenous and non-indigenous communities, across Churchill's kind of a mixed community in terms of the various people here, and there's also a lot of regional indigenous communities as well. And how prominent or how big a role do you think they should play in shaping the future of Western Hudson Bay?

MS

I mean it's prominent. I mean, you know, the days of ignoring indigenous peoples, that's gone. We will play a political role in terms of how we move forward, and that relates to conservation. That relates to bears and managing bears and belugas. But also the strength that we have in terms of demonstrating to the world, demonstrating to Canada that a prime example is the new ownership of the port and the rail line, which demonstrates paving the way. You know, we will. Right. We've been here from the beginning, and we'll continue to be. And so, again, it's really about effective management.

RT:

Excellent. Love that. So you've been supportive of launching a feasibility study to explore what a national marine conservation area could look like, if it's a good fit to have those conversations. And are there specific benefits or opportunities that you think might stem from having a national marine conservation area?

MS

I mean one of the things naturally is, you know, what are the pros and cons, right? I mean we all wanna know that? Yeah. You hear bits and pieces in terms of what's been done in other national marine conservation areas, right? So we'll look at all that, the community will have an opportunity, not just Churchill, but our partners, other First Nations who are part of this, and including the folks north of us. We share the waters, the land, and the environment together. So we'll see how that goes. And the important part of this naturally is conservation, but what are the benefits, right? What are the jobs? Where? You know, infrastructure improvements, investments, making sure that there's a balance to port operations. And

looking at all of that. We went through a process similar to this in the early '90s, establishing Wapusk National Park in 97. You know, we didn't get the benefits that we thought we would get in terms of jobs. And, and what's critically important here is that the jobs need to be focused on local indigenous jobs. There's been people that have relocated into our community through jobs, opportunities through Wapusk. So let's find a secure way to make sure that there are benefits for us and regional folks as well.

RT

Right on. So looking ahead, let's say 20 years from now, what do you hope for the future of Churchill?

MS

Well, 20 years, when you think about it, it's not that far off, but I probably won't be around, but at least it's all about, you know, uh, helping to develop a stronger future, a stronger community, a stronger region. I think we're on the path of that, you know? you know what? What we went through in terms of young people who are growing up, discrimination was there. huge military presence was here, act of port, a foundation of building a community. the difference here around is that we've gone through some challenging times, but I think what we do is, what we've done, is we've turned a page and have really set a positive direction to the future so that we can continue to coexist, people and wildlife and all of that. It's all you can, it's all you can, that's all you can hope for and reach for.

RT

Yeah. Right on. Love that. Is there anything you'd wanna share?

MS:

Like anything, it's always a work in progress. As you know governments are interested in developing a stronger north. And so we'll partake naturally. I mean, we wanna be vibrant, too. We wanna make sure that there's a future for our children, our grandchildren, the others coming forward, the others that wanna come and invest in our community. So we're not any different than communities living in Southern communities. Um, you know, again, the focus is in the north. There's a lot of focus in terms of opportunities. But in that focus, naturally, there are many challenges. You know, there's a whole aspect of making sure that we get it right.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.