

Return of the eels

Nez Perce Tribe releases Pacific lamprey into Asotin Creek as part of program to help the ancient fish survive

By ERIC BARKER
Lewiston Tribune

ASOTIN, Wash. — Charles “Chuck” Axtell rang a bell and Shannon Wheeler rapped a drum as part of an extended blessing and welcoming ceremony for about a dozen Pacific lamprey just upstream from the mouth of Asotin Creek.

One by one, members of the Nez Perce Tribe and their guests delicately released the squirming fish into the cold rushing water. Moments earlier, Axtell sang the tribe’s “Circle of Life” song in the Nez Perce language.

“That song is blessing them, that they will complete the circle,” he said.

The fish, with some help from humans, are close to doing just that and helping ensure the species retains its fragile grip in the vast Snake River ecosystem.

The eel-like fish with a toothy disc mouth, known as heésu, were once common. Nez Perce people came to the creek to catch lamprey, which were an important source of food and medicine. The creek and the town of Asotin would eventually take their name from a mispronunciation of Hesuutin, a Nez Perce word that means “place of the eels.”

But the scaleless fish are now rare here and everywhere in the Snake River basin. Dams on the Columbia and Snake rivers make it nearly impossible for adult lamprey to reach spawning grounds.

“Lamprey are an anadromous fish. They migrate to the ocean and return,” said Samuel N. Penney, chairman of the Nez Perce Tribal Executive Committee. “At each of the dams, at least 50% are lost.”

In 2007, the tribe began collecting lamprey at dams on the Columbia River and trucking them to Snake River tributaries for release. In all, about 6,000 of the fish have been moved upriver and released in places like Asotin Creek, the south fork of the Salmon River, the south fork of the Clearwater River and tributaries to the Grande Ronde River.

“We just let them hitch a ride with us. We get them up past the barriers and then we release them to do their thing,” said Todd Sween, a lamprey biologist with the tribe’s Department of Fisheries Resources Management.

Jon Hess, a scientist with the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission, of which the Nez Perce



Nez Perce tribal elder and spiritual leader Charles Axtell speaks words of admiration and encourage to a Pacific lamprey fish before release it into Asotin Creek in Asotin, Washington, on Thursday, April 14, 2022. Lamprey, an eel-like fish, hold a strong historic and medicinal reverence to the Nez Perce and other Native American tribes in the region, but their numbers have declined significantly over recent decades.



Elder and spiritual leader Charles Axtell, left, sings alongside Nez Perce Tribal Executive Committee Vice-Chairman Shannon Wheeler and Treasurer Casey Mitchell during the opening ceremony of a Pacific lamprey release into Asotin Creek in Asotin, Washington, on Thursday, April 14, 2022.

Tribe is a member, has used genetic testing to document that the translocated lamprey have successfully spawned and their offspring have migrated to the ocean.

“Everywhere we have put them, everywhere we have released adults, we have documented successful reproduction,” Sween said.

That is important because unlike salmon and steelhead, lamprey do not have fidelity to the particular streams where they were hatched. Instead, mature adults key in on pheromones released by larval lamprey to find suitable spawning habitat. So while a lamprey from the Snake River basin could return to the river to spawn, it might also return to another Columbia River tributary or any river on the West Coast.

Once a river becomes devoid of juvenile lamprey, little remains to attract adults to spawning areas, no matter how pristine they may be.

“That is the primary objective of our work — getting the adults up here, getting the young established so they can give off that pheromone plume,” Sween said.

The fish released Thursday, which also included about 100 more that were placed farther upstream, are part of that stopgap program.

“We understand this is a Band-Aid approach and there is a long-term fix that needs to be done,” Penney said.

The Army Corps of Engineers has experimented with ways to improve lamprey passage at dams but the work has just begun and yet to prove successful. Last year, only 31 lamprey were counted passing Lower Granite Dam. The 10-year average is 102.

The tribe supports breaching the four lower Snake River dams as a means to saving lamprey and threatened and endangered stocks of

salmon and steelhead. The Snake River and its nearly pristine tributaries are viewed by scientists as an important stronghold for salmon and steelhead that could be unleashed through breaching.

Sween said that same high-quality habitat could also be key to saving lamprey. As juveniles, lamprey spend years filter feeding in the sand and silt of river beds. They are especially vulnerable to pollution and need clean water to survive.

“Here in Nez Perce country,” he said, “we are blessed with just relatively pristine watersheds.”

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Outdoor school plans 50th session celebration

East Oregonian

PENDLETON — A celebration is in the works to mark the 50th session of the Pendleton Outdoor School Program.

The event is Friday, April 29, at Buck Creek Cabins on the Umatilla National Forest and open to former ODS campers, counselors, field study volunteers, teachers and community supporters. The planning committee is working to connect with these groups and individuals to invite them to the event.

Since the early 1970s, Pendleton sixth graders have ventured to Buck Creek Cabins and the U.S. Forest Service’s Corporation facility on the banks of the Umatilla River. There, students have applied skills developed in the classroom to real-life situations in the natural environment.

The event includes dedication ceremonies to name three buildings in honor of individuals who contributed their time, talents and skills to the program: the

Cookhouse will honor Bob McMillan, the Bunkhouse Jim Christensen and the Ranger Cabin the late Vern Willcox.

Due to limited parking at the ODS site, the Inter-mountain Education Service District is providing transportation via Mid Columbia Bus Company from Pendleton for the event.

The schedule for the day follows:

11:30 a.m. — Bus leaves Pendleton (from IMESD parking lot, 2001 SW Nye Ave.).

12:30 p.m. — Bus arrives at Outdoor School site.

12:30 p.m. — Hot dog lunch is served.

1:15 p.m. — Bus shuttles visitors to Buck Creek area.

1:30 p.m. — Flagpole ceremony at Buck Creek.

1:50 p.m. — Bus shuttles visitors back to Corporation.

2 p.m. — Building dedications at Corporation.

3 p.m. — Bus departs ODS.

4 p.m. — Bus arrives back in Pendleton.

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Reelect David Baum
Oregon Trail Electric Board, Position 8

STATEMENT TO VOTERS: The electric utility industry is seeing significant changes due to increased demand, new technologies, government mandates, high prices of natural gas and oil, and weather renewables (solar and wind). Weather renewables work only when the Sun is shining and the Wind is blowing.

Currently OTEC purchases 100% of its electrical power from Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) and some of the lowest electrical rates in the country. But BPA is being challenged with increasing costs, reduced revenue, and threat of the removal of the four lower Snake River dams. As the board member involved with the Wildfire Mitigation Plan, we have aggressively pushed forward with the drafting and finalization of a Wildfire Plan.

As we negotiate a new contract with Bonneville (BPA), my legal experience is a valuable evaluation tool. My focus will be to continue to work diligently in areas of Power Supply, Transmission and Distribution. I will strive to keep your electrical rates low.

Our CEO, Les Penning and staff with board support will not be raising your electrical rates for 2022.

It’s been a pleasure and a privilege to serve as your representative on the board of Directors. I have gained a significant knowledge and experience about cooperatives during this time. I will continue to work hard at keeping electric rates low while providing safe and reliable electricity to our members along with excellent customer service. I have knowledge, experience, energy and time to serve.

I ask for YOUR VOTE and look forward to our future challenges.

Paid For By David Baum / The Committee to Reelect David Baum

2022

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