

Tribal fishing: occupational hazards

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Despite those treaties, dwindling salmon runs have forced the tribes to strike a delicate balance between their rights to the salmon, other commercial and recreational fishers, and protecting the environment.

Covid-19 has made salmon fishing, culturally and economically important for the people on this stretch of the Columbia, even more difficult. The outbreak has had a disproportionate impact on tribes.

In Oregon, Washington and a dozen other states, American Indian and Alaska Native people have died at nearly twice the rate of white people.

Covid-19 took from the Yakama Nation two leaders who had long helped protect salmon and fishing rights. In April, tribes mourned the loss of Bobby Begay, a leader at Celilo Village who died at age 51 from complications of the coronavirus. In July, the Yakama Nation mourned for Johnny Jackson, chief of the Cascade Band of the Yakama, an elder who lived on the bank of the White Salmon River near Underwood, Washington, and was a passionate advocate for the River People of the Columbia Gorge and their abiding connection to salmon. Jackson died after being hospitalized with Covid-19.

Other Native people who fish the Columbia continue to be at risk of contracting the coronavirus. They live and work in conditions that can be crowded at times, and their work brings them into contact with people from around the region. But those challenges did not prevent fishers from participating in the 2020 harvest. The annual return of salmon to the river not only connects the four treaty tribes to a way of living that predates their loss of land to white settlers, but also is the primary source of income for many tribal members.

During the fall commercial gillnet fishing season, which ended on October 7, Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission staff found itself in pandemic-response mode.

The commission provides technical assistance to the four Columbia Plateau treaty tribes. This year, CRITFC employees tasked with helping fishers in business development and regulatory compliance also delivered supplies from the Yakama Nation to fishers camped at access sites on the Columbia River. The food, water, toilet paper, and cleaning and school supplies from the Washington-based tribal government was distributed to people along the river to cope with Covid-19.

“When the pandemic hit, people living year-round on the river didn’t have easy access to the health care [available] back on the reservation,” says CRITFC Executive Director Jaime Pinkham, who is Nez Perce. “They were falling through the cracks.”

The tribes partnered with One Community Health, which operates clinics on both sides of the Columbia River Gorge, to connect fishers with local health care services. Also, says Pinkham, CRITFC and its partners and funders “worked hard to get a medical vehicle to do testing.” That van will now be used to do vaccinations on the river.



Sam George gillnet fishes the Columbia River for salmon in October off the Stanley Rock Treaty Fishing Access Site in Hood River.

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— Jaime Pinkham
executive director, CRITFC

‘Could have been worse’

Treaty-tribe fishers got the go-ahead to fish with gill nets during a three-day summer season that began in late June, and again during the much longer fall season that began in August and ended in early October. The tribes closed the gillnet season after steelheads, an oceangoing form of rainbow trout, came back in greater-than-expected numbers, resulting in a large catch that was approaching the harvest limit. The 2020 runs for Chinook salmon, however, were significantly lower than the 10-year average, although more adult spring and summer Chinook salmon passed through Bonneville Dam this year than in 2019.

Fishers who use traditional platforms and dip nets, or conventional hook-and-line gear, were allowed to continue fishing through the end of the year, for both subsistence and commercial sales. Brigham, whose grandfather fished at Celilo Falls, will continue to sell fish that is caught by family members from scaffolds in Cascade Locks.

Overall, the fishing in 2020 was “not super amazing,” she says. “But it could have been worse.”

Each year, biologists from the four tribes that have traditionally fished in the Columbia River meet with their counterparts from state and federal agencies. Together, they analyze fish counts and use computer models to make their best guess as to how many fish can be sustainably harvested. After accounting for fish that are needed as hatchery broodstock, or that will be allowed to escape upriver to produce a new generation of wild salmon, they determine how many are available for harvesting.

The individual tribes decide the fishing seasons and regulations for their members. Tribes divide their allocated salmon harvest among three categories: ceremonial use, subsistence, and commercial fishing. Fishers exercising their treaty rights are legally entitled to half the yearly harvest of Columbia River salmon.

Occupational hazards

Although Native fishers work outdoors, some of their working and living conditions put them at increased risk of contracting the coronavirus. A typical fishing boat used for gillnet fishing is about 20 feet long and has a crew of four people who may or may not be members of the same household. Fishers are elbow-to-elbow while pulling in nets, which makes it impossible to maintain social distance.

While the gillnetting season was open, Brigham limited the size of her crew to reduce the chances of exposure to the coronavirus and to protect her father, who fishes with her. She fished with only her core crew, rather than hiring additional help.

But boats are not the only place where fishers come into close contact.

When the salmon are running, people from across the Pacific Northwest, many of them living on reservations in Washington, Idaho, and Oregon, come to the Columbia to fish. Tribal governments urged fishers to start social distancing even before heading to the river, to minimize their contacts with people outside their own households, and to get tested for Covid-19 through tribal clinics.

“People tend to travel from village to village, especially during fishing season,” says Lana Jack, who identifies as Celilo Wyam. Jack lives in Celilo Village and made regular deliveries last year of face masks, hand sanitizer, and other supplies to people at smaller villages along the Columbia.

Broken promises

Some Native American fishers live year-round at 31 fishing sites along the Columbia that are reserved for their use; many others join them seasonally. Many people at these sites are living in conditions that are unsafe and unsanitary. Legislation enacted in December 2019 authorized the Secretary of the Interior to assess and improve facilities at fishing sites, but that process is still in the assessment phase. The omnibus spending bill Congress passed shortly before the end of the year set aside \$1.5 million for the treaty sites in 2021.

Tribal governments brought in wash stations and additional portable toilets, and they increased janitorial services. But even at the best-equipped sites, fishers must share facilities such as showers and fish-cleaning stations. They have to crowd around processing tables that are not much bigger than a

dining table. The least-developed sites have only pit toilets and no running water. In the fall, the busiest season, hundreds of people fish on the river, and 2020 was no different.

The pandemic also brought new procedures for mask wearing and physical distancing at wholesale and over-the-bank sales stations. At the wholesale stations, “fishermen couldn’t get out of their vehicles,” says Brigham. But at over-the-bank stations, where fishers sell their catch directly to customers, not all of the customers took care to wear masks.

The federal government has broken its promises to construct permanent housing for Native American families whose homes along the Columbia were inundated by dam construction. Celilo Village, which is visible from Interstate 84, is the only site where the government has constructed replacement houses for Native Americans since dam construction began in the 1930s.

“It’s part of our identity to fish and to eat fish. For tribal people, there’s no way to keep them away from the river.” -- Jeremy FiveCrows, public affairs specialist for the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission

At sites such as Lone Pine in The Dalles, residents still lack access to basic amenities, including running water, electrical connections, and a sewer system.

It’s not just about building houses, Pinkham says. River communities also need adequate health care and social services, a year-round economy, and schools for their children. “Covid has taught us a lot about the infrastructure for a long-term sustainable community on the river,” he says.

Sales decline

Living conditions at camps and villages weren’t the only challenges for fishers coping with Covid-19. Because of the virus, the fall commercial fishing season took place in a radically altered economic environment. In the U.S., about 70% of all seafood is consumed in restaurants, so restaurant closures and restrictions necessitated by the pandemic have had a major impact on the salmon business.

There are two types of customers for Columbia River salmon caught by Native fishers: The majority of the catch is purchased by wholesalers, who in turn sell the fish to higher-end restaurants and

grocery stores. The rest is sold “over the bank” directly to the public, either at businesses like the Brigham Fish Market or at small stands near the river in Cascade Locks and other locations along the Columbia River Gorge.

Roughly 75- to 80-percent of tribal fishers on the Columbia sell to wholesalers. This year, not as many wholesalers showed up to buy fish. Fishers can still sell directly to customers or to small markets like Brigham’s, but that doesn’t make up for the loss of their biggest market.

Additionally, fishers couldn’t apply for coronavirus assistance funding provided by the CARES Act until the commercial fishing season was underway, months after the pandemic began, because applicants were required to provide extensive documentation of their receipts and expenditures—paperwork that many fishers didn’t have.

Sales both to wholesalers and to the public have traditionally been cash transactions, and fishers have paid their crew members in cash. Many of them haven’t kept good records, and this traditional way of doing business has proved to be a problem in the time of Covid-19. Organizations like CRITFC and the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission have tried to help fishers quantify the economic impacts of the pandemic on their livelihoods, but the process has been frustrating for those who rely on the informal economy.

Many of these health and economic challenges are continuing into 2021. They come on top of climate forecasts that predict a continued decline in salmon runs.

That won’t stop fishing on the Columbia. As Covid-19 vaccines begin to roll out, people who fish the river eagerly await the arrival of the first spring Chinook salmon, which usually happens in early April.

“It’s part of our identity to fish and to eat fish,” says Jeremy FiveCrows, who is Nez Perce and works as a public affairs specialist at CRITFC. “For tribal people, there’s no way to keep them away from the river.”

(About the author: Dawn Stover is a freelance science and environmental writer based in White Salmon, Washington, and a contributing editor and columnist at The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. This article first appeared at underscore.news)



Terrie Brigham, who manages the Brigham Fish Market in Cascade Locks, serves customers during a busy day at the market, despite the Covid-19 outbreak. Brigham, a member of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, calls herself “one of the lucky ones.” The market has stayed open during the pandemic by relying on takeout orders, outdoor seating, and federal relief funding that has helped keep employees on the payroll. Brigham’s sister owns the business, which specializes in fresh and smoked fish from the Columbia River, mostly caught by family members.

New report says ‘time running out’ for some salmon species

A new Northwest report puts it bluntly: Because of the devastating effects of climate change and deteriorating habitats, several species of salmon in the Pacific Northwest are “on the brink of extinction.” As an example:

Of the 14 species of salmon and steelhead trout in the state of Washington that have been deemed

endangered and are protected under the Endangered Species Act, 10 are lagging behind recovery goals, and five of those are considered “in crisis.”

This assessment is contained the 2020 State of Salmon in Watersheds report, released this month. “Time is running out,” the report says.

“The climate is changing, rivers are warming, habitat is diminishing, and the natural systems that support salmon in the Pacific Northwest need help now more than ever.”

Researchers say recovery efforts—involving tribes, state and federal agencies, local conservation groups and others—have

helped slow the decline of some salmon populations. The January report finds that two species—the Hood Canal summer chum and Snake River fall chinook—have been approaching their recovery goals.

It also notes that no new salmon species had been added to the endangered list since 2007.

Symptoms of Covid-19 can include fever, cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, chills, muscle pain, headache, sore throat, loss of taste or smell. If you have symptoms or are concerned you came in contact with Covid-19, call the registered nurse health advice hotline at 1-866-470-2015. During business hours you can call the IHS Covid-19 nurse triage hotline at 541-553-5512.