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Early CRUISER



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A defining aspect of Native culture

It's unclear exactly how abundant wild salmon were before non-Native development of western Oregon in the mid-19th century. An estimated 17 million salmon once filled the Columbia River Basin, said Jeremy FiveCrows, public affairs specialist for the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission. According to recent year counts, under two million remain.

Salmon runs are celebrated as a renewal of life each year, and allow the transfer of traditional values from generation to generation. "It's a whole culture that's based on a place and these sacred foods that are all of a sudden going away, declining or moving into other ranges," Mr. FiveCrows says.

"That is a huge problem for a culture that's based on those foods."

Gabe Sheoships, a Cayuse-Walla Walla tribal citizen, works as a fisheries biologist and Indigenous educator at Portland State University and as the executive director of Friends of Tryon Creek, a non-profit organization focusing on education about the natural world. He teaches about 'first foods,' the foods Indigenous people traditionally hunted and harvested in the region: berries, roots, deer, elk and salmon.

"Salmon is essential to both sustenance and lifestyle, fishing, harvesting, gathering and also to survival," Mr. Sheoships says. "Salmon were and are an important piece of culture in the Pacific Northwest."

Many tribal citizens live year-round on the Columbia River in fishing camps: They depend on salmon and steel-

head for their diets, trade and local economies.

According to Jeffrey Ziller, a fisheries biologist for the South Willamette Watershed District, the construction of dams was the most significant factor in declining salmon populations.

"Every assessment that has been done since I've been around has fingered the dams as the major limiting factor to salmon in the Willamette system," Mr. Ziller says. "There's obviously good reasons for that. Until we can fix the downstream passage issues at those dams, it will be extremely difficult to recover spring Chinook salmon in the Willamette Basin."

In the 1970s, there was a real possibility that whole segments of the salmon population would go extinct. "So the tribes said, 'If there's no fish, it's the same as not having a treaty right to fish,'" Jeremy Fivecrows says.

Through their restoration plan, Spirit of the Salmon, the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission contributed to the halt in salmon decline and numbers rose from near-extinction levels. At the same time, fish hatcheries became the easiest way to return fish to the river. Today, some fisheries in the Columbia Basin are completely reliant on hatcheries.

Following the completion of the dams, an agreement was made between the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife and the Army Corps of Engineers to mitigate the harm to fish populations caused by the dams. Hatcheries were seen as a viable solution.

"The hatchery system is very much in the U.S. agricultural model, which is, 'We'll grow the biggest and best fish and set it loose and hopefully it comes back,'" Mr. Sheoships says.

The justification for recreational hatchery programs parallels the motive for the dam project: the economy. Currently, wild salmon numbers are too low in the Willamette Basin, for instance, to sustain any kind of consistent angling or harvesting, creating the need for hatcheries.

The future of salmon conservation in the Columbia Basin is uncertain. As the planet warms, salmon face yet another existential crisis. Today, one-third of freshwater fish are facing extinction. In 2020 alone, 16 different freshwater species were declared "extinct" by the International Union for Conservation of Nature Red List of Threatened Species.

Still, there is cause for hope as tribes, government agencies, conservation groups, private interests and others are aware of the peril.

In a recent development, Jaime Pinkham, Nez Perce tribal member and executive director of the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission, was appointed to oversee civil works for the Army Corps of Engineers.

The appointment is significant: "Indigenous people have always been adapting and are pretty resilient," Mr. Sheoships says. "I think society needs to follow suit and adapt."

*by Clayton Franke
The Daily Emerald
University of Oregon.*

Water conflict along the Ore.-Calif. border

One of the worst droughts in memory in a massive agricultural region straddling the Oregon-California border could mean steep cuts to irrigation water for hundreds of farmers this summer to sustain endangered fish species critical to local tribes.

The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, which oversees water allocations in the federally owned Klamath Project, is expected to announce this

week how the season's water will be divvied up after delaying the decision a month.

For the first time in 20 years, it's possible that the 1,400 irrigators who have farmed for generations on 225,000 acres of reclaimed farmland will get no water at all—or so little that farming wouldn't be worth it. Several tribes in Oregon and California are equally desperate for water to sustain threatened

and endangered species of fish central to their heritage.

A network of six wildlife refuges that make up the largest wetland complex west of the Mississippi River also depend on the project's water, but will likely go dry this year.

The competing demands for a vanishing natural resource foreshadow a difficult and tense summer in the region.

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