

Kathryn O'Shea-Evans
HC 441: Columbia River Ecology
Clark Honors College
November 15, 2005

Salmon:

Spirit of the People

Introduction

The headwaters of the Columbia River originate nearly ten thousand feet above sea level, cradled between the Purcell Mountains and the colossal Canadian Kootenay Rocky Mountain Range. Here, away from human contact, the water is fresh and pure. But by the time it plunges into the Pacific Ocean this same river is nearly fatally changed: in the course of its flow it will have encountered fourteen major dams, one nuclear waste site, and a deluge of pesticides and pollutants. Like the river and the dams that cut it, the consequences are massive- especially for the native people who've found their lifeblood in its flow for centuries.

The Native American people of the Pacific Northwest have focused their livelihoods around the Columbia River for thousands of years. Kai Lee wrote of the nearly 50,000 original basin inhabitants "whose world centered on the yearly migrations that brought 10 to 16 million salmon and steelhead back to the river"(Lee). Today, those enormous salmon runs, considered to be a wild and precious gift from The Creator, are practically extinct. The health of the salmon has a direct effect on the spiritual and social health of the Columbia River Native Americans.

History of the River

The railroad made the Columbia River the key to development in the Northwest, and forced Native peoples to move away from the water. With the introduction of the canning process in the 1880's, salmon became a valuable commodity. By 1890, forty million pounds of salmon were taken out of river commercially each year (River People). As Kai Lee wrote, "The Columbia's high flows and extensive drainage have made it ideal for colonization, first, by fish and wildlife, as the glaciers retreated at the end of the last ice age and, much later, by dam-building humans"(River People).

According to Ivy Anderson, author of "Protecting the Salmon," "In the 1930's an emphasis was placed on taming the Columbia River, and dam construction began in earnest...New towns sprung up and the basin population rose from 2.8 million in 1933 to more than seven million today. The dams prevented flooding, created electricity crucial to industries, provided water for irrigation, and created shipping transport into Idaho. Without the Columbia and Snake rivers, many of the major cities of the Pacific Northwest would not exist at their present scale (Anderson).

In a 1930's era short film created by the U.S. Department of Interior, the Columbia River is propagandized into a rolling, flowing industry of power. According to the film, "America's conquest of the Columbia has begun. An unshackled giant becomes a seaway to an empire. The promise of power for every corner of the northwest, power to uncover a treasure trove of idle resources. To turn them into useful goods for which a nation waits- power for millions of Americans who look westward hopefully for land and jobs for security and happiness. Power to make the American dream come true"(River

People). It was this harnessing attitude toward the Columbia that Native American's have been living in opposition to for years.

Historical Importance of Salmon to the Columbia River Indians

Columbia River people have relied on the salmon for generations for the physical, spiritual, and social sustenance they provide. Spiritually, the salmon are very important to the Native Americans of the Columbia River Basin. As Ivy Anderson writes, "Most Pacific Northwest tribes begin each season with a religious ceremony to welcome the first salmon. Among the coastal Salish no one began to fish until the first catch had been ceremonially welcomed. As the fish was cooked, a leader prayed that salmon would return in great numbers. The entire community would share in the fish and then would collect the bones and entrails to return them to the river. This would ensure that the salmon would return to life and lead its companions to the Indian fishing sites"(Anderson). The relationship between the salmon and the Native Americans is spiritual and deep. This bond will never be fully broken, though members of the U.S. Government have been attempting to separate the Indians from the river for years.

The term "Columbia River Indian" was created in the 1880's by the US Government to define the Native American peoples who refused to abandon their homes and fishing sites along the River for reservation life. These people refused to be classified into the government mandated Indian tribes of the Umatilla, Yakima, and Warm Springs. They took pride in this distinction: "Seeing themselves as more authentically Indian than reservation dwellers, 'River People' purposefully stayed outside the lines that demarcated tribal territory and defined tribal identity under the emerging colonial order"(Fisher).

The people who refused to move to reservations did so for many reasons. They wanted to stay along the river: near the fisheries, and “near the graves of their ancestors... The renegade chiefs vowed that they would never willingly go to the reservation. To do so, they believed, would compromise their very identity as Indians”(Fisher). Umatilla Indian Pierre Meaniteat said in 1876, “I do not wish to sell any land or throw it away, as long as I live I will not sell it...[M]y heart will always be the same. That is all I want written. I am Indian”(Fisher).

The Columbia River is integral to the Columbia River Indians' way of life. When government officials were trying to move the Columbia River Indians away from the river to a reservation, Smoholla argued eloquently, and said that moving would be “against nature. It's not a good law that would take my people away from me and make them sin against the laws of god. You ask me to plow the ground. Will I take a knife and tear my mother's bosom? Then when I die she will not take me to her bosom to rest. You ask me to dig for stone. Shall I dig under her skin for her bones? Then when I die I cannot enter her body to be born again”(River People).

Walter Erickson, a long-time resident of The Dalles, Oregon, used to watch the Indians fishing Celilo, a spectacle in those days. “The Indians fished with spears and mostly dipnets and they caught a lot of salmon,” Erickson said. “You didn't have much trouble catching salmon in those days. They were just thick in the river; not the way they are today” (Erickson). The colossal change in the salmon population can be directly attributed to the creation of the dams.

What the Dams Did

As Joel Bourne wittily wrote in a 1994 issue of *Mother Earth News*, the Columbia River dams “succeeded where plate tectonics failed, creating a seaport in Idaho”(Bourne). The dams have dramatically lowered salmon populations- maybe for good. According to Ivy Anderson, “There are five factors necessary for a healthy salmon habitat: "(1) access to and from the sea, (2) an adequate supply of good-quality water, (3) a sufficient amount of suitable gravel for spawning and egg incubation, (4) an ample supply of food, and (5) sufficient shelter”(Anderson). The dams obliterated these necessities. Anderson continues: “Building dams on the rivers of the Pacific Northwest came with a price. While the Columbia River once held the greatest Chinook salmon and steelhead trout runs in the world, today those runs have diminished an estimated eighty-five percent despite the artificial raising of salmon in hatcheries. Columbia River salmon runs have diminished from ten to sixteen million adult fish to approximately one million”(Anderson).

According to Kai Lee, “The second human civilization to invade the Columbia basin has turned the river into a power plant.” He adds that the nineteen major dams of the river, along with “five dozen smaller hydro projects,” make it the largest hydroelectric power system in the world. The Columbia River is “a multiple-purpose marvel, a river, as the historian Donald Worster recently put it, that died and was reborn as money” (Lee). This is especially true at Grand Coulee dam, which stands as a barricade for the salmon. According to Fen Montaigne, “Five hundred fifty feet tall and with no fish ladders, Grand Coulee was an engineering marvel and a salmon exterminator, eliminating a thousand miles of main-stem and tributary salmon

habitat”(Montaigne). The dam contains more concrete than would be necessary to build a sidewalk that would circle the Equator twice (Montaigne). It has drastically changed the river. As Montaigne writes, “Grand Coulee is so massive that the Columbia's waters back up 150 miles behind it, forming Franklin Delano Roosevelt Lake, known locally as ‘the pool’ (Montaigne).” This has devastated the Columbia, and the likelihood of survival for salmon. According to Bob Eaton, executive director of Salmon for All, “To talk about the Columbia River is really inaccurate...We don't have a river any more. We have a series of ponds, bathtubs. We've created an environment for anadromous fish that stresses them terribly”(Bourne).

Current Importance of the Salmon

Chris Walsh, an Environmental Public Health Nurse for the Yakima, states: “The salmon for the people is the first food of spring. The salmon is so revered, it’s so necessary to the well-being mentally, spiritually, physically, culturally, that you can’t say how important it is...[It provides] a way of uniting families and passing knowledge. It’s how young learn what their culture is. It’s necessary for building family closeness and insuring that the culture will survive so that they have something to pass down to their babies”(Sacred Salmon).

As Columbia River Indian Lavina Washines once poignantly stated, “We have to go out and fish- that’s our life- it’ll always be our life...we want to be able to go to the water and get our salmon like our creator directs us through our songs”(River People).

Jerry Meninick, who was Yakima Tribal Council’s vice chair when the documentary was made, deems the Columbia River a bloodline. He tells us that the

salmon are the most sacred of all food sources for the Yakima, and that salmon is always placed on the dining table first as a sign of respect (Sacred Salmon).

David Sohappy is a Columbia River Indian who was sentenced to five years in a federal prison for catching and selling 345 salmon out of official salmon season. Sohappy is considered a religious leader to his people. His elderly wife, who was left to provide for their twenty-person family during his absence, eloquently reprovved fishing laws in the documentary "River People." She said, "The white man says I'm breaking his laws, but what about my laws? My laws came from the creator. Is it a crime to try to survive and eat in this country?"(Sacred Salmon). Sohappy earned about ten thousand dollars from the sale of the salmon he was incarcerated for catching, which he used to support his family of twenty for one year.

James Kiona, a Yakima fisherman describes Celilo Falls, the ancient tribal fishing ground that was destroyed with the implementations of The Dalles Dam. He states that fishing at Celilo was a time of abundance and celebration, and provided a source friendship and family cohesiveness. "When the dam came in we lost not only our salmon but we lost ninety percent of our way of life...the falls were destroyed, we didn't make it, the creator made the falls. [So] blowing up the falls was like cutting off our arms or taking out our heart"(Sacred Salmon). The loss of the salmon is as much a spiritual loss as it is the loss of a food source. When the salmon are sick, the health of the Native American spiritual community suffers as well.

Salmon Health

Unfortunately, because of years of environmental pollution, the salmon are in many cases unfit to eat. In the Yakima documentary "Sacred Salmon," James Kiona

speaks of catching fish and slicing them open only to find little puss-filled sores inside. He sent a particularly strange fish to the University of Oregon to be examined and found it was both male and female. The fish have changed, mutated- they even taste differently than they once did. One fish they examined had over seventy different toxins in it: including arsenic and mercury. Many contain DDT, which is still present in the river even though its use was banned more than thirty years ago (Sacred Salmon). The salmon fish, like the Columbia River, are sick with toxic contamination.

In a 1999 interview by the Oregon Historical Society, Dalles, Oregon resident Walter Erickson spoke of his own experiences with the Columbia River. "I'm kinda tied up in knots," he said, "because I want them to put it in the river instead of the air, but I don't think they ought to be wrecking the salmon. Now we're getting down to the Columbia River again... I put a trout in their water and in 20 seconds he was stiff and slow enough and not moving. 20 seconds! But in the first second he went in and he came up to the top standing on his tail with his mouth outside trying to breathe air. His gills not red, turning pink, to gray, within five seconds, and he didn't want any part of that. He couldn't stand it and his scales began to come off and his body turned light gray to almost white. 20 seconds - totally dead" (Erickson). The loss of the salmon has devastated tribal members, who have in many ways lost their way of life.

Current Views of Tribal Members

James Kiona, a Yakima fisherman, is quoted as saying "If the fish go, so do we. We break the circle and the circle ends and we end with the circle" (Sacred Salmon). His sentiments are echoed in countless interviews with Columbia River Indians.

Jesse Greene is a 65-year-old Nez Perce tribal member who's fished on the Columbia River since 1946. He remembers the way it was before the dams, saying "those damn dams...I used to catch as much as 2,400 pounds a day back before The Dalles Dam went in. The river was clear and good. Now they've dammed up the rivers and then didn't put any fish ladders in...all they [the fish management agencies] do its talk...it's been 16 years and they're still talking. It's the politicians that are ruining the river...we need to make changes right now, not in another 30 years. Right now"(Middleton).

What can be done?

"These dams represent the biggest change in the salmon's ecosystem since the last ice age," said Ed Bowles, once Idaho Department of Fish and Game's chief salmon biologist. "From a biological standpoint the only way to recover these fish with a high likelihood of success is to breach the dams"(Montaigne). Unfortunately, this is easier said than done.

According to Ivy Anderson, "Simply removing a dam will not restore a river to its natural state. The sediment trapped behind a dam can create a significant problem downstream, and possibly require restructuring of the reservoir bed...Dam removal includes the cost of sediment management and revegetation. The estimated final cost of removal of the Elwha Dam in Washington ranges from \$70 million to \$240 million...The cost of removing a middle Columbia or lower Snake River dam is likely to be much higher due to the increased sediment that moves along these rivers"(Anderson).

If they're not able to breach the dams, "Federal and state agencies can continue to improve the ways salmon get past the dams. They can continue to protect salmon habitat by controlling streamside development and refining farming and forestry practices. They

can further reduce the already restrictive commercial and recreational fishing harvests. They can overhaul hatchery operations and better control predators”(Montaigne).

Conclusion

The Columbia River is many things. It is a source of life and a provider of energy, an industry leader, an employer of thousands, a veritable wasteland, and, above all, a critical, humbling lesson. For thousands of years, this river formed the lifeblood for the Columbia River Indians. It is now a clogged artery, choking with the constriction of the dams and pollution. We are starting to experience the effects of this on the mental and physical well-beings of the human population, especially in the relationship between the salmon fish and the Columbia River Indians (for whom salmon feed spirit and soul, not just the stomach.)

As the introduction to “River People” states, “History is like a river, always moving forward, present washing over past as it flows.” What we’ve learned (or, what I hope we’ve learned) from the history of the Columbia River is that all living beings are vitally dependent on one another- the pain and suffering of one eventually leads to the pain and suffering of all.

Bibliography

Anderson, Ivy. “Protecting the Salmon: An Implied right of habitat protection in the Stevens Treaties, and its impact on the Columbia River Basin.” *Vermont Law Review*, Fall 1999, No.1.

Bourne, Joel. “End of the Line.” *Mother Earth News*, Aug/Sep 1994, Issue 145.

Erickson, Walter and Marilyn. Interview. Columbia River Dissenters Series. By Clark Hansen. 4 Oct. 1999. 15 Oct. 2005 .

Fisher, Andrew H.. "They Mean To Be Indian Always: The Origins of Columbia River Indian Identity, 1860–1885." *Western Historical Quarterly* 32.4 (2001): 41 pars. 22 Oct. 2005 .

Lee, Kai N. "The Columbia River Basin: Experimenting with Sustainability." *Environment*, Jul/Aug 1989, Vol. 31 Issue 6, p. 8

Middleton, Rusty. "View from the River." *Wana Chinook Tymoo*, 1993, Issue One & Two, p.10-15.

Montaigne, Fen. "A River Dammed." *National Geographic*, April 1, 2001, Vol. 199, Issue 4.

River People: Behind the Case of David Sohappy. Dir. Michael Conford and Michele Zaccheo. Filmmakers Library, 1990.

Sacred Salmon: A Gift to Sustain Life. Dir. Chris Walsh and Lori Lambert. Yakama Tribal Fisheries and Salish Kootenai College, 2004.