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The OCEJ Youth Committee unites green-minded high schoolers across Orange County with the OC Environmental Justice Organization. Through community outreach, events, and youth-made articles, OCEJ aims to empower OC youth to become effective advocates for local environmental justice and community issues.
Bringing salmon home: Pacific Northwest tribes continue efforts to reintroduce salmon above Grand Coulee Dam

May 30, 2024 | Penelope Morris

On July 16, 1933, the US Department of Reclamation began construction on what was then the largest concrete structure built by man—the 550-foot-tall, 5,223-foot-wide Grand Coulee Dam (GCD). Located in Eastern Washington along the Columbia River, the dam project was overseen by the federal government as part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal plans. GCD addressed several of the prevailing issues of the Great Depression by creating thousands of jobs and irrigating the farmlands of the Columbia Plateau, in addition to providing the region with electricity. Today, GCD remains the largest producer of hydropower in the United States, generating about 2,300 megawatts annually.

Though GCD does provide low-carbon energy to the Pacific Northwest, it has greatly disrupted the natural course of the Columbia River and decimated the wild salmon population. Because a dam as large as GCD could not support a fish ladder, after its completion salmon could no longer swim upstream of the dam to spawn, as they had for millions of years. By flooding 70,500 acres of land for the Lake Roosevelt Reservoir, the Grand Coulee Dam project destroyed most of the ancestral fishing sites frequented by the Indigenous peoples of the Basin. These tribes had relied on salmon for millennia; fisheries were not only primary sources of food, but also important locations for annual celebrations, intertribal diplomacy, and trade. Losing access to the vital resource of salmon caused irreparable harm to mental, physical, and spiritual health in the tribes.
In September 2023, UCUT reached an agreement with the Department of the Interior that will direct $200 million over 20 years from dam revenue, in addition to $8 million over two years through the Department of Reclamation, towards the next step in reintroduction. Phase 2 will involve further research as well as the expanded development of interim hatchery and passage facilities. The process will be costly and time-consuming, but promises resounding benefits for the environmental health of the Columbia River ecosystem, in which salmon is a keystone species.

Salmon reintroduction also marks an important milestone in preserving Indigenous cultural heritage and environmental stewardship. “Our people have endured a lot. ... They’ve been colonized; they’ve been oppressed. So has the salmon, but yet, they still endure, and they still survive, and they’re still here.” says Darnell Sam, current Wenatchi salmon chief and member of the Colville Confederated Tribes (CCT). Although tribal fishing culture has been permanently transformed by GCD, many tribe members now participate in ceremonial releases that bring healing and hope to the community while revitalizing traditions that date back hundreds of generations.

Many participants feel that advancing the program is necessary in honoring the legacy left by their ancestors. Nearly 84 years ago, Sam’s great uncle, Chief James of the Sanpoil, presided over the Ceremony of Tears in mourning of the Kettle Falls fishery, which has since been inundated by the Lake Roosevelt reservoir. Sam reflected on the occasion at a release on the San Poil River, standing on land that had belonged to his people for thousands of years. “This is an opportunity for us to wipe them tears.”

Wenatchi salmon chief Darnell Sam watches the release of chinook salmon into the San Poil River, a tributary of the Columbia River.

Source: David Moskowitz

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The definition of environmental justice is the fair treatment and involvement of all people, regardless of income, race, color, origin, or disability by agencies that affect human health and the environment. This movement was started by people, mainly of color who wanted to address the inequity of environmental protection in their communities. The Environmental Justice movement is closely related with the idea of environmental racism and human rights, with the movement being sparked during the civil rights movement in the 1960s. This issue has been occurring in the United States since its founding and continues till this day, as seen when majority-white and wealthy communities are where infrastructure investments are more likely to be made, where environmental laws are more likely to be properly enforced, and where polluters are more likely to be held accountable or be kept away. By comparison, most marginalized communities are routinely treated as places where highways are built, waste is stored, industrial facilities are built, and where natural resources are exploited or destroyed.

It has been observed all over the U.S. that corporations, agencies, and local planning boards consistently targeted low-income communities of color when planning and building polluting facilities like landfills, waste transfer stations, incinerators, garbage dumps, smokestack industries, industrial hog and chicken processors, oil refineries, chemical manufacturers, and radioactive waste storage areas. The communities targeted also seemed to target places that lacked connections to the planning boards and could not hire a legal expert to dispute these buildings. In fact, the Government Accountability Office ran a study in 1983, with the results stating that three-quarters of hazardous waste landfill sites in the eight southeastern states participating were located in primarily low-income, Black, and Latine communities. Since then, Environmental groups have fought against these injustices, and groups such as OCEJ have formed to further eradicate these issues. While environmental justice has been an issue since the creation of communities, the topic has gained traction as an integral part of environmental issues and protests.
About the Authors

The OCEJ newsletter team

Jorge Figueroa (He/Him)
I am a well-rounded person who tries to get involved in school as much as possible. My goal is to improve and impact the things which matter most to me, and my dream career is to work on environmental/climate research to create solutions for climate change.

Maya Bowen
People often define me as adventurous, artistic and driven. I love to play sports outside or paint in my free time. My favorite subject in school is science or history, but I love learning in general. The health of our environment is very important to me, which is why I do Lionsheart, Rooted and OCEJ to advocate and make changes that benefit our environment.

Penelope Morris
Having grown up in the Pacific Northwest and lived in Orange County since 2019, I have been lucky to interact with a wide variety of social and environmental causes. As part of the OCEJ Youth Committee, my goal is to continue to advocate for underrepresented communities alongside my interest in environmental science.

Cecilia Baltazar
About OCEJ Youth

The OCEJ Youth committee is a youth advocacy group comprising 18 high school students from all over Orange County, working together to spread environmental sustainability across the community. The committee is affiliated with OCEJ, a 501(c)3 multi-cultural, multi-ethnic environmental justice organization.

Visit ocej.org to learn more about OCEJ and their mission!

Lots to come this summer!

Follow us on Instagram (@ocejyouth) to learn about local environmental issues, stay updated on OCEJ Youth events, and register for monthly digital webinars!

Contact us at ocejyouth@gmail.com. We are open for partnerships & collaborations!