Salmon Unite Us
Join the Fight for Recovery
Columbia Riverkeeper protects and restores the water quality of the Columbia River and all life connected to it, from the headwaters to the Pacific Ocean.

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It’s time to get real about salmon extinctions and the ripple effects on the people and cultures that rely on them. The facts will jar you:

- The Columbia once produced more salmon than any other river on Earth.
- Twenty years ago, Pacific salmon were found to have disappeared from 40% of their native rivers and streams across Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and California.
- In places where they remain, including the Columbia River system, scientists estimate the number of wild fish returning from the ocean has decreased by as much as 98%.
- Today, 28 populations of West Coast salmon and steelhead are listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act.

The good news: The Columbia still supports important subsistence, commercial, and recreational salmon fisheries. Columbia River salmon are also food for critically endangered Southern Resident orcas and other wildlife.

Simply put, the science supports removal of mega hydro dams in the Columbia River Basin, including the four Lower Snake River dams. The politics support delay. That’s where Columbia Riverkeeper comes in. For more than two decades, Columbia Riverkeeper has worked to protect salmon by advocating for dam removal. We also take action, suing polluters and advocating for stronger laws to reduce pollution and protect and restore habitat.

Now is the time to fight tooth and nail to ensure the government honors Treaty rights and uses every tool possible to restore Columbia River salmon. Our children and grandchildren deserve the thrill of landing a wild Columbia River salmon or experiencing the beauty of one flashing through a crystalline stream. But without paradigm shifts, there are no guarantees.

In the following pages, our team breaks down the creative, gutsy strategies Riverkeeper deploys to work in solidarity with the Tribal Nations that are leading the charge to give salmon a fighting chance. We also talk to Nez Perce Tribe Chairman Shannon Wheeler, a renowned leader and inspiration to us all. His powerful message of hope hits home: “It really gives us hope that people are starting to see that we can and should change how we do business, and how we affect the environment to achieve more positive outcomes for future generations.”

Here’s what it comes down to: Without real substantive change, many more runs of wild Columbia River salmon will go extinct. We must insist our governing bodies do more. For the Tribal Nations, Indigenous people, and the diverse salmon cultures across the Northwest, the stakes are simply too high to wait any longer.

Onward,

Lauren Goldberg, Executive Director
The Rise and Fall of Lower Snake River Dams

A Brief Timeline

Since time immemorial
Indigenous people and Tribes live and fish in the region now known as the Lower Snake River.

1855 Four Columbia River Tribes sign treaties with the United States reserving their rights to take salmon at “all usual and accustomed places,” including the Lower Snake River.

1950 Washington Dept. of Fisheries opposes building four dams on the Lower Snake River because they would “jeopardiz[e] more than one-half of the Columbia River salmon production in exchange for 148 miles of subsidized barge route.”

1956 – 1975 U.S. Army Corps of Engineers constructs four dams on the Lower Snake River, drowning the “usual and accustomed fishing places” protected by Tribal treaties.

(hopefully!)
1980 Snake River coho salmon go extinct.


1995 Nez Perce Tribe begins reintroduction of Snake River coho salmon

2000 Tribes, states, and fishing and conservation groups, including Columbia Riverkeeper, sue the federal government under the ESA for failing to create a plan (called a Biological Opinion) to protect and recover salmon populations. Judges in the case strike down multiple federal plans as inadequate and order marginal improvements to the dams’ operation to protect fish.

2006 Snake River steelhead are ESA-listed.

2021 Rep. Mike Simpson (R-ID) outlines an ambitious proposal to un-dam the Lower Snake River and re-invest in river communities.

2021 Tribal governments and institutions across the Northwest and the nation ask for Lower Snake River dam removal as part of a comprehensive plan to restore tribal fishing, culture, and treaty rights in the Columbia River basin.

2022 The Biden Administration promises a “durable solution” to restore abundant salmon, and acknowledges that Lower Snake River dam removal is “essential” to that goal.

2023 Hopefully, the Biden Administration will release a comprehensive plan to recover Columbia Basin salmon, honor tribal rights, and replace the services of the Lower Snake River dams.

Be a part of bringing this future to a reality, learn more: ColumbiaRiverkeeper.org/Snake

Sockeye salmon swim 925 miles upstream from the ocean to central Idaho to spawn in mountain lakes.
Salmon at a Crossroads

A Frank Assessment of the Movement to Un-dam the Lower Snake River

By Miles Johnson, Legal Director

Sockeye salmon dying from exposure to hot water in the Columbia River, summer 2021. Photos by Conrad Gowell.
The movement to un-dam the Lower Snake River is as close to success as it has been for decades. I am proud of the role that Columbia Riverkeeper has played in that success, and you, as a Columbia Riverkeeper supporter, should be too. But victory for salmon and the cultures they support remains uncertain. Here’s an update on the movement to un-dam the Lower Snake River and why making your voice heard right now is absolutely critical to restoring abundant salmon.

A Looming Deadline

The Biden Administration has a court-imposed deadline of August 31, 2023, to outline a plan to recover Columbia River salmon and replace the electricity, transportation, and irrigation services that the Lower Snake River dams currently provide. President Biden has personally committed to solving this difficult and long-running problem. But a few powerful entities—such as the Bonneville Power Administration, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Senator Maria Cantwell (D-WA), and wealthy electric companies—are working hard to block progress. To the best of our knowledge, the Biden Administration is actively striving to make an internal decision about what to do next. The two paths are clear and distinct: One leads to extinction and broken promises; the other to abundance and growth.

Snake River Salmon on the Brink

The sickening backdrop to the Administration’s choice is the collapse of Snake River salmon and steelhead. Snake River sockeye are barely clinging to existence; in many years, only a few dozen adult fish return to their spawning grounds. Federal scientists recently found that hot water pollution caused by dams and climate change is likely to decrease adult sockeye survival by “−80% from their already low levels” in coming years and result in “future biodiversity loss”—that’s scientist-speak for extinction.

Many populations of Snake River spring Chinook are in danger of ceasing to exist, and dismal returns of Snake River spring Chinook caused emergency fishing closures throughout the Lower Columbia River this spring.

The Snake River’s once-legendary steelhead runs have collapsed as well; the number of steelhead returning in 2023 is predicted to be far smaller than the already dismal 10-year average.

There is no legitimate scientific debate about whether Snake River basin salmon and steelhead are to be saved, then policymakers and stakeholders at all
levels will need to implement appropriate processes and funding provisions to breach the four dams on the Lower Snake River.” Regional experts recently published an exhaustive review of decades of studies, all concluding that removing Lower Snake River dams has the best chance of preventing extinction and providing recovery. Most importantly, the federal government’s lead salmon scientists also weighed in, stating that Lower Snake River dam removal is “essential” to rebuilding healthy and harvestable numbers of Snake River salmon.

Cultures and Treaty Rights at Stake

This isn’t only about fish. The federal dams driving salmon to extinction in the Snake River have caused the United States to default on its promises to Tribal Nations. In 1855, Tribal leaders in the Columbia River basin negotiated a series of treaties with the U.S. government. Those Tribes gave up vast and unimaginably valuable land holdings, but extracted promises that they would forever retain the right to harvest salmon at their usual fishing places. The U.S. Supreme Court observed that these promises are central to the treaties, salmon being “not much less necessary to the Indians than the atmosphere they breathed.”

The Lower Snake River dams drowned the places where Tribal fishing occurred and decimated or eliminated the salmon fisheries that the Tribes bargained for. Righting this historic wrong is an important opportunity for the Biden Administration to begin backing up its rhetoric about supporting environmental justice and honoring Treaty rights.

A Path Forward

From the beginning of this campaign, Columbia Riverkeeper has been clear: What we want—what the Pacific Northwest deserves—is a comprehensive federal plan to recover abundant salmon and replace the Lower Snake River dams’ services. Columbia Riverkeeper has never advocated for dam removal without investing in energy, transportation, and agriculture, and we know that real solutions exist. To paraphrase leading Snake River dam removal advocate Rep. Mike Simpson (R-ID): we can do everything else differently, but salmon need one thing—they need a river. Unfortunately, the Bonneville Power Administration, the Army Corps of Engineers, wealthy electric utilities, and companies that barge grain on the Lower Snake River would rather misrepresent the science behind salmon recovery than engage in meaningful conversations about how to replace the dams’ services.

Over the past year, Columbia Riverkeeper and our allies have paused our long-running court case over how federal dams on the Columbia and Snake rivers violate the Endangered Species Act. The decision was tough. Ultimately, the Biden Administration’s insistence that it needed a year to develop a plan to restore abundant salmon runs and honor Tribal rights convinced us. But if the Biden Administration cannot live up to its promise to deliver a “durable solution” for salmon recovery by the end of August 2023, Columbia Riverkeeper will likely resume—and potentially expand—our litigation against the federal government.

A comprehensive plan, backed by the White House, seems most likely to result in dam removal and tangible benefits for the entire Columbia River basin. But without such a plan, Columbia Riverkeeper and our allies will have little choice but to return to court, given the collapse of Snake River salmon populations. In Columbia Riverkeeper’s estimation, litigation is the
only tool that has ever caused the Army Corps to change its operation of these dams to help salmon.

Despite frustration and uncertainty, I believe we are close to a tipping point for Lower Snake River dam removal. New voices and support from across the region have brought this issue to a head. Tribal and state governments are actively working, together, to improve conditions for salmon in the Lower Snake and across the entire Columbia River basin. Congressional leaders from Oregon, Washington, and Idaho have all stepped forward to find solutions. The Biden Administration has acknowledged the scientific consensus around the need for Snake River dam removal and promised to make a plan that protects Tribal rights. But despite all of this progress and momentum, a few powerful agencies and wealthy interests are keeping our region stuck in the past.

Now is the time to raise your voice and take action. Be assured that Columbia Riverkeeper’s staff are putting every ounce of pressure we can on the Biden Administration to keep its promises; we hope that you will join us. If you can write letters and make phone calls to our leaders, do it now. Because we may not have another opportunity this good for a long time. And the salmon that unite people across the Columbia River basin do not have a long time. 

Take Action Now

ColumbiaRiverkeeper.org/Snake

Sign the petition to the White House on Columbia Riverkeeper’s Take Action website. Then call your Oregon and Washington senators, and ask them to support un-damming the Lower Snake River and reinvesting in river communities.

Sen. Merkley (D-OR):
(202) 224-3753

Sen. Wyden (D-OR):
(202) 224-5244

Sen. Murray (D-WA):
(202) 224-2621

Sen. Cantwell (D-WA):
(202) 224-3441
Early this summer I had the opportunity to speak with Nez Perce Tribe Chairman Shannon Wheeler, a visionary leader fighting to restore the Snake River and abundant salmon and steelhead. Chairman Wheeler’s experience in the private sector, and as Tribal member exercising Treaty-reserved rights, forms the foundation of the policies he advocates for. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: **What does it mean to be salmon people?**
In our creation story, we have an obligation to the salmon. The salmon and the other animals had a meeting before there were people, when they could all talk, and salmon was the first to give himself up. He said, “I will lose my voice to give myself to you.” This story has been passed on for countless generations and this obligation is deeply rooted. It is a covenant between humans and the environment. We can’t strip away our word that we gave to the salmon. We have always given prayers for the foods to come back each year but we never thought that they would face extinction. In 1974 the last dam went up on the Snake River, and the runs were decimated in under 50 years. This is why we fight.

As salmon people, we don’t see ourselves any different from the land itself and our foods, and we never place ourselves above our foods. From a cultural perspective, we are the same as the salmon, therefore we are salmon people.

Q: **What would Lower Snake River dam removal mean for the Nez Perce people and what are you doing to lead the effort for removal?**
The Lower Snake River dams need to be breached in order to recover the Endangered Species Act-listed species of salmon, or nacó’x as we call them. They are teetering on the brink of extinction right now,
and we know since the inception of the dams in the Lower Snake River, these runs have declined and continue to decline. Once the final dam was built, we saw the dramatic reduction of fish that were returning to us, predominantly the spring salmon that are the most prized of all because of the nutrients that they provide.

We are currently in negotiations with the U.S. government through the Federal Mediation Conciliation Service process. We are working with state & federal legislators and governors that are willing to sit and talk and have honest conversations with us, and we are also talking to other stakeholders. We are looking for solutions for salmon recovery and solutions for the Pacific Northwest to continue to grow and prosper into the future—a future that includes renewable energy, and updated transportation and irrigation systems.

Q: You are executive producer of the new film, “Covenant of the Salmon People.” Why did you make this film and what do you hope to accomplish with it?

The film is our story about our relationship to the land itself and what we call Mother Earth, to the salmon in our creation story, how we are related, and what that obligation means to us. The telling of that relationship is important because that is the relationship that the U.S. signed up for in 1855 under Article 3 of our Treaty, that is our right to hunt, fish, and gather at all usual and accustomed places. In 1859 that Treaty was ratified by Congress and enshrined in the U.S. Constitution under Article VI, Clause II, which is an obligation by the U.S. government to uphold their end of the bargain. We have upheld our end of the bargain since 1855. This film is a way to tell our story to the general population so they have a better understanding of who we are and our attempts to uphold our obligation to the salmon and to the land itself.

Q: What can non-Tribal people do to stand in solidarity with the Nez Perce?

People can help by honoring the treaties and understanding that the people of the U.S. are also party to the Treaty because they are represented by the U.S. government which signed the Treaty. As citizens of the United States, ask your legislators: what is the U.S. doing to uphold the treaties with the Tribes? People can also support our “Covenant of the Salmon People” film, the Salmon Orca Project, Umatilla youth sign on letter to Biden, and keep sending letters to the administration and elected leaders.

Q: What gives you hope?

The truth always gives us hope, and we continue to speak the truth. Change is constant, and we as people can and are learning from our mistakes. It really gives us hope that people are starting to see that we can and should change how we do business, and how we affect the environment to achieve more positive outcomes for future generations.
“Full fish passage . . . is key to recovery for Lewis River anadromous populations of spring Chinook, winter steelhead, coho and bull trout.”

Washington Dept. of Fish and Wildlife

Lower Lewis River Falls, Lewis River, southwest Washington. Photo by Jeff Hollett.

Give Salmon a Fighting Chance

Does it give you goosebumps to watch salmon leap the falls of a wild, undammed river? You’re not alone. Evolved over millions of years, salmon put on a remarkable show of skill, agility, and determination tackling nature’s challenges. Yet sadly, they didn’t evolve to make it past dams and other human-made barriers.

Columbia Riverkeeper’s “Saving Salmon” program area has primarily focused on removing mega dams like those on the Lower Snake River. Fortunately, with the support of incredible people across the Pacific Northwest, our programs have grown to address another important piece of the salmon recovery puzzle: fish passage in tributaries of the Columbia River where salmon breed.

In both Oregon and Washington, Columbia Riverkeeper is engaging in critical efforts to secure fish passage so salmon have a fighting chance when dam removal isn’t on the table, or when culverts prevent salmon from going upstream.

Oregon Fish Passage Kerfuffle

This past December, while my kids were hard at work on their holiday wish lists, the Oregon Dept. of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) was quietly granting the hydropower industry’s wish: gutting Oregon’s so-called Fish Passage Rules. How? Oregon law requires the construction of fish passage at all artificial barriers, like dams and culverts. Oregon’s administrative rules—which ODFW writes and the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission approves—have long defined “fish passage” to mean “volitional” passage, meaning passage that fish can
use without human assistance. Without proper public notice or Tribal government consultation, ODFW changed the definition of fish passage to include "trap and transport" fish passage.

The change is a big deal for both fish passage and for dam removal. Trap-and-haul or trap-and-truck fish passage is generally far less effective at moving migratory fish like salmon, trout, and lamprey around dams and other barriers. And the cost of constructing effective volitional fish passage (as opposed to cheap but ineffective trap-and-haul passage) has led to dam removal on Northwest rivers like the Klamath and White Salmon. Accordingly, ODFW’s rule change is likely to undermine recovery for Oregon’s native migratory fish, with negative impacts to Tribes and others whose cultural and economic well-being rely on Oregon’s fisheries.

Columbia Riverkeeper is working in solidarity with the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation and the Nez Perce Tribe to challenge ODFW’s rule change. First, we drafted an in-depth letter breaking down why the 11th-hour change was unlawful—and got 14 nonprofits to join the letter in support. Second, we exercised our rights under Oregon’s Public Records Law to ask for documents that show why ODFW changed its long-standing rule. Now, if ODFW refuses to comply with state law, we are prepared to take our case to court.

### Restoring Fish Passage on the Lewis

The Lewis River Basin is famous for salmon, stunning waterfalls, big trees, blurry bigfoot sightings, and hydroelectric power. On its way to the mighty Columbia, the Lewis River flows through three large reservoirs: Yale, Swift, and Merlin. These reservoirs provide electricity and recreational opportunities. But the dams also stop Lewis River salmon and steelhead from reaching their spawning streams.

In 2004, PacifiCorp (a Berkshire Hathaway subsidiary that owns the Lewis River dams) promised the Cowlitz Indian Tribe, Yakama Nation, and the State of Washington that the dams would be improved to let salmon reach their spawning areas. But shortly afterward, PacifiCorp began a concerted campaign to renege on its promise. Why? Building and running fish passage facilities costs money. If PacifiCorp gets away with breaking its promise, the company could pocket over $100 million.

Scientists from the state of Washington, Cowlitz Indian Tribe, Yakama Nation, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service agree that reconnecting salmon with existing, high-quality spawning habitat is the best way to recover the Lewis River’s spring Chinook, coho, steelhead, and bull trout—all listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

Starting in 2020, Columbia Riverkeeper began working in solidarity with the Cowlitz Indian Tribe and Yakama Nation, as well as other nonprofit river advocates, to hold PacifiCorp accountable for its promise to restore fish passage throughout the Lewis River. We intervened before the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission and helped pressure the new presidential administration to stand up to PacifiCorp. We also developed creative legal challenges and told the story of PacifiCorp’s doublespeak to our members and in the media. We are proud to stand arm-in-arm with Tribes and river advocates and demand fish passage on the Lewis.

After many years of uncertainty, things are looking up for Lewis River salmon. During the summer of 2021, the National Marine Fisheries Service reversed a preliminary decision by the Trump Administration that would have allowed PacifiCorp to renege on its promise. PacifiCorp has recently (re)acknowledged the need to build fish passage and is negotiating the details with Tribal, state, and federal fisheries managers. But it’s still not clear when PacifiCorp will start (or finish) building the fish passage facilities it promised to construct long ago. Until then, Columbia Riverkeeper will continue holding PacifiCorp accountable for rebuilding strong salmon runs in the Lewis River.
Kids feel like the adults make all the decisions until they’re old enough to vote, but that doesn’t have to be true. Last spring, Columbia Riverkeeper Community Organizer Kate Murphy visited classrooms at Sunnyside Environmental School, where third graders had learned about the life cycle of salmon. To complement the lesson, Kate explained how environmental issues like dams impact salmon, and included a civics lesson on public engagement.

“One of the cool things we talked about is that you don’t have to wait until you’re 18 to make a difference. It’s your right when you’re little to speak up,” Kate recalled. “They loved it because it made them feel empowered. Before that presentation, they thought it was all up to the adults. Afterward, the kids were really excited to write postcards to elected officials telling them why they care about salmon and orcas.”

This example is one of many inspiring stories in our work with communities and youth. Columbia Riverkeeper hosts students at the river and visits classrooms, from second graders to community college classes. We believe working with students is a game-changer for our mission to protect the Columbia River, because the youth are our future.

Students are catalysts for raising awareness, igniting conversations, and inspiring action. In our experience, students bring fresh perspectives and youthful voices to environmental discussions. Their enthusiasm, creativity, and eagerness to make a difference invigorate our work and help us find new ways to address environmental challenges. This year we hosted 800 students at Nichols Natural Area in Hood River. Students learned about riparian zone function, tested water quality, studied native and invasive species, explored restoration techniques, and connected with the wildlife that inhabit the area through games and activities. Many of those students invite their families to volunteer at the Nichols Natural Area restoration events.

We aim to inspire kids to become passionate advocates for rivers, instilling a sense of environmental stewardship that will carry forward into their future endeavors. For example, this spring’s Hanford Journey event, led by Yakama Nation’s Environmental Restoration Waste Management (ERWM) Program and Columbia Riverkeeper, took students from Yakama Nation’s Tribal School and Heritage University on a one-of-a-kind school trip to tour the Hanford Nuclear Site. This on-site tour, led by Yakama Nation staff, elders, and leaders, was designed to inspire the next generation of Hanford cleanup advocates.

When students become involved in our cause, their energy and passion ripple through their schools, families, and networks, multiplying the impact of our efforts exponentially. For example, this spring the Portland Climate Strike was hosted by youth fighting to make climate action an urgent priority. The focus centered around Oregon Governor Tina Kotek’s power to prevent fossil fuel expansion statewide, including the GTN Xpress pipeline expansion proposal. Two months after the strike, Gov. Kotek officially went on record opposing the project. Together, we can create a brighter and healthier future for the Columbia River and beyond.

Look Forward

The Kids Are Alright

By Liz Terhaar, Communications & Marketing Director

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Columbia Riverkeeper’s Education and Outreach Work Includes:

- Providing free bilingual (Spanish and English), hands-on environmental education programming to youth and young adults from Columbia River Gorge schools.

- Hosting pollution education and prevention webinars, events and associated social and earned media outreach.

- Updating and expanding our online middle-school curriculum, which offers easy-to-implement science units that tackle important environmental issues and inspire action by empowering students with the tools to think critically.

- Creating a welcoming space along the Columbia for families and all community members to be part of the collective effort to restore the Nichols Natural Area.

- Create bilingual pollution education outreach materials (fact sheets, emails, social media) to connect people to the river and share emerging science on how pollution impacts people, water, and fish.

Here are a few of the letters we received from students who participated in Columbia Riverkeeper’s environmental education programming.
Become a River Sustainer

As a River Sustainer, you protect healthy, abundant fish and clean water by donating monthly any amount that's right for you. Your monthly donations create stability and power victories, from protecting vital salmon habitat in the Columbia River estuary to slashing toxic pollution.

Contact Membership Specialist Alex Smith to become a River Sustainer or update your monthly giving plans.

alex@columbiariverkeeper.org
503-432-8927
ColumbiaRiverkeeper.org/River-Sustainer

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