

Salmon Ceremony

As they have for thousands of years, native people came together on June 21st, the summer solstice and National Indigenous Peoples Day, to welcome the salmon and gather their whole family together. Coming as it did on the cusp of Spring and Summer, this year's ceremony embodied both the spirit of Spring, Sqipc, A time of Gathering in Salish, and Scařáq, Summer, A Time of Fishing.



People call the salmon back home to sřwnítkw *the sound the water makes at the falls* (Kettle Falls) at the annual salmon ceremony. Photo by Christian Haugen

The gathering part was best demonstrated in the Canoe Journey, which had been going on for a week. Five canoes of Sinixt and Secwépemc people together started out from Revelstoke, BC on June 14th. They were joined by many others at Kettle Falls for the Salmon Ceremony. Along the way, they had a chance to talk about the names and traditions associated with the places they passed on the Columbia. They also talked about a new insult to the Sinixt, members of which live on both sides of the border. Even though Canada now admits that the Sinixt are a native people who live in Canada as well as the United States, they are not allowed to participate in discussions about the future of the Columbia River along with other tribes. The excuse is that since they could back proposals from either country, they have a conflict of interest.

Shelly Boyd, who lives in Inchelium, speaking for the Sinixt said that there is no conflict between the Sinixt or any other tribe noting that it is another residual effect of the divide and conquer strategy of colonialism and national governments still remaining today.

What was clear is that the Salmon Ceremony was a family gathering of the many tribes who traditionally lived along various tributaries to the Columbia, which she called the Chief River. It ties all of these peoples together.

“It was so incredible to have our neighbors, friends, representatives and relatives from the Flathead, Kalispel, Okonagan, Nez Perce, Spokane, Shuswap and Wenatchee as snʔayʔckstx (Arrow Lakes) and especially the sxʷyʔilpx (Colville Band) join us in prayer for the Salmon. These prayers have happened at both Celilo Falls and Kettle Falls.”
(Shelly Boyd)

Representatives from these tribes spoke at the ceremony. The Salmon Chief of the Wenatchee went beyond saying that water is important to life to saying “Water is life”. This union with nature extends not just through all tribes, but through salmon and all species of both plants and animals. Family is much bigger than genetics. Every species makes the world more alive. Charles Armstrong, whose grandfather was Alex Louie, spoke for the Nez Perce, who actually know themselves as the Nimiipuu, The People. Every speaker identified their ancestral heritage. Their identities came from their rivers as well. The Kalispell are known as the Steelhead Trout People. The Spokanes are “Children of the Sun.” Spokanes were allowed to use the big “J” Traps at Kettle Falls along with the sxʷyʔilpx, the “Colville Band”.

The ceremony itself calls the salmon back and thanks them for their part in sustaining human life. Song, prayer and ritual pervade not just the Salmon Ceremony but all native occasions for joining together, eating and working with each other. A ritual that everyone was eager to participate in was clicking rocks together and then throwing them into the water. These actions are meant to remind the salmon of the sound of rocks tumbling in running water and being washed, as are young salmon themselves to the sea. But prayers and songs in Salish came first.

The sacred side of this gathering highlights Tmix^w, the duty of all people’s to do their part in balancing the cycles of all living things. Taking too much game; harvesting too much timber; and removing the native plants and species upset that balance. The situation with salmon is particularly out of balance.

Representatives of 37 tribes from Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Southeast Alaska, Western Montana and Northern California are united in seeking a Comprehensive Columbia Basin Restoration Initiative to bring back the populations of salmon and other fish to healthy and abundant levels. They are not against affordable clean power, but seek to fund maintenance of aging dams and turbines where they are needed and removal where they are doing more harm than good. Three key actions in salmon restoration start with restoring habitat throughout the Columbia Basin. Next the generating power of the 4 lower Snake River dams needs to be replaced with renewable energy from other sources such as wind and solar. Without removal of those dams, Snake River salmon will soon be extinct. Finally, salmon need to be returned to the upper Columbia River above Grand Coulee Dam and into Canada. All these things are feasible and in planning and or funding stages.

Native peoples along the Chief River have come together not just in thoughts and prayers, but in hands-on restoration work to bring back the salmon. The river brings them together in spirit and the flow of nature. By celebrating the cycles of the species and of the living water, the Salmon Ceremony works to strengthen those family ties; bring back health and renew our role in the balance of nature.