



For the Yurok, salmon is everything

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I have lived within the Klamath River system my entire life. I'm not very old, but I've witnessed and experienced the river for twenty-four years. The river is an inherent part of me, and the lifeblood of my people.

As a Yurok Tribal member and college student in the fisheries field, I spend my days working along the Klamath. The carnage I've seen over the past week and a half is so utterly grotesque that I cannot sleep at night. I close my eyes and the images of dead, rotting fish envelop me. You may have seen photographs in newspapers or caught a glimpse on the television, but you cannot begin to imagine the smell. This smell of death and decay is impossible to escape. It fills the air and plays with the mind in ways that I could never describe. I can't eat because food, no matter what it is, reminds me of the smell. Perhaps it's because the rotting fish represent so much of my people's food gone to waste. The water levels in the river have never been in such decline. Numerous tribal and non-tribal elders have assured me of this fact. In my lifetime, I have never seen the Klamath so shallow.

Over the past month, the lack of water has actually stopped the tribal fisheries program from completing tasks that were routine last year. There is so little water that people are unable to safely travel the river by jet boat or by raft. I've seen rocks that I didn't know existed protruding from dangerous rapids, making the attempt to count dead and dying fish a risky endeavor. Yet even in its shrunken state the river humbles me and demands my respect. I am fortunate enough to spend time within its grasp and to be able to know and understand the power of the Klamath. For me, nothing is greater.

Civilizations will come and go, but the river will remain. This I know. People will try to destroy it, to use it for hydroelectric power, use it to irrigate a desert, use it to get votes and push policies contradictory to natural laws. But the river will survive. All of the sickness and greed in the world cannot stop the river from its flow. In the not so distant future the world's population will surpass the Earth's carrying capacity. People will starve, become infected by disease and suffocate just like that salmon in the Klamath. This insanity will stop, and the river will rise. Unfortunately, the chinook, coho and steelhead salmon will not see the river rise.

Just like the wild grizzly and wolf, these fish are being run out of California. Some would argue there isn't a problem because we can just grow new fish in the hatchery system, but that system, like many others in forced management, is flawed. The hatchery system has created fish of unknown origin. It is impossible to tell the difference between a hatchery born fish and native fish without extensive genetic studies. It is estimated that only 10 percent to 25 percent of hatchery chinook are marked for identification, and estimates of the native fish population estimates are very difficult to make. Arguments that dismiss the magnitude and future impact of this fish kill sicken the spirit. It may as well be said that Yurok people could just die off because other native and non-native people could easily replace us and thrive in our traditional homeland. Native fish, not hatchery fish, are the only hope for the future of the species. Without a doubt, the native chinook, coho and steelhead are endangered.

Recent fish kill estimates in the Klamath have been conservative, but as many as 30,000 chinook, 600 coho and 1,000 steelhead are likely to be counted among the dead. These numbers may not sound like much unless you've witnessed the putrid, decaying fish kill firsthand. Washington bureaucrats, like Secretary of Interior Gale Norton, need to come to the Klamath and walk along the banks of the river with me. Perhaps a view of the carnage might lead them to see things differently. I personally invite officials from the Bureau of Reclamation and the Department of Interior to come and cut open the bellies of rotten salmon to detect their sex. I invite them to hack off fish tails in an effort to keep them from being recounted. I want them to realize there is no escaping the smell.

The Klamath is everything to me. It is my home, church, garden, highway, counselor, friend, brother, and provider. Even in its depleted state, nothing on this planet could equal its beauty and its power. Secretary Norton has a rare opportunity to do something great. She has the power to reverse an incredible injustice. The Yurok people aren't asking for all of the water in the Klamath, just enough for our most important resource to survive. Her job is not easy, and her decisions affect people's livelihoods. But her decisions also affect generations of Yurok, Hupa and Karuk tribal peoples. Another fish kill of this magnitude could bring about extinction. Salmon are the center of our tribal culture. If they leave the river system, we don't know what will become of us.

If farmers growing potatoes in the Klamath Basin faced crop die-offs, they could easily recover. The same cannot be said for native salmon species in the river. Is the federal government really willing to risk the demise of salmon species and tribal culture because the irrigation of crops in the basin is, in their minds, the right thing to do? Potato crops are not endangered. Farmers are not endangered.

It is a miracle to me that chinook, coho and steelhead are still in the river, and that this kind of fish kill has not happened

before. What is equally miraculous is the fact that the river still holds such beauty despite the robbery of its mass and the degradation of its quality. But we are running out of miracles. These stories of survival have all but come to an end here on the Klamath.

The people of the Klamath, and our way of life, deserve the same respect given to the farmers of the upper basin during their so-called water crisis. The Department of Interior and Secretary Norton need to understand that this type of ecological disaster cannot happen again. The time will come when she will have to decide the fate of the salmon essential to our survival. For the Yurok, and other tribal groups impacted by the current situation, this is not simply a struggle for water rights. It is a matter of life and death.

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