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Slippery Business

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Slippery Business: The Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission and the Politics of Salmon Recovery in the Pacific Northwest

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Introduction

The annual, all-you-can-eat salmon buffet at Bonneville Dam on the Oregon-Washington border is an environmentalist's nightmare. Every year, dozens of California sea lions swim more than a hundred miles up the Columbia River to camp out in the dam's fish ladders and gorge themselves on a steady stream of succulent chinook—consuming up to four percent of the depleted runs, including protected wild fish (Preusch). The spectacle of a formerly endangered (and highly adorable) species feasting on currently endangered salmon populations is enough to perplex any environmental activist. Add iconic Native Americans to the mix and you have the makings of a veritable “Sophie's Choice” for greens in the Pacific Northwest, which is arguably the most environmentally conscious section of the United States. During the 2008 season, the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission (CRITFC) came out in favor of shooting sea lions that refuse to take the hint when caged and relocated. Simultaneously evoking and defying the Ecological Indian¹ stereotype, CRITFC Chairperson

1. Anthropologist Shepard Krech III coined the term “Ecological Indian” to describe the popular trope that portrays Native Americans as simple children of nature, living in complete, spiritual harmony with their surroundings and never causing any ecological harm. His critique of this iconomic image in *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000) caused great academic and public controversy following its publication.

Fidelia Andy (Yakama) wrote in the *Seattle Times*, “There is no nobility in one species squatting in a fish ladder and eating another into extinction. Our Creator gave us the responsibility to protect the balance among all creatures in the ecosystem. Traditionally, we accept responsibility for the survival and prosperity of the resources that surround us” (Andy).

Normally, non-Indian advocates of salmon restoration would applaud tribal invocations of the Creator and a culture of stewardship for nature’s bounty. In this case, however, some environmental organizations and supporters recoiled in horror at the potential slaughter of creatures beloved by much of the American public. “Sea lions are natural predators of salmon, fishermen are unnatural,” opined one online commentator. “Maybe we should start shooting the fishermen,” suggested another (OregonLive). The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) sought an injunction to prevent the shootings—noting quite correctly that sea lions kill far fewer salmon than birds, human fishers, dams, and habitat destruction—yet a federal judge upheld the death sentence for repeat offenders. Charles Hudson, CRITFC’s public relations officer, dismissed the Humane Society’s motion as a “Hail Mary” pass and praised the court’s ruling for rightly favoring endangered salmonids over abundant sea lions (Frazier). The tribes and the HSUS do not disagree fundamentally about either the causes of the Northwest salmon crisis or the solutions to it, even as they argue over the merits of hazing and harming sea lions. On that issue and others, however, their differences are both significant to policy formation and instructive for scholars.

CRITFC’s fight for salmon recovery furnishes a lens through which to study the conflicted relationships among Indians and environmentalists in the United States. Although still widely favored as symbols of ecological sensitivity, actual Native people often stake out positions on environmental issues that challenge the familiar trope of the Ecological Indian. The Mid-Columbia treaty tribes have many things in common with non-tribal activists dedicated to saving salmon and restoring rivers, but the tensions between them reveal much about the class and racial biases that still bedevil mainstream environmentalism. At the same time, some tribal fishers remain suspicious of CRITFC’s technocratic methods and resentful of the compromises it makes in the name of cooperative management. Rather than a solid front, the various organizations and constituencies that favor salmon restoration constitute a shifting and fractious coalition. CRITFC has become an important player in environmental politics, however, and its actions complicate the narrative of declension that long dominated both Native American and environmental history. Particularly in studies of Indians and river development, the story too often ends with tribes either inundated by water or deprived of it and other resources essential to

their survival. While threats to wild salmon and indigenous cultures are legion, CRITFC offers an encouraging example of Native communities providing bold environmental leadership and making real progress toward the goal of putting salmon back in the rivers.

Cultural and historical background

Salmon have been central to Mid-Columbia Indian culture for thousands of years. Their importance is recorded both in the archaeological record and in oral traditions like the one Charles F. Sams III (Cayuse) heard as a young man in the 1970s. In that story, the trickster figure *Speelyi* (Coyote) asks all the animals to give gifts to the human beings that the Creator is bringing into the world:

Salmon replied, "Of course I will. I want to provide two gifts. One is my body, so the humans will have food that will make them strong and healthy. I will also give to the humans my voice, completely, so they can talk with one another." Coyote is very impressed with these gifts. Salmon calls out one last time, "With these gifts comes a big responsibility, though; I ask that humans speak for me and for all the other animals and plants of the earth. The humans must promise to protect us now and for future generations" (Sams 645).

Sams has personally honored this promise through his previous work as the executive director of Salmon Corps, which partners with CRITFC to engage tribal youth in conservation projects, and the national director of the Tribal & Native Lands Program of the Trust for Public Lands. "You see," he recalls his grandfather saying, "since the beginning of time it has and always will be humans' responsibility to be the Wakanish Naknoowee Thluma or Keepers of the Salmon. By fishing in our traditional way along the Columbia River, we continue to be nourished by the gift of the salmon" (Sams 645-646).

Mid-Columbia Indians secured their right to fish through treaties signed with the U.S. government in 1855. Under growing pressure from American colonists, Native leaders ceded millions of acres in what are now the states of Washington, Oregon, and Idaho but specifically retained certain lands (reservations) and the perpetual right to fish, hunt and gather in "all usual and accustomed places" both on and off the reservations (Cohen). The treaties also called into being new tribal confederations—the Yakama Nation, the Nez Perce Tribe, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, and the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs—whose members and interests increasingly clashed with those of the non-Indian majority in the Pacific Northwest (Fisher). By the 1870s, salmon had become a lucrative commodity that could be canned

and shipped around the world for sale in the capitalist marketplace. Although some Indians also sold fish to the canneries, they resented the usurpation of their traditional fishing grounds and the accelerating destruction of salmon habitat by non-Indian ranching, logging, irrigation, and dam construction. By the early twentieth century, many salmon stocks were already in steep decline. The states of Oregon and Washington responded with conservation laws that generally favored non-Indian commercial and sport fishers over Indians, who found their off-reservation fishing increasingly constrained by a web of regulations governing illegal gear, trespassing, licensing, closed seasons, prohibited areas, catch limits, and the sale of fish (Cohen). When Indians caught salmon and steelhead trout in violation of these laws, state authorities arrested and prosecuted them for poaching. Their broader cultural and political marginalization left them with virtually no say in how the resource was managed until the “rights revolution” of the late twentieth century.

Tribal co-management of Northwest fisheries is a legal right won during the notorious “fish wars” of the 1960s and 1970s. Tired of shouldering the burden of conservation and the blame for the sorry condition of salmon stocks, Indians on Puget Sound and the Columbia River fought back against state regulations that interfered with their treaty-reserved rights to fish at all “usual and accustomed places.” In 1969, a vigorous protest fishery on the Columbia produced Judge Robert Belloni’s decision in *Sohappy v. Smith* and *United States v. Oregon*, a joint ruling which held that the state’s restrictions on Indian treaty fishing were invalid and discriminatory. While the state could regulate the off-reservation Indian fishery, its powers were limited by certain conditions and standards that Belloni spelled out in his written opinion and decree. State regulations must be proven “reasonable and necessary for conservation,” must be the least restrictive possible, and must not discriminate against Indians, who can fish at times and with gear prohibited to non-Indians. Furthermore, Belloni stated, the tribes must be given “a fair and equitable share” of the catch and the opportunity for meaningful participation in the regulatory process (Berg 7-18). This standard helped shape fishery management practices as the tribes and the states gradually moved from litigation to cooperation.

The Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission

The Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission emerged from a 1976 Memorandum of Understanding between the Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) and the four-treaty tribes party to *U.S. v. Oregon*. Under the terms of the memorandum, the BPA agreed to fund tribal participation as part of its legal obligation to mitigate the effects of federal dams. The tribes then passed

resolutions authorizing the commission, and by March 1977 they had adopted its constitution and by-laws. CRITFC's structure reflects the determination of its founders to overcome tribal differences and practice cooperative management. The four tribal fish and wildlife committees comprise the commission's governing body, and they must reach consensus before it can act on their behalf. Each tribal committee appoints several commissioners, who annually select three officers (a vice-chair, secretary, and treasurer) and a chairperson from among their ranks, with each tribe holding the chair on a rotating basis. The position of executive director also rotates among the tribes to avoid charges of bias. Although disagreements occasionally arise within the commission, it remains committed to "unity of action in service of the salmon" (CRITFC website).

CRITFC has expanded greatly in size and expertise since the late 1970s. At first, it employed only two fish biologists and depended heavily on state and federal fishery agencies for advice and support. Over the years, as the tribes gained confidence and experience, CRITFC's staff grew to include additional biologists, fish passage specialists, policy analysts, attorneys, public relations officials, and law enforcement personnel. Some tribal fishers initially resented the imposition of another layer of management, but most now view the enforcement program as essential to their own safety and protection, as well as to the preservation of the salmon. Commission staffers are active in gathering scientific data, setting fishery seasons and harvest quotas, carrying out habitat restoration projects, offering technical support to tribal hatcheries, conducting legal research and lobbying policy makers. In 1980 Congress mandated that the Northwest Power Planning Council give weight to tribal recommendations in running regional hydropower operations (Taylor 247). For years, BPA used its power of the purse to hamstring recovery measures with endless complaints about cost effectiveness and scientific uncertainty (Chaney 564-565, 606-608). CRITFC developed its own management objectives, though, and over time it garnered the respect (if not always the affection) of the numerous state and federal agencies involved in salmon restoration.

It also worked to overcome the hostility of tribal fishers, many of whom blamed their own governments and CRITFC for selling their treaty rights down the river. During the "fish wars" that culminated in *U.S. v. Oregon* and *U.S. v. Washington*, tribal councils and their attorneys had selectively supported Indian fishermen in their legal battles against state harassment. At the same time, however, the councils had issued their own regulations to help track the treaty harvest and demonstrate their ability to self-govern. "Although tribal governments regarded their ordinances as alternatives to state regulation, some tribal fishers perceived them as threats to the autonomy and spirituality of the

“River People,” many of whom lived off-reservation and followed the traditional *Wáašat* religion (also called the Seven Drums or Longhouse religion), which reveres salmon as a sacred food.² They regard salmon as a gift from the Creator, not the property of the state, and fishing rights are an individual prerogative controlled only by the rhythms of the river and the proscriptions of *tamanwit* (natural law). State-determined seasons and tribal permits thus represented an infringement of their religious liberty as well as a threat to their livelihood. “No man should be required to obtain a permit from another man to practice his religion,” declared David Sohapp, Sr., who emerged as the symbolic leader of the river-dwelling dissidents after his victory in *U.S. v. Oregon* (Fisher 226). Throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, they continued to ignore both state and tribal fishing ordinances—until a federal-state sting operation of dubious merit (later dubbed “Salmonscam”) sent Sohapp and several others to federal prison for selling fish caught with ceremonial permits. Some of the River People have never forgiven CRITFC for its role in administering state regulations and tracking down the tribal defendants who fled prosecution.

Reconciling science and spirituality

The burden of improving relations with federal agencies, state governments, and tribal fishers fell to Ted Strong, a Yakama with extensive knowledge of computers and finance but little direct experience with fishing. When he became CRITFC’s director in 1989, Strong recalled, many of his own tribal members “detested what they felt were unnecessary restrictions upon their right to a free access to fish and fisheries.” They disliked compromising with the states, and some blamed the commission for the declining numbers of salmon and the continuing constriction of tribal fishing seasons. As river resident Lavina Washines complained in the midst of Salmonscam, “This Inter-Tribal Fish Commission [that’s] sitting in Portland [Oregon] knows more about fishing than I do. They have more authority than I as an elected official to speak on behalf of my rights and it’s very disturbing to me. Because they’re playing with my religion” (Fisher 234). Strong tried to assure them that CRITFC was not

2. The modern *Wáašat* religion recognizes five sacred foods—water, salmon, roots, berries, and game—which must be honored in annual first-food feasts in order to thank the Creator and ensure the abundance of these resources. As anthropologists Deward Walker and Helen Schuster explain, *Wáašat* today constitutes “a complex mixture of older elements including vision questing, tutelary spirit power, and, in some locations, shamanistic curing, along with various Christian elements, in a distinctive nativistic framework in which the tribal language, behavioral norms, morality, relations, beliefs, and customs are perpetuated” (Walker and Schuster 502-505).

their enemy. “We found ways to try to understand the situation and ease some of the conflict,” he recalled a year after retiring:

But the Commissioners knew that they would have to go home and face their own tribal membership. And any elected official coming home and saying look, we’re only going to get ninety fish this year, have to face tribal members here who will say, “That’s why we should never have agreements with the state. The state doesn’t do a damn thing to help us. The state isn’t there when we’re trying to allocate these 390 fish among 17,000 tribal members. They’re over there gloating over their scientific restrictions,” and so forth (Strong 12).

Convincing them that Western science could supplement spirituality and traditional ecological knowledge thus became one of Strong’s core missions: “I really and sincerely believed it was a time of reconciliation... A time of reconciling between the deeply held religious and cultural beliefs of Indian peoples and emerging and ubiquitous scientific forums that were being planned and designed, which I also felt were going to take over the Columbia Basin” (Strong 12).

During his ten-year tenure as director, CRITFC’s expanding technical staff worked to integrate the material and moral dimensions of salmon management. Strong admitted that he initially had a lot to learn about both. Although his family had fished at Celilo Falls before its inundation in 1957, he had grown up on the Yakama reservation and attended Bible school instead of *Wáašat* ceremonies. Strong’s childhood diet included such traditional fare as fried deer meat and fishback bone soup, but his parents farmed and raised cattle rather than trying to wring a livelihood from the depleted runs of the Columbia. College took him even further from the river and his roots, so he came to CRITFC with business acumen but only limited knowledge of the various salmon stocks the tribes fished. At first, his executive style and bold plans to reorganize the commission antagonized some of its veteran employees. Over the years, though, Strong learned to speak the differing languages of biologists, fish passage specialists, policy analysts, attorneys, and law enforcement officers (Strong 1-13). He also came to appreciate and participate in the *Wáašat* religion, partially at the urging of his Navajo wife and partially because it mattered so deeply to the people he represented. This spiritual understanding of the issues helped Strong “set the framework to bring science in. Science is in a larger context—you look at the earth as a kindly mother, generous, bountiful, who never forsakes her children. And it is said that her children are the water and the foods... We follow behind them. You can’t [just] bring in science because there’s no explanation for the spirit of this land. And I didn’t bring in science as a replacement. I didn’t bring in science to supplant our stories” (Strong 87).

Strong was not alone in noting the power of faith to transform and elevate the commitment of CRITFC staff. Douglas Dompier, a non-Indian fish biologist, spent twenty-six years (1979-2005) developing and overseeing fish passage, harvest management, habitat protection, and hatchery programs for the tribes. His recent book, *Fight of the Salmon People: Blending Tribal Tradition with Modern Science to Save Sacred Fish*, chronicles both the history of hatchery production in the Columbia Basin and the deepening admiration he developed for the tribal cause. “As I looked at salmon management through the eyes of the salmon’s first caretakers,” he writes, “I began to understand the depth and strength of the tribes’ culture and their concern for the resource” (Dompier 127). Like Strong, though, Dompier recognized that moral suasion alone would not put salmon back in the rivers or sway the agricultural, industrial, and electrical power interests whose practices had pushed wild runs to the brink of extinction. The tribes needed a plan, one informed by traditional values but based on sound scientific data, feasible policy goals, and clear technical recommendations. That plan became known as *Wy-Kan-Ush-Mi Wa-Kish-Wit* (Spirit of the Salmon), or the Tribal Restoration Plan (TRP), the Indian alternative to more timid recovery measures proposed by the state and federal governments.

First issued in 1995 and updated continually, the TRP provides the only basin-wide plan that encompasses the requirements of the treaties, the Endangered Species Act, and the other federal and state laws protecting salmon and their habitat. Unlike competing plans, it also covers Pacific lamprey (eels) and sturgeon, and it goes far beyond mitigation to advocate significant improvements in ecosystem health and changes in hydroelectric power production. The heart of *Wy-Kan-Ush-Mi Wa-Kish-Wit* is the concept of “grave-to-gravel” management, a life-cycle framework that seeks to shepherd salmon from their natal streams and back again under the best possible conditions. This model, like the spiritual principles that animate it, takes a holistic and adaptive view of the natural systems and cultural modifications that affect salmon survival. “Adaptive management is learning by doing—an approach the tribes have used for thousands of years,” explained Yakama tribal chairman Jerry Meninick in 1995. As applied to the life cycle of anadromous fish, it means “observing survival problems at each life stage, taking actions to fix the problems, observing the results of those actions and, if necessary, making changes in those actions” (*Wana Chinook Tymoo* 1995: 13-17). Such an approach seems like simple common sense. In a world where most salmon are reared in concrete pens and trucked or barged downstream to bypass dams, however, common sense is often in short supply. Tribal advocates believe that their plan’s blend of faith and reason can restore sanity along with the salmon. As Yakama fish commissioner Wendell Hannigan remarked on the debut of

Wy-Kan-Ush-Mi Wa-Kish-Wit, “Our salmon plan is the only vehicle we can use to bring our spiritual and cultural values into the region’s restoration efforts” (*Wana Chinook Tymoo* 1995: 8).

Tribal pragmatism versus ecological fundamentalism

The TRP’s title and Hannigan’s words certainly fit the trope of the Ecological Indian, which anthropologist Shepherd Krech has criticized for obscuring the complex and sometimes contradictory character of Native American relationships to the natural world. Non-Indians have often imagined Indians to be mystics who lived in complete harmony with all creation and never disrupted the delicate “balance” of nature, but CRITFC’s policy positions are not so easily categorized. In its commitment to preserving both salmon runs and tribal culture, the commission espouses a view of nature that is simultaneously reverential and practical, spiritual and utilitarian, idealistic and pragmatic. Even as they speak of salmon as a gift from the Creator, the tribes and the TRP reject the environmentalist critique of hatchery fish as Frankenstein monsters that will ultimately destroy the genetic diversity and health of wild salmon (Dompier 134). CRITFC biologists are very critical of the way hatcheries have been used historically, and tribal facilities have introduced more naturalistic rearing pens (featuring curved raceways, subsurface feeding, and predator access) and acclimation procedures to improve survival rates in the wild (*Wana Chinook Tymoo* 1999: 17). CRITFC also places great faith in a technique called supplementation, which combines habitat restoration with hatchery transplants to rebuild naturally spawning runs. These methods helped put salmon back in the Umatilla River, where they had gone extinct, and they are currently being used to repopulate the Upper Yakima watershed (Pearsons 3-7). Supplementation, together with increased spill from the dams during peak migration periods, has been widely credited for the rebound seen in runs between 2010 and 2012. Mid-Columbia Indians would prefer to see hatcheries made redundant and dams removed, but in the meantime they generally support any measure that puts more salmon in the streams. That is where they part company with many of the non-Indian environmental organizations engaged in the fight to save the Northwest’s signature fish.

The debate over supplementation engages not only conflicting scientific assessments but also competing conceptions of what is natural. Citing recent biological studies, conservation groups such as Save Our Salmon and Trout Unlimited express concern that hatchery stocks weaken wild fish and reduce their survival rates through competition and interbreeding. Bill Bakke, a lifelong fly-fisherman and the executive director of the Native Fish Society, first became

concerned with the impact of hatchery stock after noticing differences between the native-born and pond-raised steelhead he caught. He once worked for CRITFC but quit in disgust over its support for integrated hatchery programs, which the tribes now regard as necessary cogs in the organic machine that the dominant society has made of the Columbia River (Craig; Liberty).³ Doug Dompier, among others, frankly dismisses the “idealistic dream” of self-sustaining wild stocks in a system transformed by dams (Dompier 134). CRITFC conservation biologists dismiss the construct of genetic purity as an impediment to restoration and an excuse to avoid rebuilding salmon runs in the upper basin, where most tribal hatcheries are located. Considering the genetic and demographic risks attendant to reproductive isolation and small population size, they contend, the emphasis on pristine wild stocks is scientifically debatable and an unrealistic basis for policy. While the jury remains out on the long-term effects of supplementation, many non-Indian environmentalists favor what we might call an ecologically fundamentalist view of salmon and steelhead recovery. They insist that only wild fish populations should be restored, and that hatcheries merely pump out a lot of red herring to distract people from more fundamental steps that must be taken.

Their disappointment with CRITFC reached new levels when the tribes retreated from the issue of dam breaching on the Lower Snake River. In April 2008, all of the Mid-Columbia tribes except the Nez Perce signed an agreement with the Bonneville Power Administration, the Army Corps of Engineers, and the Bureau of Reclamation to forestall further litigation and inject much-needed funds into salmon recovery. In return for a pledge of \$900 million to support mitigation projects, the tribes promised that they would not contest the federal government’s forthcoming biological opinion on hydro management or advocate breaching any dams for ten years. CRITFC chairwoman Fidelia Andy praised the agreement as a step toward getting the respective parties “out of the courtroom and back on the firm ground of mutual goals and collaboration” (Reuters). Non-Indian conservation groups took a dimmer view, accusing the tribes of selling their souls for federal dollars and selling out endangered fish. “The tribes have turned their back on stewardship of wild salmon recovery,” charged Bakke in an online forum (Rudolph):

By joining the Bush administration salmon team, the tribes are getting \$94 million for hatcheries that have already been scientifically discredited as a recovery tool, and \$32 million for habitat that will not compensate for the salmon kill at the

3. Richard White introduced the idea of the modern Columbia River as a hybrid natural-cultural system in *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996).

dams. This rate payer gift to the tribes can be added to the \$9 billion already spent on salmon recovery with no measurable benefit (Rudolph).

Beyond the implication that Indians are receiving a kind of federal welfare wrung from hard-working whites, Bakke's spiteful words suggest that the tribes have forsaken their sacred fish and fallen from grace as the "first environmentalists." This apostasy is all the more unforgivable in his eyes because most Columbia River Indian fishers employ "non-selective" gillnets to harvest salmon and steelhead commercially. They are now, like the state and federal agencies they once opposed, seemingly committed to a "simple industrial model of stock and kill" (Bakke).

Conclusion

Bakke's indictment of tribal management practices and priorities is indicative of a larger bias within the non-Indian fish conservation movement. Groups such as the Native Fish Society and Trout Unlimited primarily represent non-Indian sportsmen, historical (and occasionally histrionic) competitors and critics of tribal fishing. Some have never gotten over their anger with the 1974 "Boldt Decision" (*U.S. v. Washington*), which held that Indians are entitled to half the harvestable fish, and they readily blame both Indian and non-Indian commercial fishers for taking too many salmon and steelhead. Other environmental groups, such as Defenders of Wildlife and Friends of the Columbia Gorge, cater largely to urban greens and are more concerned with fish and fish habitat than with fishing or fishing cultures. Their constituents principally value salmon and steelhead for their symbolic qualities, as well as for their ecological niche in healthy river systems; hence, they regard harvest and hatcheries as threats to be reduced rather than as ends and means of salmon conservation. "In decrying the excesses of other resource users and management agencies," notes historian Joseph Taylor, "urban environmentalists have artfully converted self-interest into principle. Their demonization of rivals has conveniently obscured their own material interests in nature as consumed experience, yet those interests are no less tangible and no less biased by race, class, and location" (Taylor 239-241). Cosmopolitan greens also tend to be more sympathetic to Indians—at least in their idealized form—but they can be very impatient with tribal actions that depart from the script of our cherished morality play about Native Americans and nature.

CRITFC remains committed to public outreach, however, and it has gained some ground even with traditional enemies of treaty fishing rights. During the late 1990s, the organization began sponsoring an annual music and food festival in Portland, Oregon, called Jammin' for Salmon (later named

Wy-Kan-Ush-Pum, or Salmon People). The downtown event folded after several years due to budget issues and personnel changes, but CRITFC maintains a presence at the Oxbow Salmon Festival near Gresham, Oregon. Visitors can participate in cultural activities at the Wy-Kan-Ush-Pum Village, where tribal elders help them tie fish nets, demonstrate food preparation techniques, and relate traditional stories about the salmon. In addition to fostering cultural appreciation, “This glimpse into the traditional salmon culture of the Columbia basin tribes encourages people to see salmon in a different light and to realize the importance of protecting them, not only because it is important to the tribes, but because it is important to every resident of the Pacific Northwest” (Wy-Kan-Ush-Pum Village 2007). Carol Craig (Yakama), a former public relations officer for the organization, also set up information booths at sportsmen’s shows during the same period. At a 1997 event in Yakima, Washington, she recalls, she asked a passerby if he wanted some of the literature she had on hand that explained CRITFC’s mission and methods. He glanced up at the sign over her display and snapped, “The only thing I want to do is blow up this booth.” Seven years later, after CRITFC had further proven itself by restoring salmon to the Yakima River, Craig had a very different experience at the Tri-Cities Sportsmen Show. A group of white men approached her booth, and one said, “Go back and thank the Yakama Tribe for bringing the salmon back. We know if it wasn’t for the Tribe there would still be no fish in the Yakima River” (Craig). There is danger in reading too much into such anecdotes, of course, but they do suggest that minds can be changed and differences overcome when people focus on their common goals.

The Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission’s contentious relationship with its environmental allies reminds us that collective action and cooperative management can be as slippery in practice as the fish they seek to protect. More importantly, Native American engagement in the restoration effort highlights a historical narrative that scholars have only just begun to explore. This story is recent, ongoing, and politically charged—all traits that pose obvious challenges for historical analysis—but the tribal response to the Northwest fisheries crisis complicates the conventional tale of environmental declension that generally places Indians on the losing side. Organizations such as the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission deserve further study because they reveal the successful exercise of tribal sovereignty in political contexts beyond the reservations and the battles of the 1970s. The tribal professionals and delegates who comprise CRITFC have little in common with the “Crying Indian” of that decade, who helplessly shed tears at the sight of polluted rivers and littered highways. The Commission and its constituent tribes are taking the lead, using their treaty rights and cultural traditions to leverage a future for salmon. The

tribes are also prodding their state and federal counterparts to do more, as the Yakama Nation did in April 2012 when it called on industrial polluters to meet their obligations to clean up the Superfund site in the Willamette River, a tributary of the Columbia that flows through the toxic Portland Harbor. “The Yakama Nation cannot turn its back on the harm Portland Harbor pollution has done—and continues to do—in the Columbia River,” said Virgil Lewis, a member of the tribal council and chair of the Nation’s Fish and Wildlife Committee. “There is nothing more important than honoring our ancestors by protecting the spiritual and cultural resource that has sustained our people for thousands of years, and restoring it for all people that will use this magnificent resource for generations to come. We must clean these rivers fully and completely” (Hansen). The tribes are serious about saving the salmon, and taking their environmental initiatives seriously is something that scholars, policymakers, and environmentalists alike would be wise to do.

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Summary: Since its founding in 1977, the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission has become an important player in the effort to protect and restore the endangered salmon runs of the Pacific Northwest. On some issues, though, CRITFC and the tribes have clashed with their “natural” allies in the non-Indian environmental movement. At the same time, some tribal fishers remain suspicious of the commission’s technocratic methods and resentful of the compromises it makes in the name of cooperative management. Rather than a solid front, the various environmental organizations and constituencies that favor salmon restoration constitute a shifting and occasionally fractious coalition. This article furnishes a lens through which to study the conflicted relationships among Indians and environmentalists in the modern U.S. Although still widely favored as symbols of environmental stewardship, actual Native Americans often stake out positions on environmental issues that challenge the familiar trope of the Ecological Indian. This essay also complicates the narrative of declension that still dominates both Native American and environmental history. While threats to wild salmon and indigenous culture are legion, CRITC offers a heartening example of Native communities providing bold environmental leadership.

Keywords: Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission, Treaty fishing rights, Salmon, Ecological Indian, Environmentalism.

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Résumé : Depuis sa fondation en 1977, le Comité de Pêche Intertribal de la Rivière Columbia est devenu un acteur important dans l’effort pour protéger et restaurer les montaisons de saumon en voie de disparition du Nord-Ouest du Pacifique. Sur certaines questions, cependant, le CPITRC et les tribus se sont confrontés à leurs alliés « naturels » du mouvement environnementaliste non-Indien. Dans le même temps, certains pêcheurs tribaux continuent à se méfier des méthodes technocratiques du comité et à éprouver du ressentiment face aux compromis qu’il fait au nom de la gestion coopérative. Plutôt qu’un front solide, les différentes organisations environnementales qui favorisent la restauration du saumon constituent une coalition instable et souvent indisciplinée. Cet article permet d’étudier de près les relations conflictuelles entre les Indiens et les écologistes dans le monde moderne des États-Unis. Bien qu’encore largement considérés comme des symboles d’une bonne gestion de l’environnement, les Amérindiens adoptent des positions sur les questions environnementales qui remettent en question le trope familier de l’Indien écologique. Cet essai remet aussi en cause le récit du déclin qui domine encore à la fois l’histoire amérindienne et environnementale. Alors que les menaces sur le saumon sauvage et la culture autochtone sont légion, le CPITRC offre un exemple encourageant de gestion audacieuse de l’environnement par des communautés autochtones.

Mots-Clés : Le Comité de Pêche Intertribal de la Rivière Columbia, Droits de pêche par traités, Saumon, L’Indien écologiste, Environnementalisme.