

BEAR AND THE STEELHEAD

Lummi Culture Protection Committee
Written by Jewell P.W. James 02/04/92



The people all lived in the village, at the mouth of the river. They all knew that the gift of Salmon Woman and her Children was amongst them. Raven was a great leader. His wife was wonderful. Each year her children came to the village, and then went upstream to the spawning beds. Each year they returned to their mother's house under the oceans. But, the people always knew that the Salmon Children would return each year. All the people learned to keep the respect for the children. This guaranteed their survival.

Raven had a brother. His name was Bear. Bear was married. His wife was pregnant. In accordance to the beliefs of the people, Bear's wife was in a very spiritually strong condition. She was creating life. She was deeply loved and respected by all the people. She was a part of the great mystery of creation. But, as long as she was pregnant then Brother Bear could not hunt, fish, or even gather roots and berries. In fact, it was preferred that he not touch his gear or that of the other hunter's and fishermen as well.

The people believed that some of the powers around Bear's wife, during this time of creation, could rub off and influence the things Bear does or touches. If he touched hunting gear, or fishing gear, or gathering gear then it could cause harm to the owner or the plants and animal themselves. The hunters and fishermen prayed before they hunted or fished- this was respectful, it was the tradition of the people. Plants and animals were food, but they were once spiritual beings at one time and deserved to be respected. Tools had to be clean physically and spiritually to work properly. If Bear touched such tools, then he could undo all the work.

Brother Bear was restricted from hunting, fishing, or gathering as long as his wife was pregnant. It was Raven's duty to hunt, fish, and assure that plants and roots

were gathered for the house of his brother- Bear. Raven gathered up his gear and did his duty, helping provide for his brother's family needs.

To Bear it seemed that each hunting or fishing trip his brother went on took longer, and longer, and longer. He was restless. He wanted to go hunting. He wanted to go fishing. He wanted to do something. It seemed that the rule of his not doing any of these fun things was unfair. He was a man. He should provide for his family, not someone else. It did not seem necessary to him. After all, it was his wife that was pregnant not him. What harm would it do if he went fishing.

Raven was gone and not expected back for some time. The people would not notice if he left for a short while. If he when fishing then he could provide his wife with extra food, above and beyond that which his brother was providing. He was a man, he should provide for his own wife, this thought became his justification. No one would blame him. Besides, what right was it of Raven to do all of his duties?

Bear knew that the people would see him in the bay if he went fishing there. They would see him in the river if he fished near the village. He thought and thought. Then, it seemed to strike him as a great idea; he would follow the Salmon Children upstream to their beds. He could fish there and the people would never see him. What they did not see could not possibly hurt them. After all, there were millions and millions of the different Salmon Children. No one could possibly notice a few would be missing, not if they were taken in the upper reaches of the river, away from the village.

All of Brother Bear's fishing gear was stored away. He decided to go to the spawning beds and simply fish with his hands. Bear left the village. He arrived up-stream and spotted the Salmon Children in their beds. He knew each one by their names. He could tell them all apart. There was Chinook, there was Coho, there was Sockeye, there was Pink, there was Chum, and there was Steelhead. They all were in his reach. All he had to do was to reach out and grab a few. No one would even know.

Bear reached out and touched the Salmon Child called Chinook. As soon as he did then all the Chinook Children died in their spawning beds. He thought nothing of it. He did not realize that the power that surrounded his wife's pregnancy was too overwhelming for the Salmon Children. He, then, reached out and touched the one called Coho and immediately all the Coho died. First the Chinook floated down

stream, and pass the village at the mouth of the river. The people saw this and were upset. Then, the people saw the Salmon Child called Coho drift pass the village. They sent a search party out to find Raven, for no one ever remembered the Salmon Children dying like this.

The people searched and searched. The whole village was concerned and being overcome with grief and fear. They anxiously waited for the return of Raven, surely he had answers. In the mean time, Brother Bear was still enjoying himself in the spawning beds. He next found the Salmon Children called Sockeye, then Pink Salmon. As he touched them they all died. They drifted down stream, pass the village.

As soon as Raven returned he called a meeting of the village. He noticed that only one person was gone—Brother Bear. He knew that Bear's wife was pregnant and that Bear was forbidden to touch the fishing equipment for good reasons. This respectful conduct was expected of all the people in the same condition and circumstances as Bear. Bear was not to be treated any different. He realized that it must be his own brother that was violating the promises made to Salmon Woman. . . to respect her children and leave them alone in the spawning beds.

Brother Bear was so happy to be fishing. He thought what a foolish rule it was for them to say he could not fish. Here he was, fishing, all alone, and no one could catch as many fish as he had. Bear did not even notice that the river bed and shore was covered with the multitudes of dead Salmon Children. He did not want to see, so he became blind to his own mistakes and errors. He was happy, that was all that mattered to him. He had an excuse. Next Brother Bear found Chum Salmon. He reached out and caught one, and then all the other Chums began to die. They floated down stream.

Raven followed the dead fish upstream. He came to the spawning beds and there he found his Brother—Bear. Bear was just ready to reach out and touch the Salmon Children called Steelhead. Raven stopped him. Steelhead was not touched by Bear. It did not die in the spawning beds. It did not float down stream pass the village. Bear could not deny he was fishing. Raven explained to Bear all the damage that was done. Bear was ashamed and he shamed his Brother- Raven, and he brought shame upon his whole village and all the people. The vows to Salmon Woman were violated, again.

Raven had to punish his brother. So, he forbids his brother from using any fishing equipment from that day forward. Bear would be stuck with fishing in the spawning beds, when the Salmon are not in their best quality condition. But, the damage was done. The Salmon Children called Chinook, Coho, Sockeye, Pink, and Chum were all touched by Bear when his wife was pregnant.

They, the Salmon Children, all were affected by this. Now, they all die in their spawning beds. Before they used to go to the spawning beds then return to the oceans, to the House of Salmon Woman—under the water. They would take this journey year after year. But, now, it all changed. They would come to the spawning beds only to die.

All except Steelhead—who was not touched by Bear. Steelhead, to this day, continues to swim up to the spawning beds then return to the ocean, year after year. This is why Steelhead is different from all the other Children of Salmon Woman.

Raven remembered all the disrespect before this happened. He remembered the time that Salmon Woman took her children away before, and the people suffered from their foolish behaviors of disrespect. Raven knew that Salmon Woman could leave the village, once again, and take all her children away forever. He convinced her it would be wrong to make all suffer for the poor decision of one- Bear. But, he knew that all of us were responsible to make sure such disrespect did not happen again. So, there had to be a way for the whole village, all the people, to remember this event and not be so disrespectful in the future.

This was the time that the people began to hold the "First Salmon Ceremony." They knew that Salmon Woman would continue to send her children, year after year. But, to remember the sacrifice and the need to not repeat past mistakes, the people began to hold annual ceremonies to remind the elderly and teach the young children to never forget. Through the use of a traditional, annual, ceremony each generation would be taught. All of the people would participate- the elderly, the

young, and the leadership. Now, each year, with the arrival of the First Salmon Children, the people remember that the death of the Salmon Children is a spiritual matter, and if we want them to come back every year then we have to be respectful. . . they are, after all, spiritual sacrifices for the benefit of the human children.

Kwel Hoy> (that is all), Hy>sh>qe (thank you), Se-Sealth, Xwlemi

