
Lummi Nation: Meet the People

Narrator: The Lummi refer to themselves as People of the Sea. They and other Coast Salish peoples are the original inhabitants of the Puget Sound of Washington State and British Columbia. For many centuries, salmon have been at the center of Lummi people's lives. Their culture and their survival have depended on the annual migrations of salmon. But the number of salmon returning to Lummi waters has declined for years. Now some species are even facing extinction. Many things have changed for the Lummi, but they have held on to their language, their beliefs, and their ways of life. They continue to be People of the Sea.

Felix Solomon, Lummi Artist and Former Commercial Fisherman: Well, we fished for thousands and thousands of years, you know, so salmon is a main staple of our diet, and always has been and still is very important. It's a food that satisfies your spirit inside. It's our identity here in Lummi—we're salmon people.

Merle Jefferson, Director, Lummi Natural Resources: My dad was a fisherman, my grandfather was a fisherman—our heritage. My dad told me many stories. He said that, you know, salmon is good medicine. It's part of our life. Salmon is medicine, it's good for you.

Linda Delgado, Salmon Enhancement Manager, Lummi Natural Resources: A lot of our culture revolves around having salmon. That's the way we lived and sustained ourselves.

Willy Jones, Lummi Elder: This year I had to buy salmon to can for the winter. I had to buy it! We used to never have to do that before.

Narrator: Today, the Lummi live on a reservation of about 12,500 acres created in the Point Elliot Treaty of 1855. It's only a small portion of their original territory. The treaty also guaranteed them access to their traditional fishing and hunting grounds, even those outside of today's reservation boundary.

Merle Jefferson: When we first got our treaty, the BIA [U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs] tried to make us into farmers, you know, but they couldn't do it. We live off the sea. We are a fishing tribe.

Willy Jones: I spent 30 years on the tribal government fighting for rights that were supposed to be guaranteed—health rights, education rights, salmon rights, the right to fish—.

Cynthia Wilson, Culture Teacher, Lummi Nation School: Even though the resource is depleting, you know, we still cannot give up on our tradition and our culture of who we are, and which identifies us as Native American people of the Pacific Northwest, and sets us apart from everybody else.

Narrator: For thousands of years, the Lummi have lived along the waters of Puget Sound. Fishing, hunting, and plant gathering provided foods like salmon, clams, deer, and many kinds of berries. The towering cedar tree provided shelter, clothing, and transportation. All of these things contributed to Lummi spiritual wellbeing.

James Hillaire, Director, Lummi Nation Culture Department: [A] long time ago, our people practically and mostly lived off the land and water. Elders realized that Earth provided all of our needs: food, clothing, shelter. All of those things came from nature.

Felix Solomon: The old fishermen, when they carved fishing gear, you know, they would carve gaff hooks, they would carve their own fishing hooks. I mean, there was not a [place] to go buy your stuff at, or to go to buy your ropes or buy your gear. You made it. You made your boats. You made everything. A shovel-nosed canoe was very, very important to our Lummi people and our Coast Salish people from the Fraser River all the way down to the Columbia River. It was our mainstay. It was our utility vehicle for fishing, for wood gathering, for going upriver to other villages for ceremonies. After they got out into the Puget Sound and out into the big water, they would have to use an ocean canoe. You know, they would have to use it, because it had higher sides and it was more stable.

Narrator: Their villages were located throughout the San Juan Islands and on the mainland. The sea and rivers were their highways, canoes their means of travel.

Merle Jefferson: Before the white man came, you know, there was no border. There was no border. We could cross the border freely and we fished in the Fraser River. There was no border for us. We fished all through Puget Sound, into Canada. So, we followed the fish.