
Lummi Nation: Our Environmental Challenge

Narrator: Salmon are especially vulnerable to changes in their habitat and they are disappearing at an alarming rate in the Northwest. The salmon is the most important resource to the Lummi. Its loss has affected their culture, economy, and environment.

James Hillaire, Director, Lummi Nation Culture Department: Back in the early '50s we began to notice a change in the water. There was different types of fish coming in to the Puget Sound here. We began to notice the water getting warmer, and the salmon not coming in to Puget Sound the way they used to.

Felix Solomon, Lummi Artist and Former Commercial Fisherman: In the past five or six years, it has been really, really tough to get fresh salmon because of the supply and demand. You know, they're just not available, and then when they are available, it got too expensive.

Willy Jones, Lummi Elder: How do we tell our younger kids, if they don't see us smoking fish, and don't see us canning fish, and don't see us salting fish? I don't know how they are going to learn it if there is no salmon season.

Felix Solomon: They're still men out there from Lummi Nation and other tribes that make a living, not just fishing, but they have to do shrimping. They have to do crabbing. But the salmon fishing itself, you can't make a living at it anymore.

Narrator: Salmon have a life cycle that affects the entire ecosystem, not just people.

Crystal Conley, Fish Specialist, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife: They support a lot of other different species all throughout their lives. When they're babies, they are food for other fish. As they grow up in the ocean, they're food for larger fish or sharks or whales, or seals. When they come back into the freshwater system, after they've spawned and they've died, their carcasses actually provide nutrients and also food to the organisms in the river system.

James Hillaire: It's not only us human beings that is feeling the effect of no salmon. The orcas are starving, the whales are starving. The sea lions are getting so bad that when you try to haul the salmon in, they'll come right up and practically grab it out of your hand.

Narrator: There are many reasons why salmon are disappearing. The main causes can be traced directly to environmental changes—changes that result from population growth and land development.

Leroy Deardorff, Environmental Director, Lummi Natural Resources: Your watershed, where your rivers and your streams all begin, have usually in times past, they were covered with lots of vegetation. And so that contributed to food, shade, it stopped sediment build-up in rivers from occurring, and so it created these conditions that the fish could use to spawn in and grow up in and out-migrate. Since those times, logging has come along, farming, development for homes, and housing, industry. And they've removed a lot of the stuff along the edges of the river, the riparian area. When it rains now, water will rush off the land and carry a lot of sediment and so forth into the rivers and begin to plug the rivers up. There's a big timber industry in this part of the country, and what they do is they will flag out an area, a pretty good-size area, and they'll go in, cut everything down. And then we have this problem with rain carrying sediment down to the rivers, going through the riparian zone that can't filter the sediment and whatnot out that's going into the rivers. And so it creates bad habitat for salmon again. Logs come down and they get caught sideways in the stream and the river. Another one would get caught behind it, and pretty soon you have a whole bunch of, we've got a jumbled mass of logs—that's a logjam. Well, those have all been cleared out. When the settlers came into this area, the logjams were seen as an impediment. Logjams are really important for habitat because what they do is they provide cover. They hold water back so it doesn't flush out so fast. It creates what's called wetlands, so that the small juveniles can get out into them.

Narrator: Overfishing, or taking too many fish, has also been a factor.

James Hillaire: My mother worked in the cannery out at Village Point on Lummi Island. And she used to tell us stories of how they had to take barge loads of salmon out and dump them because the cannery workers couldn't keep up.

Narrator: Now, without enough fish in the waters, Lummi children are growing up not knowing how to fish. And people in the community are concerned.

Steve Solomon, Lummi Fish Commissioner: Before, our people walked these shores and used this water, fished these waters for thousands of years. Children don't know that. Today's children of this school, you go and ask them if they ever had the joy of going with their dad or their grandpa fishing on the river [Lummi language] we call it, or [Lummi language].

Narrator: Lummi artist Felix Solomon carves art from cedar wood. This is a longstanding tradition among his people. He talks about the loss of salmon as shown in one of his own pieces of art.

Felix Solomon: Once the salmon got the dollar amount put on their heads, we all went full energy into commercial fishing, whatever it took to catch as many fish as we could catch. And if it wasn't for this poorly regulated state fisheries, we would still have fish. But because of the commercialization, we just fished and fished until there's almost no more fish right now. And the name of this sculpture is called *It's Mine*.

