

Tribe catches coho salmon on free-flowing Elwha River, a first since dam removals

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Coho salmon, Tillamook State Forest, Oregon. Credit: Oregon Department of Forestry

With the plonk of fishing tackle in clear, green water, the Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe's first fishery on a free-flowing river in more than a

century got underway.

"I am so proud of my tribe today," said Russell Hepfer, vice chairman of the tribe, to a gathering of more than 100 people from the community and beyond to share in ceremony before starting the fishery on Monday. There was a welcome song, a prayer song and, of course, a salmon song.

"It's been a long time coming," Hepfer said. "The laughs, the joy we all feel in our hearts, is just tremendous, it's historic."

Two dams blocked nearly 90 miles of river and tributary habitat on the Elwha, or more than 90% of the river, since 1911. But both the Elwha and Glines Canyon dams were gone by August 2014 after a couple of years of demolition in what was the largest dam removal project ever undertaken.

And on Monday, the wait for a run of salmon healthy enough to be fished was over. A broad fishing moratorium on the river remains in place, but the Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe, in agreement with Olympic National Park and the Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife, was able to [fish](#) for coho salmon for tribal and subsistence use.

It is a small fishery—just 400 coho out of a total run of 7,000—but to Loretta Charles, 91, the tribe's oldest living member, it has immense meaning—big as the fish the Elwha once was famous for. "My dad used to catch fish on this river big as me," she said.

Vanessa Castle, natural resources technician with the tribe, caught two big coho on Monday, one she estimated at 15 pounds. "This completely filled my spirit to be back on the water again, to be able to exercise my treaty rights just as my ancestors did and fought for," Castle said. She was excited to cook the fish for family dinner—the first salmon from her tribe's river for her son Braven, 5. "It means everything," Castle said,

"to have that food security to know that I can catch a fish to feed my family.

"It is good to be back out there and to be able to do this ... and I know my ancestors were standing with us."

Tribal member Sara Moore, a dental technician at the tribal clinic, seemed to even surprise herself with the coho she pulled from the river on a beautiful slow slide of the Elwha, with its deep, shadowy pools. She grinned holding her fish for a portrait, and said she didn't yet know what she was going to do with her prize.

The fishery is by pole and line, which is not traditional gear. But to give everyone a chance at such a limited fishery, net fishing is being put off until later in the month. Tribal members were game, giving the unfamiliar gear a go.

Chairwoman Frances Charles gave it a try, quickly getting the hang of long graceful casts that landed the gear practically on the nose of a big lunker, but the fish was not biting. She seemed too happy to mind, witnessing this day. "We knew it was going to happen," Charles said. "But it is something very humbling, and honoring, to have this day come forward."

There were spawned out salmon on the banks, and the air smelled of fish in a marvelous fructifying funk that is the death that brings new life to the river. Autumn gold glowed on the maples, reflected in the river's teal green water. Eagles floated overhead, and ravens gronked.

Coho are making the strongest recovery so far in the river. In all, an estimated 6,821 coho returned to the river in 2022—and about 36% of those fish were of natural origin, meaning they spawned on their own and were not born in the hatchery, according to the tribe. That was the

largest coho return in four years, 10% higher than in 2021; 30% higher than in 2020, and more than three times the return in 2019, according to the tribe.

The success was boosted by relocations of surplus hatchery coho from the lower river to the mainstem and tributaries, in seven years between 2011 and 2021. Today relocation is no longer necessary. "The fish are doing it on their own," said Mike McHenry, fish habitat manager for the tribe, who has worked on Elwha River recovery for 32 years.

"Here we are, we can have a cautious fishery and the tribe can get back into the river," McHenry said, "which is what really this was all about."

Chinook remain listed as a threatened species and their return, while improving, is still modest, at 3,998 adults in 2022—but that is twice the pre-dam removal average.

Dam removal on the Elwha was a grand experiment, and a unique chance to start over, with 83% of the watershed permanently protected within Olympic National Park. The park is a core stronghold for wild fish populations and is among the largest protected areas for salmon on the West Coast.

Knocking down the dams also restarted the flow of sediment, gravel and big wood in the river, crucial to the river's ability to build the jams and side channels so essential to a natural river's complexity. Fish need a range environments, from deep pools to big mainstem water to quiet side channels.

The fishery marks the beginning of a new era for the tribe. "It will be a great time to introduce our children to the river, and hopefully be able to revive some of those basic ceremonies around it," said Lower Elwha Klallam tribal member Wendy Sampson, 44. "I do think this is an

amazing time for our young teenagers who have never fished on this river."

She sees a revival that goes beyond fish. The recovery of the river has also helped bring back history and culture to the tribe, and the surrounding Port Angeles community.

Tribal member Carmen Watson-Charles is the Native American liaison for the Port Angeles School District. The week before the fishery, she took [middle school students](#) to sites on the river for science classes covering everything from river water chemistry to the tribe's first salmon ceremony and dissecting a salmon to learn its anatomy.

Dam removal also re-exposed the tribe's creation site, making visible once more a cultural treasure that living generations had only heard about, but never seen. "To see that rock, it was a rare, big rock, it had two holes, just like in the oral history, shaped like coil baskets," said Jamie Valadez, a tribal member and longtime language instructor for her tribe and Port Angeles public schools. "It was a reclaiming of place and connection."

The river's restoration remains in its early stages. Steelhead are recovering, but chum remain depressed, and pinks are just beginning to bump up in numbers. Distribution of fish in the river is part of an emerging picture of how recovery will play out. Few fish as yet are utilizing the upper river.

The dams were built in the early 1900s to provide hydroelectricity to spur development, without fish passage. Over the years the river's storied fish runs declined.

The Elwha has been a source of inspiration for dam removals elsewhere, including on the Klamath River in Northern California. That project is

now underway, and will take the place of the Elwha as the largest ever dam removal in the world. "I think the Elwha gives people hope for what might be possible," said Matt Beirne, director of natural resources for the tribe.

Mel Elofson, assistant habitat manager for the [tribe](#) and a tribal member, is 65, and heard about the dream of dam removal on the Elwha from his elders all his life.

"Now I'm getting to witness it for my elders who were unable to see it," Elofson said. "I am getting to be their eyes."

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