



KLAMATH TRIBES NEWS AND EVENTS

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Commentary: Salmon migrated past Klamath Falls before dams



Gentlemen display their catch while salmon fishing on the rapids of Link River, 1891.

news

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By JOHN HAMILTON, Aug 18, 2021

A recent opinion piece argues that salmon were unable to migrate upstream of the Klamath River dams due to a natural barrier. This matter is raised in order to question the rationale behind plans to remove the lower four Klamath dams.

While I will avoid discussing the merits of dam removal, I can address the matter of historic fish migrations.

I authored several peer-reviewed publications on the topic. I will attempt to set the record straight by reviewing the most compelling evidence, which indicates salmon historically migrated well past the site of the dams.

Note that while I have identified scores of relevant primary sources of information, only 3 suggest that runs of salmon beyond the area of Iron Gate Dam were meager; the rest indicate there were abundant runs of salmon beyond Iron Gate Dam as far as the Sprague River above Upper Klamath Lake.

The first accounts of the presence of salmon in the Upper Klamath Basin came from John C. Fremont. In 1846, Fremont recorded in his journal that he obtained salmon from one of the Indians at the outlet of Upper Klamath Lake. Fremont noted, "Up this river the salmon crowd in great numbers to the lake (Upper Klamath Lake), which is more than four thousand feet above the sea."

He was the first but not the only early non-Indian explorer to the area to document salmon in the Upper Basin. Other accounts also come from newspapers in the area. In 1884, the Linkville Star reported that, "The lake (Upper Klamath Lake) abounds in both salmon and trout, a source of pleasure and profit to our citizens, and especially to Poor Lo (Indians), who take them out in the spring by the wagon load, and pile them up like cordwood to dry in the sun for his winter's food."

Another example comes from the Medford Mail Tribune, which reported in 1914 that, "For years the (Klamath) Indians have spent much of the spring, summer, and fall months catching salmon and drying them for winter food, and it is said that during the last winter some of them actually suffered because they did not have this supply."

Additional accounts come from federal agents, Indians, naturalists, biologists and ethnographers.

More recently, geneticists contributed to the story. Salmon bones found in archeological sites in the Upper Basin at known Klamath Tribes fishing sites were analyzed. The samples ranged in age from post European contact to over 5,000 years old. DNA sequencing revealed the presence of both spring and fall chinook. This supports the assertion that not only did salmon make it to the Upper Klamath Basin, multiple seasonal runs made it.

Legally, the question was resolved in 2006. PacifiCorp challenged federal agencies' mandate requiring fish passage beyond the dams for any new dam license. Tribes, agencies, and the company provided written and verbal testimony. The judge found that chinook salmon (both spring and fall run) were abundant above the dams including the tributaries of Upper Klamath Lake. Thus, as a legal matter, this issue is settled.

The opinion piece is based solely on sketches of an ancient lava flow made by Copco dam engineers. In reviewing the cited sources, it is clear that early engineers indeed deduced the geologic history of Ward's Canyon as the site of an ancient lava flow; however, the river eroded the formation thousands of years ago. This has little bearing on the question as to whether salmon were present upstream at the time of dam construction.

I invite skeptics to review the publications I cited. Each includes photographs provided by a range of sources that clearly reveal that residents of the Upper Klamath Basin enjoyed abundant runs of salmon until the construction of the Klamath River dams.

John Hamilton is a retired biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. He is the primary author of two peer-reviewed publications on salmon in the Klamath River.