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OCTOBER 2000

ENVIRONMENT

Saving Salmon, or Seattle?



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The Northwest is obsessed with the fate of salmon -- except that, as is often true, the battle is really over how people want to live

by [James Fallows](#)

IN mid-July, *USA Today* broke the biggest political news of the year for the Pacific Northwest: the Clinton Administration was about to reveal its plan to save the endangered wild salmon of the region, and the plan would *not* include partly removing, or breaching, four dams on the lower Snake River, in the southeastern corner of Washington State. For the past several years these dams have been the object of mounting controversy among environmentalists, industrial groups,

farmers, and politicians. The Administration said that for at least the next five years a variety of other recovery measures would be given a try.

Discuss this article in the **Politics & Society** conference of Post & Riposte.

More on **politics and society** in *The Atlantic Monthly* and *Atlantic Unbound*.

More on **the environment** in *The Atlantic Monthly*.

From the archives:

"The Trouble With Dams,"
by Robert S. Devine (August 1995)
Some 100,000 dams regulate America's rivers and creeks, often at the expense of ecosystems -- and of taxpayers, who are subsidizing handouts to a large number of

The Administration made the announcement because federal court rulings required it to take a stand on the dams, but in so doing it also solved a political problem for Al Gore. The environmental groups that were Gore's natural allies had been pushing him hard for a commitment to breach the dams -- that is, to leave the concrete portions in place but remove the adjacent earthworks to create a channel. But such a pledge would have hurt Gore with voters in the arid eastern parts of Washington and Oregon, where the dams provide irrigation and other benefits, and would invite Republican attacks on him as an environmental extremist. At first Gore kept his distance from the proposed five-year delay, but soon he embraced it as "a solid foundation for restoring the salmon while strengthening the economy of the Pacific Northwest."

The benefits to Gore were so obvious that the Republicans' main complaint was how much the Clinton plan helped him. "Make no mistake -- it's a delay to give Vice President Al Gore cover until after the election," Senator Slade Gorton, of Washington, a Republican and a strong supporter of the dams, said as soon as the moratorium was announced. Republicans could complain about little else: at face value the plan made sense. The

farmers, floodplain occupants, hydro-electricity users, and river-transportation interests.

"Empowering Species," by Charles C. Mann and Mark L. Plummer (February 1995)

The best way to save endangered species may be to help them pay their own way.

"The Butterfly Problem," by Charles C. Mann and Mark L. Plummer (January 1992)

Because the government doesn't have the means to preserve endangered species, let alone a coherent plan, its decisions are haphazard -- and private landowners often find themselves paying for the

Administration was saying that it would try less drastic steps to help salmon before resorting to the most costly, least readily reversed measures.

The plan seemed anything but sensible to the coalition of groups that had been demanding immediate breaching of the dams: "We are shocked and disappointed by the lack of vision," Mark Van Putten, the president of the National Wildlife Federation, said when news of the impending decision was leaked.

Representatives of Friends of the Earth, American Rivers, Defenders of Wildlife, and other conservation groups added their disapproval of the plan when it was officially confirmed, a week later. Chris Zimmer, of Save Our Wild Salmon, a coalition of environmental and fishing groups, said his organization was "deeply disappointed" by the delay. Rob Masonis, of American Rivers, told me, "Our paramount concern is the displacement of dam removal as the principal recovery tool." In late August the Seattle City Council endorsed getting rid of the dams. On the other side, representatives of the Bonneville Power Administration -- which distributes and sells electricity from the four disputed dams -- and of the big power-consuming industries in the region said they were concerned that the standards for "sufficient" salmon recovery would be subjective enough to make whatever happens in the next five years seem a "failure" and therefore would dictate dam breaching as the next step.

preservation of species they've never heard of.

Elsewhere on the Web

Links to related material on other Web sites.

Colombia Basin Research

A compendium of scientific studies posted by the School of Aquatic and Fishery Sciences at the University of Washington.

Columbia & Snake Rivers Campaign

"The Campaign is dedicated to bringing back Northwest salmon and steelhead by partially dismantling 4 federal dams in the Columbia Basin." News updates and information about how to take action.

American Rivers

"A national

James Buchal, a lawyer in Portland, Oregon, and the author of a skeptical point-by-point response to anti-dam arguments, called *The Great Salmon Hoax* (1998), also predicted that the dams would face very high "flow requirements" -- obligations to draw down their reservoirs by releasing water over the spillways, in an attempt to simulate fast-flowing streams. These, he said, would reduce their power-generating potential so significantly that "they will make dam removal the cheap way out."

In some political interactions -- coming up with a tax bill, for example -- a balance of complaints may indicate that something like the right result has been reached. But in other disputes -- say, land claims in the Middle East -- grievance from all sides means that the dispute is likely to persist. The salmon controversy, I fear, will be like the Middle East.

In Washington and Oregon this year's salmon runs have been the strongest in many years. The perverse reality is that the main threat to the anti-dam movement is the possibility that salmon runs will continue to recover over the next five years. The anti-dam forces say this can't happen, because the dams are the real problem, and if the salmon stock does somehow recover, it will be an anomaly, like one cold summer in the midst of a global warming trend -- or, more to the point, like this year's huge returns of salmon up and down the Northwest coast. Nonetheless, the anti-dam movement now

organization dedicated to protecting and restoring America's river systems and to fostering a river stewardship ethic."

Arguments against the Snake River dams and information about how to take action.

Northwest Power Planning Council

"Striking a balance for fish, wildlife and energy in the Columbia River Basin." News and information about the Columbia and Snake Rivers salmon question, and arguments in favor of the dams.

Buchal.com

A site hosted by James T. Buchal, a complex civil litigation specialist, who successfully defended the

has a short-term stake in whatever is bad for the fish. Last year Washington voters considered a ballot initiative that would have banned gill-netting for salmon -- a destructive and indiscriminating means of fishing. In my naiveté as a newcomer to the region (I had lived there less than a year at the time), I assumed that if salmon were endangered, catching fewer of them would be helpful, so I voted for the initiative. But many environmental groups stood shoulder to shoulder with commercial fishermen in criticizing the initiative, arguing that it would divert attention and political pressure from the "real problem" -- the dams. The initiative lost. Such odd alliances and "intensify the contradictions" thinking have only become more likely because of the Administration's new plan.

THERE'S a deeper problem, too -- or so I thought as I ended an eighteen-month residence in Seattle, last summer. The standoff over fish and dams reflects other tensions generated by the region's rapid growth and spectacular wealth. Seattle thinks of itself as more unspoiled, closer to nature, and less materialistic and overbuilt than southern California -- the local synonym for hell. It considers itself more laid-back and unpretentious than San Francisco, more racially tolerant than any city on the East Coast, less class-bound than other cities of its size.

One can see the basis for all these views.

Federal Columbia Power System against litigation by American Rivers. Features arguments in defense of the dams, suggested reading, and related resources.

Visualizing Salmon Nation

Color-coded maps offering an overview of the status of salmon in the Northwest and the regional extent of dam development. Posted by Ecotrust, "a nonprofit organization dedicated to building a conservation economy along North America's rain forest coast."

Tidepool: Salmon

Updates about the status of Northwest salmon and salmon-related policy, and links

The natural setting is spectacular, and people are always heading out to hike or go kayaking. Informality prevails. I wore a necktie maybe half a dozen times while I lived there. The city is a haven for mixed-race couples; I believe the local claims that Seattle has a higher proportion of black-white married couples than any other major city. The parks, marinas, bicycle trails, and lakefront swimming zones are abundant, well maintained, and accessible. Poor people in Brooklyn might open a fire hydrant to cool down; poor people in Seattle are never more than a mile or two from a nice beach. If the climate were not so dark and rainy (every day I didn't wear a tie, I wore a Polartec vest), everyone would want to live here.

At the same time, one can see the ways in which this reality is under assault -- largely because of tech wealth. Years ago, when Boeing and Weyerhaeuser were the biggest local employers, a little bungalow on Lake Washington was a realistic ambition for the average working family. Now thousands of tech millionaires, plus a few billionaires, have bid waterfront property out of reach of the average or even the professional family. Self-pitying Seattle news reports notwithstanding, freeway congestion is not as bad as in New York or Los Angeles, but there is a high concentration of construction vehicles on Seattle's roads, because malls, subdivisions, and office developments are being thrown up nonstop. People with money often buy extra homes, so fancy

to salmon management and educational resources. Posted by [Tidepool](#), a news service for those working "to create a conservation based economy."

Save Our Wild Salmon

"A coalition of Northwest conservation organizations and commercial and recreational fishing associations united to protect and restore wild salmon and steelhead throughout the Pacific Northwest." Offers news, suggested reading, related links, and contact information for elected officials.

Wild Salmon Project

Information about the Sierra Club's efforts to protect wild salmon in the

weekend retreats have sprung up in Seattle's hinterland, from the San Juan Islands to the Olympic Peninsula to the Methow Valley, in the Cascades.

All this activity necessarily puts a strain on the forests, meadows, waterfronts, and mountain streams that are part of the Northwest's historical identity. And this brings us back to the salmon debate.

EVERY party to the dispute seems to be talking about the same thing: protecting salmon, which require particular river conditions in order to spawn. But in reality people are using similar terms to describe at least three different goals: protecting the fish themselves, in the sense that giant pandas or rhinos or blue whales are protected against threats to their existence as a species; maintaining fisheries, whose purpose is to allow fishermen to catch and people to eat the fish; and preserving the wild natural environment in which the fish spawn. Two hundred years ago, before a substantial white population had settled in the region and before the rise of industrial-scale fishing and industrial manipulation of the environment, there was no need to distinguish any of these goals from the others. Many Northwest tribes took a heavy but sustainable toll on the salmon runs, in an unspoiled river environment. But now the logical steps for achieving the three goals diverge significantly -- and there is little honest discussion about which goal

Pacific
Northwest.

**National
Marine
Fisheries
Service,
Northwest
Regional Office**

"We conserve, protect, and manage Pacific salmon, groundfish, halibut and marine mammals and their habitats under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and other laws." News and information pertaining to fishing regulations in the Pacific Northwest.

should take precedence.

Officially, everyone is primarily concerned with protecting populations of fish that might otherwise become extinct. Seventeen types of Northwest salmon are "listed" under the Endangered Species Act, which contains a variety of absolute prohibitions against any measures that might harm a protected type. Legally, salmon's situation is more complicated than that of many other species. The problem is the tension between the ESA and a different set of guarantees: long-standing treaties between the U.S. government and Northwest tribes, granting them rights in perpetuity to take salmon from their traditional fishing grounds. In principle, no one knows which guarantee would win out, because there has never been a court case directly pitting ESA protections against treaty fishing rights. In practice, the conflict has been finessed by yearly negotiations over how many fish the tribes can take. This has in turn justified continued nontribal fishing, because many of the treaties hold that the tribes will "share" the fish of certain rivers with other fishermen.

There is a biological complication, too: in this case what the ESA is protecting is not exactly a species, in the normal sense of the term. A "species" usually means all animals that can interbreed. By this definition there are only six species of Pacific salmon -- Chinook, sockeye, coho, chum, pink, and cherry (the Atlantic salmon is a separate

species) -- none of which is threatened with extinction. Salmon of all but one of these species abound in Alaska, and hatcheries are capable of producing millions of the fish to keep the species alive. But for salmon the ESA has been applied not to entire species but to "distinct population segments" or "evolutionarily significant units." These are, essentially, populations of Chinook, sockeye, coho, or other salmon that spawn in particular geographic areas -- streams, lakes, watersheds. If the salmon runs returning to a specific stream diminish, then that "unit" is listed and must be protected.

Continued...

(The online version of this article appears in two parts. [Click here to go to part two.](#))

James Fallows is the national correspondent for *The Atlantic*.

Illustration by Adrian Chesterman.

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