

# CONSERVATION *Showcase*

## A place to come home to: *Ceremony marks return of salmon, tradition to Colville Reservation*

**T**om Louie didn't know if he would live to see the day when the spring Chinook came home again. It had been some 80 years since the last time they had made their way up the Columbia and Okanogan Rivers, into Omak Creek and onto the Colville Indian Reservation.

Still, for most of his life, he prayed for their return.

This past June, Mr. Louie's prayers were answered when 11 spring Chinook salmon once again swam into tribal waters. Their return infused new life into an important cultural event – the First Salmon Ceremony for the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation. It also closed a gap between generations – a gap that had been widening since the spring Chinook were blocked from their annual migration up Omak Creek in north central Washington, some eight decades earlier.

The return of the salmon also signaled an enormous conservation achievement for the Tribe and for the Natural Resources Conservation Service – the USDA agency that orchestrated the development of the plan that set the stage for the salmon's return.

### *No way home*

The trouble for the spring Chinook began in the 1920's, when a rail line was constructed above Omak Creek by logging companies in order to deliver timber to a local lumber mill. During the excavation and construction



*Tribal councilman Andy Joseph harvests the first spring Chinook to be taken from Omak Creek in 80 years. The fish was prepared for the Colville Confederated Tribe's First Salmon Ceremony. (Photo by Keith Kistler)*

of the railroad, explosions from excavation activities sent boulders cascading down into the waters below – effectively cutting off the spring Chinook from their traditional spawning waters in the upper reaches of the stream.

Through the years, other barriers including a 45-degree, 30-foot long concrete slab and the cave in of 1300-foot long, 10-foot high culvert prevented the Chinook and other species of salmon from returning.

*“Today, we continue to use NRCS’ expertise – they’re always available to help us move this process forward.”*

Joe Peone, Director, Fish and Wildlife, Colville Confederated Tribes

Once the boulders were removed, Steelhead salmon were able to hurtle over the remaining blockage, but the somewhat less athletic spring Chinook salmon were unable to do so.

During the years that followed, excessive logging, decaying logging roads and season-long grazing contributed to the degradation of the watershed. As a result, the impact on the fisheries habitat was significant – especially regarding water quality and high water temperatures. The combination of degraded fishery conditions and physical barriers made the return of spring Chinook impossible.

### ***A blueprint for change***

Beginning in 1996, the Colville Confederated Tribes worked with NRCS to develop and implement a plan to restore 40 miles of historical anadromous fish habitat on the reservation, improving riparian habitat, reducing sedimentation into the creek, improving water quality, and implementing range management objectives.

“If we were going to be successful in bringing the spring Chinook back, we knew we had to have a blueprint to make a place for them to come home to,” NRCS State Resource Conservationist Frank Easter says. “The key to that successful blueprint,” he says, “was keeping with the tribe’s goals of achieving an ecosystems-based management system.”

“NRCS was a critical link,” CCT Fish and Wildlife Director Joe Peone says. “We

simply didn’t have the technical resources to get the plan started,” he says, “and their assistance in range conservation and engineering was outstanding. Today, Mr. Peone says, “we continue to use NRCS’ expertise – they’re always available to help us move this process forward.”



*Colville Confederated Tribes Fish and Wildlife Director Joe Peone, is using the NRCS plan to restore miles of fish habitat along Omak Creek.*

Mr. Peone credits the plan for setting the stage for the return of the spring Chinook in a number of ways. According to Mr. Peone, the plan not only provided an interdisciplinary approach for resource planning and implementation, but it has helped the Tribe leverage funding for resource management activities from other federal, state, and tribal sources.

To this day, the plan is paying dividends.

“We’ve used it as a cornerstone to obtain funding from a wide range of sources,” Mr. Peone says. “From providing water quality standards, to grazing and road management, the plan lays out our resource principles and lets potential contributors know that what we’re doing is based on sound resource management and good planning,” he says.

### ***Preparing a place to come home to***

With the plan in place, the conservation

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and rehabilitation work began in earnest in 1997. Land treatment measures including fencing, access to water for livestock grazing, and wildlife revegetation along three miles of stream corridor, and critical area seeding for erosion control were among the land treatment activities that have been implemented during the past several years. Along the stream bank, protection conifer mattresses – limbs and needles attached to the stream bank to provide short-term protection from scour during high flows – were also installed.

“In addition to critical land treatment measures,” Mr. Easter says, “we removed most of the fish barriers from the project area. That allowed Steelhead and spring Chinook salmon to migrate upstream and have access to approximately 60 miles of spawning habitat,” he says.



*Critical land treatment measures throughout the watershed have led to improved water quality and have significantly improved fisheries habitat.*

The remaining obstructions were removed from the stream in the summer of 2005, according to Mr. Easter. “The removal of these last barriers provides even more access to the spawning beds upstream,” he says. This was follow up work to the fish passage barrier.

This plan was unique, according to Mr. Easter, in that it was the first one in the nation in which a tribe was the sole sponsor of a small watershed project.

### ***A celebration of tradition***

To celebrate the salmon’s return, members from all 12 tribes from the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation (CCT) participated in a First Salmon Ceremony in late June. During the ceremony, spring Chinook salmon from the reservation waters were harvested and prepared in a traditional manner.

“The CCT’s interest here was three fold,” Mr. Peone says. First, he says, “we wanted to celebrate the return of spring Chinook salmon to our trust/home/traditional lands through a ‘First Salmon Ceremony.’”

“Second, we wanted to harvest only one spring Chinook salmon to be shared with all who gathered for the ceremony,” Peone says. “And we wanted to thank those people and organizations who have helped CCT achieve this goal,” he says.

“Many council members had participated in other First Salmon Ceremonies of other Indian Nations,” Mr. Peone says, “but they had never participated in one of our own – with our own fish.”

Mr. Peone says that many tribal elders had talked about First Salmon Ceremonies of the past, but the return of the spring Chinook to the reservation restored a tradition that many thought had been lost. “My grandparents had talked about First Salmon Ceremonies,” “but I had never been a part of one – until now,” he says.

As a tribal member and as director of fish and wildlife on the Reservation, the return of the spring Chinook is doubly gratifying for Mr. Peone. “It was wonderful to see so many elders – many of whom rarely speak publicly – share their memories of past First Salmon Ceremonies,” he says. “It was great to see the tradition return, and to see it handed down to the next generation.”

This year’s First Salmon Ceremony, like those from years ago, began with sunrise services near the stream from which

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*“Salmon from our own waters are important for our people’s health.”*

Tom Louie, Elder  
Colville Confederated  
Tribes

Tribal councilman Andy Joseph trapped and harvested the first spring Chinook that came home to reservation in more than a generation. It ended with a closing prayer in the afternoon.

Hundreds attended the ceremony, including more than 250 Tribal members.

For her part, Barbara Aripa helped arrange the ceremony and was among those who prepared the first salmon taken for dinner. “This honor bestowed upon myself was wonderful and very prayerful,” Ms. Aripa says. “All the women who assisted and prepared the food were happy and exuberant,” she says, “because it was such an honor.”

Ms. Aripa says that a small portion of the sacred salmon was given to each of the participants during the ceremony. “The most important moment to me was when the prayers were said before the dinner,” she says, “and everyone was able to eat the sacred first salmon – the salmon I prepared.”

Participating in the revival of such an important ceremony provided the Tribal members with an important connection to previous and future generations. “Through the years, with the salmon gone, we almost lost an important cultural activity,” Mr. Peone says, “But now the tradition is being handed down to the next generations,” he says. “I was glad to be a part of that.”

Now a tribal elder, Tom Louie was too young to participate the last time a First

Salmon Ceremony was on the Colville Reservation. “But I watched as my grandfather and uncles prayed for the salmon,” he says. “It was back when they were putting in the Grand Coulee Dam.”

This time, however, he was a participant.

And while the return of the spring Chinook filled a critical cultural gap, the overall improvement in fisheries habitat is providing additional benefits for Tribal members, as well. “With an unemployment rate of 50 percent, providing Tribal members with access to subsistence activities like fishing is very important, too,” Mr. Peone says.

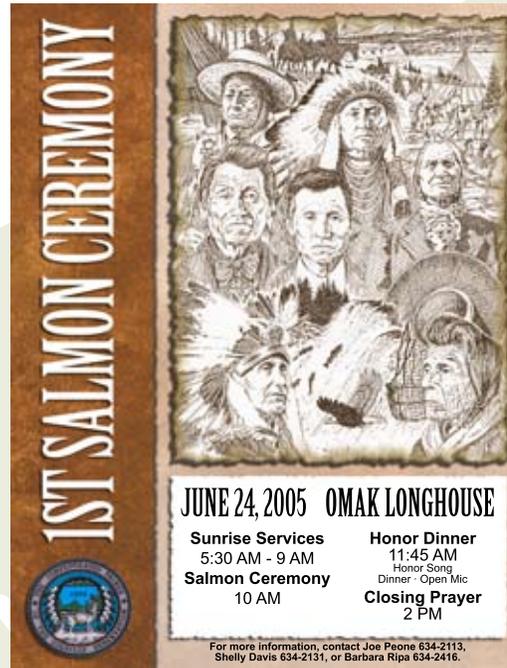
“People want to provide for their families,” he says, “so it’s important that we do everything we can to contribute to the Tribe’s subsistence and recreational opportunities. For some tribal members,”

he says, “fish from their own waters is all they’ll eat.”

“In years past, we were able to live off the river and our people were healthy,” Mr. Louie says. “I’m a firm believer that without the salmon we get sick.” And although salmon is available from stores in various forms, Mr. Louie says, that salmon doesn’t have the same natural oils and minerals. “Salmon from our own waters,” he says, “are important for our people’s health.”

***Helping people help the land***

Conservation planning and project implementation will continue into the coming years, as Mr. Peone, his department, and other state and federal



*Some Tribal members waited 80 years to participate in a 1st Salmon Ceremony.*

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agencies work to restore and improve natural resources within the watershed. “The policy leaders of the Colville Tribes and NRCS had a vision to bring the spring Chinook back to our people,” Mr. Peone

“but for those of us who believed we could help prepare a place for them to come home to, seeing the spring Chinook return is the ultimate payoff.”

### *Answered prayers*

Mr. Louie has spent many years along the stream’s bank, praying for the salmon’s return. His health now failing, he continues to pray for his people and for the salmon.

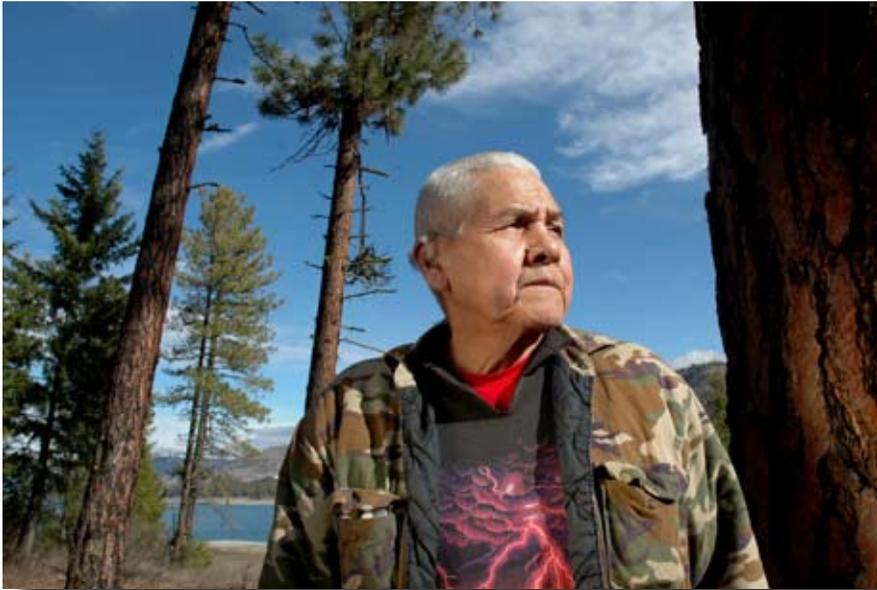
“My wife can tell you that I’ve shed a lot of tears along the river – praying for my people,” he says. “I pray that the Great Spirit may hear me and help my people – and I pray that the river will never dry up and that the salmon will be plentiful again,” Mr. Louie says.

One of his prayers was answered with the return of the spring Chinook, he says, but he also credits those who helped in that process. “Yes. I’m a firm believer in prayer,” he says, “but I also believe in the changes we make in life – like the fish hatcheries and all the other work that has taken place and all of the people who have worked to help the salmon return.”

Like Mr. Louie, Ms. Aripa knows that a good deal of work was behind the salmon’s return. “I’m thankful to Joe Peone’s fishery people and the NRCS for all of the work done to restore Omak Creek,” Ms. Aripa says. “And,” she adds, “I look forward to other creeks and streams to be restored, and to other first salmon ceremonies to come.”

Mr. Louie now prays for the day when the salmon will return in great numbers, but he knows that the process will take time. “I know that it’s not going to happen over night,” he says, “but maybe in my grandchildren’s lifetime, the salmon will be plentiful again.”

*Written by Ron Nichols, NRCS  
February 2006*



*Tom Louie’s dream of participating in a First Salmon Ceremony were realized this past year as the spring Chinook made their way back home to tribal waters.*

*“For those of us who believed we could help prepare a place for them to come home to, seeing the spring Chinook return is the ultimate payoff.”*

Frank Easter,  
State Resource  
Conservationist, NRCS

says. “Without that vision, and the help of the Colville Business Council, the cause would have been lost,” he says.

“There’s still a lot to do, but it’s clear that what we’ve done so far is making a difference,” Mr. Peone says. Even during the second lowest stream flow recorded, he says, the spring Chinook made it back. “Their return made believers out of everyone who says they wouldn’t or couldn’t come home again,” he says.

NRCS’ Easter says his agency will continue working closely with the Tribe to provide technical and financial assistance. “This is a great achievement for the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation and for all of us who have worked to help bring the spring Chinook back home,” he says. “It’s important to all of us to continue to build upon this success,” Easter says.

“Many thought the spring Chinook would never return to the watershed,” he says,