

Impacts to First Foods and Traditional Use Areas at the Portland Harbor Superfund Site



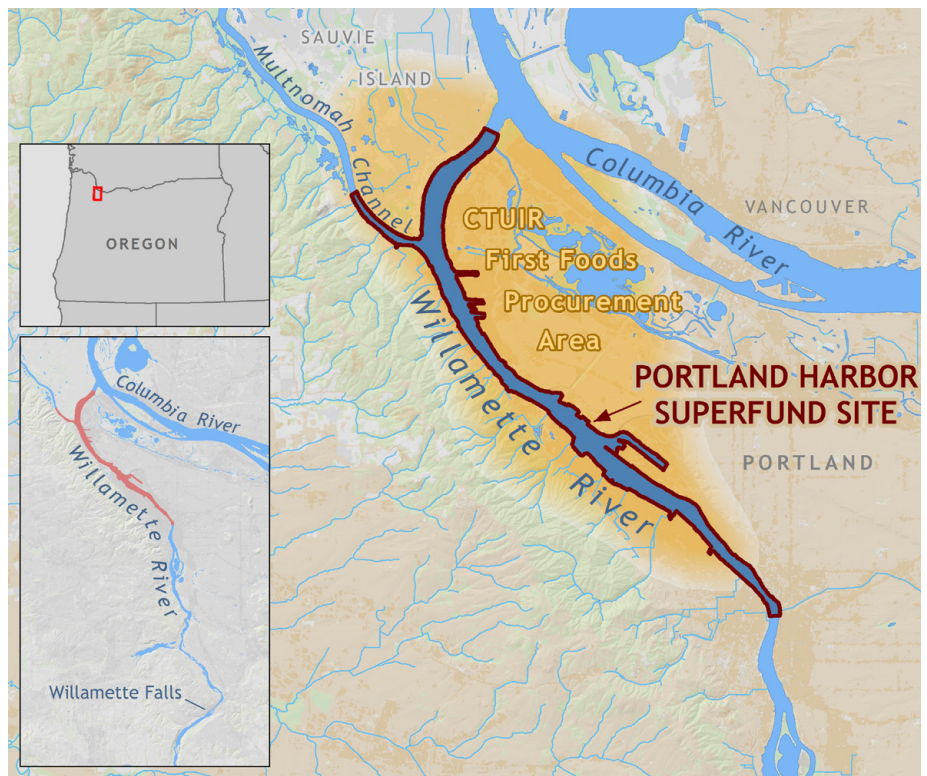
Since time immemorial, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR) has been sustained by many rivers in the Columbia River Basin, including the lower Willamette River. The First Food resources of these rivers – water, salmon and other aquatic species, animals, and plants – are the lifeblood of our people, connecting us to the land, to our ancestors, and to the spiritual world.

For over a century, contamination released into the Willamette River along Portland Harbor has harmed our vital First Food resources. This pollution has disconnected us from culturally significant areas where we once lived and traveled on an annual basis. Resource restoration in the lower Willamette is essential to the CTUIR's cultural livelihood and survival. It reconnects our community to the river and the cultural and natural resources found there. The cultural preservation of traditional places, practices, and the procurement of First Foods in this important waterway must be restored for future generations.

Our Ties to the Lower Willamette River

The CTUIR consists of the *Weyíiletpu* (Cayuse), *Imatalamláma* (Umatilla), and *Walúlapam* (Walla Walla) people, historically occupying lands partly in Washington and partly in Oregon Territories on the Columbia Plateau. Our people have followed *tamánwit* – the natural law or covenant with the land, the physical and spiritual way of life that sustains Plateau people – for thousands of years to the present day. *Tamánwit* is the promise that we made with our First Foods to take care of one another – a reciprocal relationship to preserve and protect these valuable resources.

In the past, people of the CTUIR came to the lower Willamette River valley as part of seasonal rounds of movement to obtain traditional subsistence resources, known as the First Foods. We have lived, camped, traded, practiced religious activities, and buried our ancestors here. Our people continue to procure First Foods and engage in traditional practices – including fishing, hunting, and gathering native plants for food, medicines, and culturally important materials – in and around the lower Willamette.



The CTUIR First Foods Procurement Area shown above is not intended to depict the full geographic range of the CTUIR's off-reservation treaty rights, but only the area of CTUIR First Foods procurement directly impacted by contamination at the Portland Harbor Superfund Site. A map of the CTUIR's broader areas of traditional use may be found at https://gis.ctuir.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/traditional_use1.jpg.

Our Reserved Treaty Rights Protect Our Access to Resources

In 1855, the *Weyíiletpu* (Cayuse), *Imatalamláma* (Umatilla), and *Walúlapam* (Walla Walla) signed a treaty with the U.S. government forming the CTUIR. We retained and reserved our rights to hunt, fish, and gather foods, medicines, and culturally important materials throughout our traditional use areas, including the lower Willamette River. The CTUIR maintains its inherent sovereignty, of which self-government and co-management of natural resources are critical parts.

The Willamette River Sustains Our Sacred First Foods and Traditional Resources

Many of our First Foods and resources that we use for feasts, ceremonies, medicinal purposes, and to sustain us throughout the year come from the Willamette River. We have a reciprocal responsibility to respectfully care for, harvest, share, and consume these resources so that they will return to us every year.

Traditional First Foods and Ancestral Resources from the Willamette River: Important Examples



Núsux (Salmon)

"Salmon [and other fish] ... it is our church. That's our religion. That's who we are. That's what makes us who we are. That's what continues."

– CTUIR elder

Salmon from the Willamette River has always been a staple food that we honor and celebrate. Salmon nourishes us physically and sustains us spiritually as a community.



Ƙsúya (Pacific lamprey)

"[Lamprey] promised to take care of our people and the people are responsible for the care and protection of [them]."

– CTUIR Department of Natural Resources

Lamprey is an ancestral resource that we depend on for subsistence, ceremonies, and medicine. Willamette Falls is one of the few remaining lamprey fishing sites in the Columbia River basin available to tribal members.

Freshwater mussels

"[We] used to gather mussels in the wintertime, when other things weren't available."

– CTUIR member

Prior to contamination, we had long harvested mussels in areas around Portland Harbor.

Wáptu (Wapato)

"We're just now starting to find [wapato again]... in some of our own homelands, and I'd like to be out here [along the river]."

– CTUIR elder

Wapato is a nutritious tuber that we once harvested throughout the Willamette River valley but is scarce today.

More Information

CTUIR History and Culture

<https://ctuir.org/about/history-culture/>

Fisheries and First Foods Policy, Programs, and Other Resource Issues

CTUIR Department of Natural Resources:
<https://ctuir.org/departments/natural-resources/>

Natural Resource Damage Assessment and Restoration Efforts in Portland Harbor

Portland Harbor Natural Resource Trustee Council:
<https://www.fws.gov/portlandharbor/>

Contamination Has Impacted Our Traditional Resources in Portland Harbor

Since the early 1900s, urbanization and industrial activities have transformed the Willamette River environment. Dozens of contaminants have been released into the river, including polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), dioxins/furans, pesticides, and metals. The presence of these harmful substances in the river led the U.S. EPA to designate Portland Harbor a Superfund site in December 2000. Years of scientific data show that natural resources in the Willamette River have been injured by contamination.

Restoration of Traditional Resources Is Key to Cultural Survival

Contamination has made some fish and shellfish species unsafe to eat. CTUIR members fear for the health of fish, animals, and plants, because they need clean, cold water to survive. For decades, reduced access and high levels of contamination in our natural resources in the lower Willamette River have made it increasingly difficult to engage in cultural practices. Despite contamination, tribal members maintain traditional practices in accordance with reserved treaty rights, including fishing, hunting, and gathering of First Food resources that remain in and along the Willamette River. Even if resources are unhealthy, Indian people are required to uphold their reciprocal promise made with the foods.

Cleaning up contamination and restoring salmon, lamprey, mussels, and other key resources is essential to ensure the physical, emotional, and cultural wellbeing of future generations of the CTUIR. The goal of restoration is to bring First Foods and culturally important resources back to the condition they would be in if the river had not been contaminated. The CTUIR is participating in a Natural Resource Damage Assessment (NRDA) to identify the extent to which resources in the lower Willamette have been harmed, seek compensation from the parties responsible for contamination, and guide efforts to restore the vital resources that are so necessary for our cultural survival. Planning is underway to develop restoration projects that will benefit CTUIR members, the lower Willamette River, and the resources that give us life.

"[W]hen we sit down and have a meal of salmon ... I tell [my daughter] this is what it's all about. This is how we were meant to be eating."

– CTUIR member

