

# Cultural Impacts of Contamination at the Portland Harbor Superfund Site



The Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation of Oregon (CTWSRO or the Tribe) have maintained strong ties to the Willamette River since time immemorial. The River's ecosystem provides habitat for culturally- and spiritually-significant natural resources essential to the CTWSRO, including salmon, other resident fish, lamprey, wildlife, and plants that depend upon the vitality of the River.

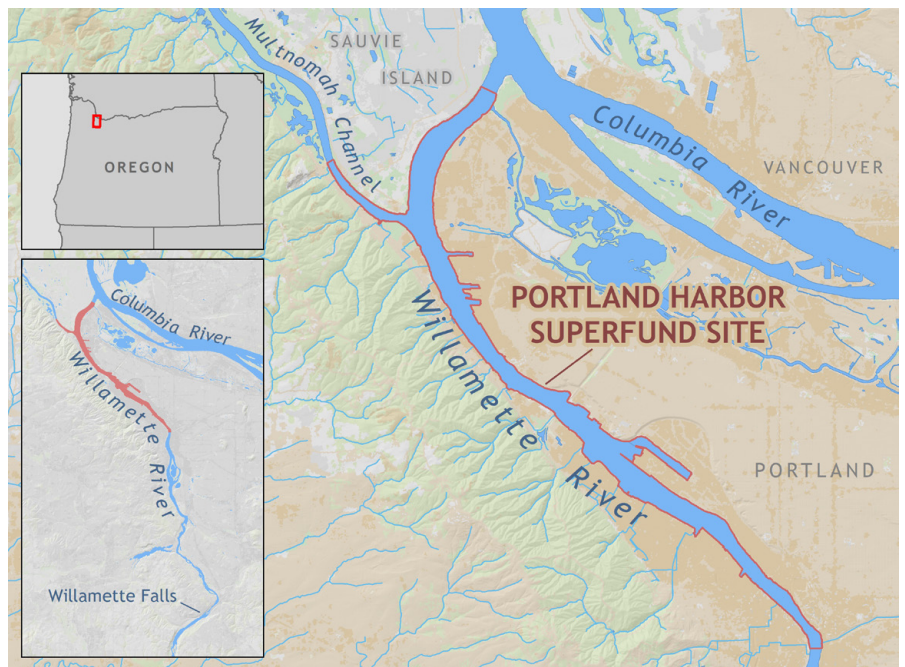
Over the past century, these invaluable resources have suffered from contamination released into the Willamette River, especially in the area that is known today as Portland Harbor. Restoring resources is central to the CTWSRO's role as a steward of the environment as well as its mission to secure and protect the perpetual health and prosperity of the Tribe and its membership.

Since the early 1900s, urbanization and industrial activities have transformed the Willamette River environment.

- During this time, dozens of contaminants, such as polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), dioxins/furans, pesticides, and metals, have been released into the River that have substantially injured its natural resources.
- The extent of these harmful substances led the U.S. EPA to designate Portland Harbor as a Superfund site in December of 2000.
- The CTWSRO is participating in a Natural Resource Damage Assessment (NRDA) with other trustees to identify the degree to which resources in the lower Willamette River have been harmed, to guide restoration efforts, and to seek compensation from the parties responsible for the contamination. Compensation will be used for restoration of natural resources.
- Planning is underway to develop restoration projects that, in addition to broader ecological benefits, will help improve culturally-significant resources to the CTWSRO membership in the lower Willamette River.

## CTWSRO Treaty Rights Guarantee Access to Resources in the Willamette

- On June 25, 1855, bands of the Wasco and Warm Springs tribes signed a recognized treaty with United States government, the Treaty with the Tribes of Middle Oregon. (<https://warmsprings-nsn.gov/treaty-documents/treaty-of-1855/>).



- In the Treaty, the tribes ceded much of their traditional territory to the United States in exchange for exclusive use of the Warm Springs Reservation; the tribes also reserved rights to hunt, fish, gather roots and berries, and pasture livestock on unclaimed lands (in common with citizens of the U.S.) at "usual and accustomed stations" outside of the Reservation.
- The Willamette River is a usual and accustomed station for CTWSRO.



CTWSRO tribal member Willard Tewee at Cathedral Park, Portland.

## Important Treaty-Protected, Traditional and Spiritual Resources of CTWSRO

- **Water** is the first gift the Creator gave tribal peoples to use and protect. It sustains all life and links human beings to their natural environment. This fundamental understanding of the sacred nature of water is passed down through cultural practices and traditions; water is the first resource acknowledged at traditional CTWSRO meals and ceremonies. Tribal members measure the wellbeing of their environment and natural resources by the quality of water.
- **Salmon and Steelhead** continue to be a staple for the CTWSRO people. Currently, CTWSRO works with state and federal agencies to protect these sacred resources to ensure future generations can harvest fish for subsistence and ceremonial purposes.
- **Pacific lamprey or eels**, as the tribes call them, are a treasured food and an important part of CTWSRO culture. The transfer of traditional knowledge has been key to the management of lamprey throughout the Columbia River Basin. Willamette Falls is a usual and accustomed station where tribal members exercise their treaty right to harvest lamprey.
- **Native plants** that grow along the Willamette River provide food, medicine, and materials for traditional use, as well as habitat for wildlife. Wapato and camas are examples of important traditional foods that are associated with the Willamette River. The gathering of roots and berries is also considered a fundamental link between the CTWSRO and the landscape.



CTWSRO tribal members Margaret Suppah and Laurie Danzuka (top right), at Cathedral Park, Portland.

### CTWSRO Ties to the Willamette River

- The Willamette River continues to be important to the Tribe's way of life and is integral to the health, culture, knowledge, identity, family dynamics, and spiritual well-being of CTWSRO and its members.
- The River sustains a diverse array of important cultural and traditional natural resources, considered to be a gift from the Creator, and it is CTWSRO's obligation to act as a good steward - using resources responsibly and ensuring their survival for future generations.
- Countless generations of CTWSRO members have maintained their relationship with the Willamette River and its resources by passing down knowledge through teachings and oral



traditions that ensure the continuation of their tribal culture.

- Traditional practices include fishing for lamprey and salmon, gathering plants, and harvesting animals that provide food, fiber, medicine, and regalia.

### Contamination Has Impacted Traditional Resources in Portland Harbor

- CTWSRO members are concerned about the health of the River and its resources, and perceive that it is less productive and appears less healthy as a result of contamination. This change in perception has caused CTWSRO members to reduce or even cease their use of the lower Willamette.
- For the Tribe, harm to natural resources not only inhibits their ability to exercise treaty rights, but it also prevents members from being able to utilize those resources to pass down traditional teachings, art, knowledge, and practices, which are irreplaceable once lost.

### Restoration of Resources is Critical to Cultural Survival

- Beyond cleaning up contamination, restoration of Willamette River resources and the cultural practices that depend on them is vital to retaining CTWSRO's cultural identity and ensuring the wellbeing of future generations.

## More Information

### About CTWSRO

<https://warmsprings-nsn.gov/>

### History of the CTWSRO

<https://warmsprings-nsn.gov/history/>

### Natural Resource Programs and Management

CTWSRO Branch of Natural Resources: <https://warmsprings-nsn.gov/tribal-programs/natural-resources/>

### Natural Resource Damage Assessment and Restoration Efforts in Portland Harbor

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