

Cultural Impacts of Contamination at the Portland Harbor Superfund Site



The Nez Perce Tribe has maintained strong ties to the lower Willamette River since time immemorial. The river provided abundant natural resources like lamprey, salmon, and plants. It was a place to meet, trade, and celebrate with our relatives and friends. These qualities made the Willamette a vital part of our relationships with the landscape and its resources.

For over a century, the fish, animals, and plants of the Willamette have been exposed to hazardous contamination in what is now Portland Harbor. Restoring these resources is critical to Nez Perce wellbeing and cultural survival.

Nez Perce Ties to the Willamette River

Historically, the Nez Perce Tribe (Nimíipuu) traveled to the Willamette River every year to fish salmon, lamprey (eel), trout, and other species, to gather plants, and to trade. Willamette is a significant Nez Perce word, as a Nez Perce elder explained:

“Nez Perces were in Umatilla and Willamette. Willamette means tied together, like in a bundle. Willamette is Nez Perce.”

– Lizzie Threefeather Lowery
(June 19, 1954)

Traditional narratives, which preserve and communicate essential knowledge about the world and our place in it, speak to the cultural importance of fishing sites like Willamette Falls. Today, we continue to visit the Willamette to fish at the Falls and around Portland Harbor.

Our Treaty Rights Guarantee Our Access to Resources

The Nez Perce Tribe signed treaties with the U.S. government in 1855, 1863, and 1868. In these treaties, the Nez Perce retained and reserved the explicit rights to hunt, graze livestock, and gather on open and unclaimed lands; to travel; and to fish in usual and accustomed areas, including the lower Willamette River and Willamette Falls.

The Willamette River Provides Important Traditional Resources

Countless generations of Nez Perce tribal members have maintained relationships



with the Willamette River and its resources. To us, the river is a living being. It gives us many traditional foods and resources for medicine, ceremonies, and other uses. We share them as gifts, honoring elders, relatives, and guests. The river and its resources are inextricably tied to our health, families, knowledge, and culture.

Nez Perce tribal members Charles Ellenwood, Jack McCormack, and Troy Matheny (left to right) at Willamette Falls, ca. 1990.



Traditional Foods and Resources from the Willamette River: Key Examples



Chinook salmon (*nacóoʔx̣*) and other kinds of salmon from the Willamette River are staple foods and an essential component of feasts and celebrations that mark the most important occasions in our lives and communities. Without salmon, we would be unable to practice the most essential expressions of our religious beliefs.

Pacific lamprey (*héesu*) is another ancestral food that continues to sustain us. Willamette Falls is one of the few remaining lamprey fishing sites available to tribal members. We share lamprey with elders who are unable to make the trip themselves, reinforcing the inter-generational ties that strengthen our families and our entire community.

More Information

History of the Nez Perce Tribe

<https://nezperce.org/about/history/>

Natural Resource Programs and Management

Nez Perce Tribe Natural Resources Department:

<https://nezperce.org/government/natural-resources/>

Natural Resource Damage Assessment and Restoration Efforts in Portland Harbor

Portland Harbor Natural Resource Trustee Council:

<https://www.fws.gov/portland-harbor/>



Nez Perce tribal member Jesse Williams harvesting eels from the Willamette River (Image: NEPE-HI-0783)

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 Critical to Cultural Survival

The health of the Willamette River is tied to the health of the Nez Perce people. Industrial-related contamination has made some fish and shellfish species unsafe to eat, and Nez Perce tribal members fear for the health of many fish, animals, and plants. Reduced access to resources is already impacting traditional knowledge and practices. Younger generations risk

losing the opportunity altogether to experience these essential resources and the cultural practices that surround them. Now and in the long term, our wellbeing and survival depend on resources from the Willamette River.

Nez Perce tribal members are committed to our stewardship of the Willamette River and its resources. Cleaning up the river is just a start. Restoration of salmon, lamprey, and other key resources is critical to the physical, emotional, and cultural wellbeing of future Nez Perce generations. The goal of restoration is to bring these resources back to the condition they would be in if the river had not been contaminated. The Nez Perce Tribe is participating in a Natural Resource Damage Assessment (NRDA) to identify how resources in the lower Willamette have been harmed, seek compensation from the parties responsible for contamination, and guide efforts to restore resources. Planning is underway to develop restoration projects that will benefit Nez Perce members, the lower Willamette River, and the resources that give us life.