

Cultural Impacts of Contamination at the Portland Harbor Superfund Site



Since time immemorial, the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians has maintained strong ties to the lower Willamette River. Salmon, steelhead, and lamprey are among many natural resources from the river that have sustained our people and traditions for generations.

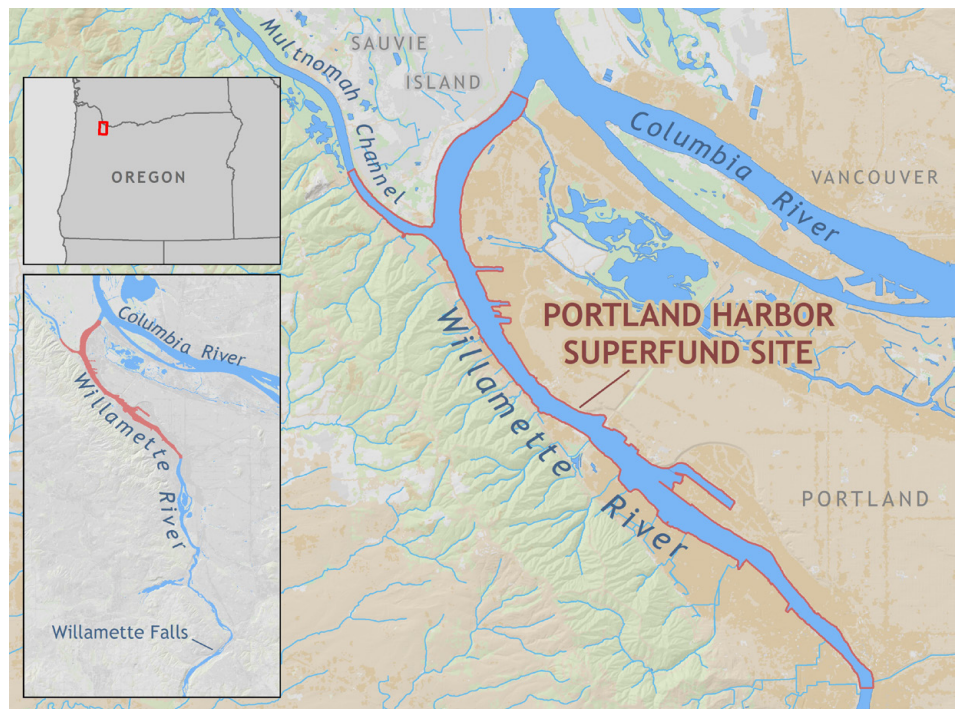
Over the past century, these vital resources have suffered from contamination released into the Willamette River around what is today known as Portland Harbor. Restoring resources is essential to the wellbeing and cultural survival of the Siletz people.

Our Ties to the Lower Willamette River

Our ancestral homelands span the river systems of western Oregon, including the Willamette. Since our earliest days, Siletz people have fished, hunted, and gathered plants and raw materials in and around Portland Harbor. Our cultural and spiritual life depends on healthy, sustainable relationships with the river's resources.

The Willamette River Sustains Important Traditional Resources

Many of our traditional foods and resources come from the Willamette River. We honor them with ceremonies to give thanks, a practice that brings our community together. A home to diverse resources, the Willamette gives strength to our health, families, teachings, and culture.



From left: Siletz Tribal Natural Resources staff taking a group of Tribal members to Willamette Falls to gather eels (lamprey); Siletz Tribal Natural Resources staff and Tribal members getting ready to harvest eels at Willamette Falls; A bag load of eels being transferred to the boat at Willamette Falls.

Traditional Foods and Resources from the Willamette River: Key Examples

Pacific lamprey (*Entosphenus tridentatus*), or eel, is highly valued as a traditional food. We gather several times each year to harvest lamprey at Willamette Falls, one of the few remaining lamprey fishing sites available to tribal members.

“Lamprey is “the best food you can eat... the right food.”
– Siletz tribal member Lillian Bayya¹

Salmon (*Oncorhynchus tshawytscha*, *Oncorhynchus kisutch*) from the Willamette River is another highly respected traditional food. Many ceremonies and stories revolve around salmon.

“[N]othing is too good for salmon.”
– Siletz tribal member Clara Pearson²

Wapato (*Sagittaria latifolia*) is a nutritious tuber that Siletz people have long cared for and harvested throughout the Willamette River valley. Plants like wapato are part of deeply interconnected networks of resources that link us to places, practices, and cultural knowledge.

¹ Quoted in Downey et al., *Skwakol: The Decline of the Siletz Lamprey Eel Population During the 20th Century* (1996), p. 35.

² Quoted in Wilkinson, *The People Are Dancing Again: The History of the Siletz Tribe of Western Oregon* (2010), p. 47.

Our Rights Guarantee Access to Resources

In the early 1850s, our ancestor Tribes were compelled to sign multiple treaties with the U.S. government. In exchange for ceding the vast majority of their traditional homelands, our ancestors sought to retain and reserve the rights to hunt, fish, and gather foods and medicines in usual and accustomed areas, including the lower Willamette River and Willamette Falls. Today, Siletz fishing rights are defined by a legal agreement between the Siletz Tribe and the State of Oregon.



A day's catch of eels being smoked.

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. Many years of scientific data demonstrate that natural resources in the Willamette River have been injured by contamination.

Restoration of Traditional Resources is Critical to Cultural Survival

Because of industrial-related contamination, some fish species are not safe to eat. Siletz tribal members are deeply concerned about impacts on resources like lamprey, especially because they are no longer accessible in other locations. For decades, reduced access to resources has been undermining our ability to engage in vital cultural practices. Younger tribal members are at risk of losing the experience and knowledge needed to carry on our traditions into the future.

The Siletz Tribe is working hard to restore the health of Willamette River resources. Beyond cleaning up contamination, restoration of lamprey, salmon, and other key resources is needed to ensure the physical, emotional, and cultural wellbeing of future Siletz 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 Siletz Tribe is participating in a Natural Resource Damage Assessment (NRDA) to identify the extent of harm to resources in the lower Willamette, seek compensation from the parties responsible for contamination, and guide efforts to restore resources. Restoration projects are underway that will benefit Siletz tribal members, the lower Willamette River, and the resources that give us life.

More Information

History of the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians

<http://www.ctsi.nsn.us/chinook-indian-tribe-siletz-heritage/>

Siletz Natural Resource Issues

Siletz Department of Natural Resources: <http://www.ctsi.nsn.us/Siletz-Tribal-Services-Umpqua-Clackamas-County-Tillamook/other-departments/natural-resources-2>

Natural Resource Damage Assessment and Restoration Efforts in Portland Harbor

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