

Right an Injustice to the Nimípuu: RESTORE THE LOWER SNAKE RIVER



Members of the Nez Perce and other area tribes paddle in traditional canoes on the Snake River. (Photo: Whitney Hassett)

For over 10,000 years, the Nimípuu (Nez Perce) people have lived, fished, hunted, and traveled along the Snake and Clearwater rivers in the Pacific Northwest. The salmon that make the migration through Nimípuu territory swim some 900 miles and 7,000 feet in elevation from the mouth of the Columbia River at the Pacific Ocean to the lower Snake River, up the Clearwater and onward to the pristine streams of their birth deep in the mountains in Idaho. These rivers were once among the greatest salmon-producing waterways in the world, with estimated runs numbering in the millions. The abundant salmon not only provided sustenance and goods for trade for the Nimípuu and other tribes throughout the Columbia River basin, they also held important cultural and ceremonial significance.

When settlers colonized the area and the United States government forced the Nimípuu to cede territory, the Tribe reserved in the Treaty of 1855 the right to fish at all usual and accustomed fishing areas. Subsequent treaties with the U.S. government maintained these rights. These rights have been upheld on numerous occasions in court cases citing treaty rights as the supreme law of the land.

During the 20th century, the U.S. government built hydroelectric dams throughout the Pacific Northwest, eventually making the Columbia River basin one of the most dammed river systems on earth. The era of dam building came to an end in the 1960s and 1970s, but not before the last of the dams — Ice Harbor, Little Goose, Lower Monumental, Lower Granite — were constructed along the lower Snake River in Washington state.

The dams were meant to provide hydropower and allow for navigation of barges from the mouth of the Columbia to Lewiston, Idaho, near the Nez Perce Reservation. However, the dams were widely controversial, in part because of their impact on the natural river system and threats to native fish. Arguably, no group was more deeply impacted by the four lower Snake River dams than the Nimípuu.

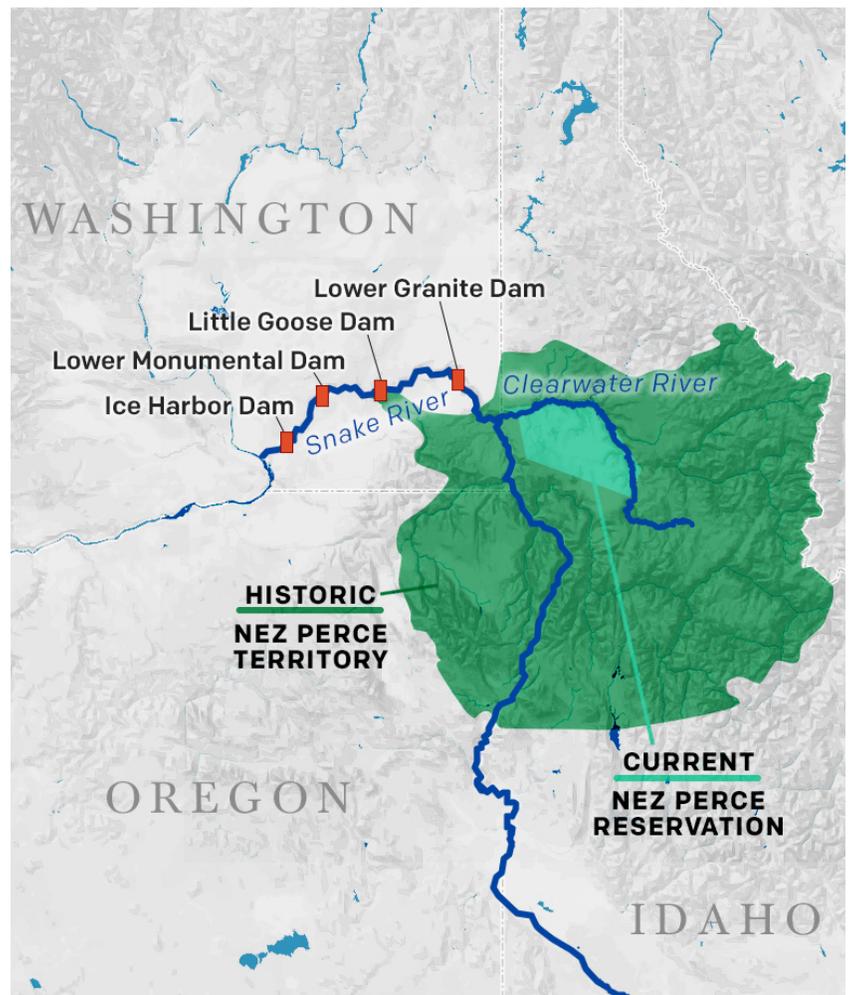
The dams led to displacement of native families as the waters along the river rose, flooding Nimípuu villages, settlements, fishing spots, and sacred grounds. Cemeteries were inundated. The impacts of these four lower Snake River dams continue to be felt most directly by the Nimípuu.

The lower Snake River was once the largest and most productive salmon-producing tributary of the Columbia River. Since the construction of four lower Snake River dams, several runs of Snake River salmon and steelhead have gone extinct. All that remain are listed on the federal endangered species list.

The four lower Snake River dams' disastrous impact on salmon have in turn had a devastating impact on the Nez Perce Tribe and the fishing rights they reserved in their 1855 Treaty with the United States.

For more than two decades, the Nez Perce Tribe has been party in a series of lawsuits — alongside fishing and conservation groups and the state of Oregon — challenging the Federal Columbia River Power System for violating the federal Endangered Species Act. Judges have sided with the Tribe and the other plaintiffs five times. In the most recent ruling, in 2016, the federal district court ruled that the federal Biological Opinion — the recovery plan for endangered Snake River salmon — was unlawful. The judge ordered the federal agencies to prepare a new environmental impact statement (EIS) that evaluates stronger salmon recovery measures, including potential removal of the lower Snake River dams. The draft EIS is due out in early 2020, with public comment period and hearings to follow.

There is a widespread and growing movement to restore a free-flowing lower Snake River. The contribution of the four lower Snake River dams to support energy, transportation, and irrigation needs has significantly diminished, while the costs of maintaining and upgrading them is estimated at more than \$1 billion.



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Additionally,

Orcas are nearing extinction:

The decimation of salmon runs has consequently impacted other species, most notably the endangered Southern Resident Orcas which number less than 80 individuals. The orcas which frequent Puget Sound depend on Chinook from the Columbia and Snake Rivers as a critical food source at certain times of the year, especially in the later winter and early spring months. With sharply diminished salmon to hunt, the orcas are starving to death.

The science is settled:

In a joint letter to Washington Governor Jay Inslee's Orca Task Force, 33 Northwest fisheries scientists and professionals forcefully stated that dam removal will benefit salmon and orcas: *"Removing the four federal dams on the lower Snake River and restoring the ecological health of that river corridor ... is the single largest step we can take to increase salmon abundance for orcas at critical times of the year."*

Hydropower is not worth what it used to be:

The four lower Snake River dams together generate about 4% of the Pacific Northwest's electricity. Most of the power these dams produce comes in spring when demand is low and hydropower is abundant. Much of the power is sold as excess to California. However, demand from California markets is dropping as that state increasingly turns to local energy suppliers of cheap wind and solar.

Further, Energy Strategies, an independent energy consulting group, studied multiple scenarios and found:

"The region can remove the four lower Snake River Dams and replace the power they provide with a portfolio of conservation and renewable energy resources while maintaining grid and transmission reliability at levels equal to or better than the current system and with little or no increase in greenhouse gas emissions."

The increase in energy bills to the average ratepayer would be approximately \$1.38 per month, according to the Northwest Energy Coalition.



Enrolled Nez Perce Tribe members Julian Matthews, Lucii George, and Gary Dorr, and Kalispel Tribe member Nathan Piengkam stand on traditional Nimíipuu land overlooking the Lower Granite Dam. (Photo: Justin Clifton)

Barge travel is not what it once was:

Enabling barge navigation through the lower Snake River to ship grain and other agricultural commodities along the lower Snake River was once a primary purpose of the dams. However, in the past 20 years that has changed: Freight volume through the lower Snake River corridor has declined by 70% and grain volume has declined 45% in favor of shipping by rail.

The Northwest can choose to make smart investments in expanded rail to serve shipping needs. The locks that allow passage through the lower Snake River dams are now over 40 years old and need extensive maintenance and re-building, which does not make economic sense given limited demand for river shipping.

Restoring a free-flowing river brings great opportunity:

The restoration of the lower Snake River would enable the greatest river and salmon recovery of all time. It would also be a good faith act of the United States to respect the treaties it signed with the Nez Perce Tribe as a sovereign nation. A free-flowing lower Snake River would expose many places and sacred sites that were inundated by the dams.

Restoring Snake River salmon runs will be a huge boost to sport, commercial, and tribal fishing economies that once were a mainstay of the Northwest.

Replacing Snake River hydropower with modern solar and wind generation, energy efficiency, and demand-response technologies will diversify and update the Northwest's energy portfolio and create good jobs.

Smart investments to address localized impacts of dam removal — such as added rail capacity for grain shipping and riverfront improvements in Clarkston WA, Lewiston ID, and other communities — can leave impacted towns better positioned for the future.

TAKE ACTION

A new generation of Northwesterners are standing with the Nimíipuu to call for the removal of the four lower Snake River dams. We have an opportunity to be a part of the greatest river and salmon restoration of all time. Governor Inslee and the Washington state legislature have created forums for stakeholders to weigh in on the issue through 2019–2020. This offers a chance to come together to imagine what the Snake River watershed could be, and all that we could do differently to meet everyone's needs when the lower Snake River dams come down.

To learn more, visit nimiipuuprotecting.org.



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