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What is Environmental Consciousness? A Thematic Cluster



Loved Badly on Your Bank

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Loved Badly on Your Bank

by Paul Lindholdt



About the Author

[Paul Lindholdt](#) came of age in and around the Salish Sea. A professor of English at Eastern Washington University, he has won recognition from the Academy of American Poets, the Society of Professional Journalists, and the Washington Center for the Book for his ecological memoir [In Earshot of Water: Notes from the Columbia Plateau](#) (University of Iowa Press, 2011). He applied ecocriticism to a wide variety of cultural texts in [Explorations in Ecocriticism](#) (Lexington Books, 2015). In 2018, he published two books, [Making Landfall](#) and [The Spokane River](#). His personal website may be [retrieved here](#).

Loved Badly on Your Bank

Paul Lindholdt

*Man's like the earth, his hair like grasse is grown,
His veins the rivers are, his heart the stone.*

—Anonymous

Imagine you are hovering above the Columbia River, a continental watershed that drains all of Idaho, most of Washington, large parts of British Columbia, Montana, and Oregon. Creeks, streams, and smaller rivers pulse like arteries and capillaries. Much like mammal arteries, those watercourses help to shuttle lifeblood out from the heartland to the continent's shores. Vein-like rainclouds trundle that same blood back in then from the Pacific Ocean to the watershed's core.

Squint west and you will glimpse the Columbia River shimmering and drudging to the sea. Fourteen major dams congest it. Dozens of other upcountry dams engrave the tributary rivers and streams. Dams emboss those watercourses like so much bling on a cashmere jacket.

This is my bioregion, the place I've lived for most of my life. When I liken water to blood, when I compare geography to human anatomy, I am making more than a flip analogy. "Not only is blood mostly water, but the watery portion of blood, the plasma, has a concentration of salt and other ions that is remarkably similar to sea water," Natalie Angier noted, in "[The Wonders of Blood](#)." We know full well how harmful it is to inhibit circulation, to bind up veins and hinder the distribution of bodily fluids. The same is patently true for our waterways.

Think of calcified aortas working overtime to siphon, of physicians performing bypass surgeries by embedding stents to relieve congested hearts. Call it all the world's body. Call water the planet's blood. The ratio of water on our home globe measures the same 70% or so as the water in us *Homo sapiens*. The salt suspended in Earth's water is

also the same as in our circulatory systems. The Gaia Hypothesis, too fanciful for many scientists, too absurd for every legislator on record, maintains that the planet of our habitation shares the processes of an individual organism. That it lives and combats pathogens. That our industrial excess sickens it.

The present emotional geography meanders through history; loops through agencies, industries, utilities, and the corridors of state capitals. Here I try to clarify why we should be concerned about the condition of our planet's rivers, the species they harbor, and the quality of their water. Water that frightened me as a child, seized me as a teen, and gained my growing devotion as an adult.

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Rivers have preoccupied me my whole life. When I was a toddler, I saw the Green River south of Seattle overflow its banks and [saturate the Kent Valley](#). A snaking monster wielded forces beyond our purview and control. Just as the flooding Nile fed its delta before the advent of the Aswan Dam, our Green River fed and replenished the dairies and truck farms that flourished in Kent and Tukwila. Scientists call it estuary habitat. Volcanic ash from Cascade headwaters replenished those downstream fields. The fields nourished by the river nourished us in turn. Over the decades the Green River came to be channeled and diked, made obedient and still. No one would recognize the Kent Valley as habitat today, overtaken as it is by factories and warehouses.

In the Green River's upper reaches, my siblings and I slid down slick rock chutes on innertubes. We bobbed downstream like platelets in blood. Tannin from red cedars and fir trees bathed us. The deeper we plunged in rivers and lakes, the more fragrant the tannin became. It is that "yellowish or brownish bitter-tasting organic substance consisting of products of gallic acid" in barks and other plant tissues. Tannins abound in red wines, teas, berries, barley, chocolate, nuts, and squash. The tannic water functioned like aromatherapy, inviting to us, never bitter at all. Soviet scientist [Boris Tokin](#) in the 1920s and '30s discovered that volatile oils exuded by conifers benefit our species by reducing blood pressure and boosting immune function.

In those years that we were playing on the Green, we heard a story of an inner-tuber savaged by otters and transported to hospital. Those otters felt threatened when the teen bobbed through. Since then, I've seen river otters in other regions behave with territorial angst. They had been the apex predators of our fresh water until the end of the last Ice Age. Humankind began then to depose them by taking over the wild waters the otters coevolved with, reducing those aquatic mammals to subalterns. *Homo sapiens* still menace them today. The prospect of flashing incisors on the Green River made our summertime recreation all the more delicious for the risk.

The Green River downstream becomes the [Duwamish River](#), named for Chief Seattle's tribe. Before it slumps into Elliott Bay, the Duwamish grows slow and sick. A sluiceway for industry, a conduit for topsoil, spanned by girders, fouled by factories, the Duwamish has been straightened, dammed, diked, and brought into compliance with the needs of cities and county planners. Its former flood zone, though, retained a wild vitality I could taste. Nosing there like a hound one day, I came upon a cluster of mushrooms. "Bland-mannered," in [Sylvia Plath's](#) fine phrase, they took "hold on the loam" and "acquired the air." Spore samples confirmed them as *Psilocybe semilanceata*, the magic mushrooms that some people still call liberty caps.

When it fell beneath the yoke of humankind, the Duwamish River left them behind like a bit of vestigial wildness. Those fungi induced auditory and visual hallucinations in their users. As if jets were zooming through a dining room, they altered one's perspective of the man-made world. The proximity of harsh manufacturing plants, airports, helipads, and radar towers fostered those odd effects. Or so I guess. At home one day overhearing those fungi, my hair stood straight on end, like a scared cat's tail, when someone knocked. My mirror showed some dude from the underground comix of the era, a character from R. Crumb, eyes bugged out, spectacles askew.

Seeking escape from a Seattle high school, six of us motored to the Columbia River's banks. We were a mixed-gender cohort whose parents would have cried foul had they known. One young woman almost blew our plan. She shouted at me from my antique panel van in the driveway, "Paul, get some butter!" The van was padded, carpeted, its windows shaded in drapes a girlfriend made, drapes ablaze with stars. We crested the Cascades and hit the river after dark.

On our way there we took turns roof-surfing, no one quite crazy enough to stand atop the van at highway speed. We lay flat instead across the rooftop, legs trailing, fingers hooked inside window wells to ride out bumps. Springsteen's "Born to Run" played from an eight-track tape. Beside the windy river where we camped, we stamped flat a site inside within a patch of cattails and flung sleeping bags. Those reed maces above us rustled and sung like wind harps all night.

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While we were having our fun, Natives near Tacoma were striving to gain their civil rights. Nisqually Tribal members were beaten, gassed and jailed, their nets confiscated or stolen, for fishing in the rivers as their ancestors had done. Lengthy cultural and legal battles ensued. At stake was the lawfulness of 1850s treaties that ensured them salmon and steelhead in perpetuity. The Nisquallys were overtopped in saltwater by larger boats and better equipment. Fired at with rifles to try to scare them away. Forced to tolerate

non-native fishermen trespassing on their tribal grounds. The military had seized 3,370 acres of their reservation in 1917 for [Fort Lewis](#).

A hero-leader emerged from the fray. [Billy Frank Jr.](#) set out to preserve the river traditions his ancestors had bequeathed him. His scarred and weathered face, his calm but forceful manner attracted national notice. He was a commander in what came to be named the Fish Wars in Pacific Northwest rivers. Adopting tactics from antiwar protesters, Frank and others of the allied tribes coordinated protests called [fish-ins](#). They defied state orders and cast nets on the Nisqually and Puyallup Rivers without seeking sanction of seasons, limits, licenses, or laws.

Billy Frank was arrested more than fifty times over three decades. Celebrities stood beside him. Dick Gregory spoke. Jane Fonda showed up. Marlon Brando was seized. The ACLU and the NAACP made common cause. Even the Department of Justice eventually came around to Frank's way of thinking. He was as consequential an activist in the Pacific Northwest as anyone has ever seen in this region. He led the charge from [Frank's Landing](#)—the six acres of Nisqually River frontage his father chose to purchase after the government dispossessed him.

The campaign for Northwest rivers established a precedent for other tribes around the nation. After hearing three years of testimony, Judge George H. Boldt in Seattle ruled in 1974 that Indian tribes had valid claim to half the salmon. Also, that they should manage the fisheries in tandem with the states. The case, the [Boldt Decision](#), was the only finding in judicial history to gain an eponymous celebrity status for the person who handed down the law. It also laid the groundwork for cooperation between state and Indian governments, allowing the passage of future regulations favoring tribes. One was the 1988 Indian Gaming Regulatory Act, which allowed tribes to open casinos to help fund their governments.

Backlash in response to the Boldt Decision was swift. Commercial and sport fishermen in overalls and rain gear rallied in Tacoma and in Olympia, the state capital. They hailed motorists as we drove by. They waved signs saying, "Indians are Racist" and "Shuve it Boldt." Anti-Indian bigotry, continuing today, has gone to the blogs. One blogger wrote of Indian fishers in 2016, "Disgusting. Should be hung by their necks. And left to rot!!" I caught lots of Pacific Ocean salmon during that riotous time, chugging diesels out to sea, vomiting overboard between strikes.

During the 1970s, too, an influx of Vietnamese refugees roiled the waters of the [Salish Sea](#). Some of those immigrants tried commercial fishing to make their way. More shots were fired, more demonstrations. A boat was scuttled. Some who fanned the backlash were the soldiers who had slogged the jungles of Vietnam. In the entitled eyes of locals, Asians and Indians conspired to deprive whites of jobs and encroach on God-given

rights. Mutterings about an Asian invasion were overheard from San Francisco to Seattle. One of my shirttail female relatives boasted of throwing a Vietnamese woman to the floor in a secondhand store.

The Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals upheld the Boldt Decision, and Billy Frank became a luminary. His charm in part was due to his gift for aphorism, long before the locution *sound bites* came to be. “When an electric light is turned on in Seattle,” [he said](#) about the hidden costs of hydroelectric power, “a salmon comes flying out.” His capable equation was quoted round the region. He met with presidents and led national committees. He did not stop with rights for his tribe and other Natives. He exacted promises from timber companies to roll back logging operations alongside salmon streams. He lobbied the United Nations to ban drift nets. He fished, at long last, in his tribe’s “[usual and accustomed places](#)” between Tacoma and Mount Rainier.



In the late 1970s in Seattle, my literary forefather [Richard Hugo](#) wrote dirges for rivers. His 1965 poem “Duwamish Head” shows ecological insight. “With salmon gone and industry moved in / birds don’t bite the water.” Skimming birds no longer hit the surface due to pollutants decimating baitfish they fed on. “Once this river,” Hugo keened, “brought a cascade of color to the sea.” The color-cascade from spawning salmon drew to a drab close after key links in the food chain snapped. Everything about the Duwamish River in Hugo’s perceptions grew gray. In mine, too. The sludge that smeared the banks of the Duwamish River seared its vegetation.

Richard Hugo’s Seattle differed from some other frontier towns after WWII. Its pace of change was driven in large part by jet manufacturer [Boeing](#), a multinational corporation. Boeing remains the world’s largest aerospace manufacturer today. Hugo worked there as a technical writer. At the University of Washington, he studied under Theodore Roethke. When he moved inland, he made a happy transition as a professor and a poet. He enjoyed a second career at the University of Montana. He left behind those agents of ecological change—the jet and rocket industries, the military contracts in Seattle, the heavy-metal waste the manufacturers made.

Hugo’s best poems adopt a tragic mood. He obsessed over defunct towns gone to seed, ramshackle homes, social isolation, and family dysfunction. Failing rivers like his beloved Duwamish rasped the big man just as badly. “Jacks don’t run. Mills go on polluting / and the river hot with sewage steams.” Jacks, those male juvenile Coho salmon, spend a year in saltwater before they fin back inland. Fifteen years after he published his chapbook *Duwamish Head*, Hugo was still grieving for the river. Its populous waters still drenched his imagination. In a 1980 poem he wrote for James Wright—“[The](#)

Towns We Know and Leave Behind, the Rivers We Carry with Us”—he lamented “mercury in the cod.”

Anglo-Saxon scholars know such somber strains as *ubi sunt*. The phrase from Latin translates “Where did they go?” The ancients deployed that formulaic linguistic maneuver to ruminate on the brevity of life, the weight of mortality, the cosmic loom of loss that wove their doom. Northwest rivers still weave rapture in abundance, especially for those of us who recreate upon them. The Book of Lamentations, allied rhetorically, mourns the destruction of Jerusalem.

The Cedar River, part of the Duwamish and Green watershed, once ran salmon-thick. As a kid I witnessed its color-cascade in full splendor. Its fish-hordes generated extravagant claims. One could walk across the backs of fish from shore to shore. The Cedar-Sammamish watershed drains to the southern end of Lake Washington now, where a kokanee sockeye salmon fishery persists. Those fish grow scrawny when measured against their oceangoing counterparts, the anadromous sockeye. Food in the Pacific Ocean is more plentiful than in Northwest rivers.

In one Salish tongue, *kokanee* means red fish, the landlocked sockeye. Those fish turn bright red when they spawn. Now the word *kokanee* is all but eclipsed in U.S. consciousness by a brewery in British Columbia that drafted the word to brand a beer. The Salish diction that flavored our regional speech took a hit with that commercial appropriation. Names from nature often get usurped in corporate boardrooms for commercial use. Nature owns no copyrights.

One of the most forceful lines Hugo wrote about the river sounds as confessional as any by poet Robert Lowell. “River, I have loved, loved badly on your bank.” I imagine Hugo in erotic mode—field grass stamped flat, blanket spread for a compliant lover—before a spasm of endemic self-consciousness set in. His autobiography *The Real West Marginal Way* gives instances of his gawkiness with women. It’s tempting to envision him turning crimson in an act of disastrous outdoor spawning. Apostrophe, the figure of speech used to address an absent or inanimate entity, is considered an antique manner in poetry now. It has fallen far away from popular tastes. Poets no longer address rivers. Or dead ancestors. Or the sun like John Milton did.

Three years after the publication of Hugo’s second book, *Death of the Kapowsin Tavern*, the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act came into being. That 1968 act designates U.S. rivers to be preserved for their outstanding beauty—for recreation, geology, natural history, culture, and much more. Such a designation is intended to keep rivers from being dredged or locked up for hydropower projects; from being stoppered, plugged, and riveted shut. Maybe Hugo’s speaker was not only addressing a lover, whom he had failed, but

also confessing to the river that he had loved it badly. That he neglected to protect it well. Today the Duwamish delta accommodates both a [Duwamish Longhouse and Cultural Center](#) and a [\\$342 million Superfund cleanup site](#).

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Back East where I went to graduate school, most of the river mouths had been dredged to form deep ports. Channelized, excavated, made subservient to the commercial will. Back East, classmates and I scouted waters wild enough to furnish respite from the grad-school grind. The Youghiogheny River in West Virginia filled the bill. We rafted and paddled that watercourse like so many otters. Its current diminished the academic stress somehow, leveled every ethnicity and creed. It brought us all together. We classmates grew to be thankful for and trust in one another.

Paddling white water, an extreme sport, compares to little else. Implicit risk is a calculable bit of its equation. Even practiced paddlers sometimes drown; even those who wear, as federal law demands, a personal flotation device or PFD. The paddler might tumble from the craft and get clonked on the head. Get flipped and trapped beneath the hull. Or overturn and be Maytagged—swirled underwater as if in a washing machine. One might also broach the boat against a rock or fallen tree, as happened once to me. Broadsided in a frail canoe that almost buckled, I was soused like a noodle inside a “strainer,” which is paddling jargon for a fallen tree.

Living and working in Pocatello after graduate school put me in striking distance of new and different Northwest currents, including the [Henrys Fork](#) tributary of the Snake River to the west of Yellowstone. That stretch of Idaho geography remains memory-etched for me as the most stunning place I’ve sojourned on this dirt-and-water body we call Earth. The Big Wood River that runs through Hailey and Ketchum in high-mountain Idaho comes in a close second.

Before I gave up spin-casting, I hurled a lure in the Big Wood, its foliage neither burnt to a crisp from grazing nor sheared close to plant crops. It was thriving with alpine chill and insect life. In its pulsing capillary of shade, I practiced bow-and-arrow casting. Heavy vegetation overhung the water so far that I could not hurl the line overhead. Branches would have snarled it if I tried. I crouched, I pinched the lure with ginger fingers, I bent the fishing rod almost double. Pointing it downstream, I released the lure to clear the vegetation. It worked. Right there in the river city of Ketchum, where Ernest Hemingway spent his last years. After paying homage to his granite slab of an outdoor memorial, I thought about him and his writings for a good long time.

In much of Hemingway’s fiction, rivers offer sanctuary and flight. *A Farewell to Arms* he set in Italy, where wounded Frederick Henry escapes execution by plunging in a river

during WWI. Later, Henry uses the Isonzo and Tagliamento Rivers to flee. Hemingway himself resided in several nations, but he returned to the mountains and the rivers of south-central Idaho many times over two decades. He recognized, like few writers aside from Twain, the redemptive power of big streams. The progress they embody, the promise for the human prospect. His Nick Adams, back home from WWI, suffering family alienation and PTSD, made his way to the tangled banks of “The Big Two-Hearted River” to rediscover an elusive soul-balm no humans could provide.

Not far from Ketchum, I drifted on the Salmon River for a week. Its yawning canyons shadowed the stream. Its Class 4 rapids tossed me like a bark chip in a gale. My paddle partner and I, on a working vacation to find and uproot invasive knapweed, knocked heads hard. We saw daytime stars. Idaho Senator Frank Church set aside the river corridor by sponsoring the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, inked into law by President Lyndon Johnson. On Church’s death in 1984, the two-and-a-half million acres took his name. The Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness, with the contiguous Selway-Bitterroot complex, is the largest official Wilderness in the lower 48. If not for his fight and foresight, it would all be plugged up now.



Native fisher [David Sohappy](#) was arrested by federal agents while I was teaching in Idaho in the 1980s. The scheme that netted him became known as [Salmon Scam](#). A Wanapum Native who served in WWII, his ordeal began when he lost his sawmill job and moved his family to [Cook’s Landing](#) on the Columbia River. It is one of dozens of sites the U.S. government allowed Natives to inhabit after the advent of Bonneville Dam in 1938. Where the Little White Salmon River joins the Columbia, the National Marine Fisheries Service persecuted Sohappy. Agents named the site a boat launch, not a lawful residence; named him and his family squatters. The fish the Sohappy clan was selling, the state named them legal for ceremonial purposes only.

David believed otherwise and fought the law till he died in 1991. He fought the law by arguing that his spiritual principles made fish, fishing, and trading fish a right. His Seven Drums religion was founded by his ancestor the prophet [Smohalla](#). That prophet foresaw a return of his people to the ancestral homeland, a [prophecy](#) that came true. Capturing salmon was an exercise of traditional religious beliefs. Anglo allies rallied and dubbed David Sohappy a prisoner of conscience. To bolster his defense, Jackson Browne and Bonnie Raitt played a benefit show.

The American Indian Religious Freedom Act, overdue as a federal law, had not passed until 1978. [AIRFA](#) preserves and protects the cultural practices and privileges of Aleuts, Inuit, American Indians, and Native Hawaiians. Those practices include worship through ceremonial and traditional rites, access to sacred sites, ownership and use of

sacred objects, and repatriation of artifacts and bones held by museums or discovered in digs. That law, wisely applied, might have saved Sohappy a lot of grief. Access to rivers and fish might have qualified under AIRFA.

A member of the [Wanapum People](#) of Washington State, Sohappy and his ancestors had used Cook's Landing, in present-day Skamania County of Washington state, long before the John Day Dam was built in 1971. But federal agents said Sohappy was but trespassing and illegally selling fish. In the undercover operation they set up, he got stung. Agents entrapped the people of his tribe by soliciting fish. Seventy-five other tribal members were taken in dragnets as well. David Sohappy and his son David got convicted and sent to a series of federal prisons.

Chilling in the joint for thirty months, shuttled at age 62 from state to state, Sohappy had a stroke. Worse, he suffered a broken spirit. Sen. Daniel Inouye of Hawaii came in 1988 to the Geiger Corrections Center in Spokane and worked with Washington Governor Dan Evans to gain Sohappy's early release. Discharged on a snowy day, he can barely walk in the [film](#) made of his life. Cradling a withered arm as if it were a sleeping child, he tries to address his kinfolk; tries to speak to them in the old tongue. But he breaks down in tears and coughing fits. Prison had crushed him. Two years later, still cuddling that left arm, he fought removal from Cook's Landing and prevailed. Some of his offspring still live there. His granddaughter Loretta, a [Gates Scholar](#), did a graduate degree in urban and regional planning at Eastern Washington University.

Sohappy Sr. did not live to wield influence like Billy Frank, but his family disobedience set a precedent. In the 1969 case *Sohappy v. Smith* that tried his relative Richard Sohappy, U.S. District Judge Robert Belloni awarded Native Americans a "fair share" of the harvestable surplus of the Columbia watershed's fish. Five years later, in the Billy Frank case, *U.S. v. Washington*, Judge Boldt defined Belloni's "fair share" doctrine to mean exactly half the harvestable surplus.

By the time I gave up spin-casting in 1995, fishing rules had grown byzantine. Habitats were being trashed. Fishing license fees paid for rearing and planting of hatchery trout. Put-and-take, it was called, meaning the fish were put in and dudes took them away. That ain't fishing, I slurred. State trucks vacuuming trout from concrete troughs, spewing them out for people to haul in, that was the opposite of outdoor glory for me. "Catch-and-release" became a similar sham once I learned about the mortality rates. Some 30% of hooked fish do not survive the palate-piercing, the barbs on hooks, the hauling to the boat or shore, the netting and the handling. David Quammen used to be fishing guide but gave it up. The fish he saw, before being released, would "get eye-hooked, they bleed, they suffer trauma and dislocated maxillae and infection."

If I fish at all, I use flies and barbless hooks. A prole of a fisherman, I am not one of those Zen poetic types, nor a calendar model in costly gear. My camouflage on rivers is hand-me-down khaki and five-buck shades. A bumper sticker says a bad day fishing is better than a good day at the office, but I would hone the slogan to say there's no such thing as a bad day fishing. Just to witness the line looping, the birds swirling, the river crooning ceaseless tunes is pleasure enough.

The fact that fly-fishers rely on undammed rivers ought to persuade many of them to outlawry.

Outlawry tempted me one day near Oldtown, Idaho. Driving through there, I got thirsty and stopped at an asphalted bulge in the road. The Albeni Falls Dam on the Pend Oreille River made me seethe. Its [visitor center](#) and gift shop were got up by the Army Corps of Engineers like a destination resort. I yearned to slip back with can of spray paint, get decorative, conduct some *nachtwerk*, in Edward Abbey's words. All my reserve of civility was required to silence my ire.

As I bent above the drinking fountain, I realized that gilding the lily always requires the gilder to kill the lily first. When I stood up, a head rush gave me a different clarity. Through my set of narrowed eyes, I saw the starched and ironed functionaries behind the desk as cogs in wheels spun by organic machines. I grew tender with empathy for their lot. Had I not halted a misbegotten undergraduate degree in forestry and natural resources, I might have sat behind that same desk with them. And I would surely have found a way to rationalize the uniform I wore.

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"How do we forgive our fathers?" Thomas Builds-the-Fire in the movie *Smoke Signals* asks. The question resonates as we viewers fly high above the Spokane River. Sherman Alexie wrote the screenplay and laments, like Richard Hugo, the slow violence done to local people. In poems and stories, Alexie channels an abiding anger about a shattered past. In his poem on the Spokane Falls titled "[That Place Where Ghosts of Salmon Jump](#)," the word *love* erupts eight times. How can Indians love again, the poet wonders, when the salmon now are ghosts?

Places revered by Northwest Indians for centuries have been destroyed by dams built in the Columbia River watershed. Grand Coulee Dam—for years the largest concrete structure on the planet—required upstream tribes to pry their dead from graves before the water inundated them. In 1940, the waters behind the dam rose and never stopped, submerging Kettle Falls under ninety feet to form the reservoir named Lake Roosevelt. The combined loss of cultural legacy and fish runs give rise to "[The Ceremony of Tears](#)" for some 10,000 people in the region.

Filming the Alexie-written *Smoke Signals* in 1998, [director Chris Eyre](#) also experienced a costly disappointment. He learned about the vagaries of river flows due to dam management by the local utility. Upon discovering the Spokane River's falls that run through the city, he was stunned with wonder. Perfect for the scene, he decided, where Victor Joseph scatters his father's ashes from high atop a bridge. His film crew costing him \$75,000 a day to retain, they arrived to discover the falls switched off at the dam. Nothing but dry stones remained. Eyre got hold of Avista Utilities' flow schedule, returned at the programmed time, and shot the scene.

After I moved to the city, I toted one of my sons in a backpack to Eyre's same high bridge. Above those stunning falls that spray in April at peak flow, we leaned upon the railing. Reed craned over my shoulder to see. He set his eyes on the rush and flood. What he witnessed there caused his jaw to drop. The sucky plugging his mouth went spinning into the drink.

Two decades before I made Spokane my home, boosters were gearing up to host Expo '74, the International Exposition on the Environment. Spokane would be the smallest city in history to host a world's fair. But the city needed buy-in from corporations and nations to keep from drowning in red ink. Ford and General Motors were dubious prospects. In the summer of 1973 though, they agreed to wine and dine and scope the site. A businessman named [Walt Toly](#), fabled for his sales skills, set up a lunch at a posh restaurant below the lower falls that typically go dry to make summer electricity. Behind the scenes, Toly persuaded Washington Water Power, the precursor to Avista, to switch on the falls so a showy flow might brighten the visit. The auto company representatives were impressed. They agreed to shell out for major exhibits at the fair.

The subterfuge of modulating flows for cosmetic and economic purposes has figured in American exceptionalism for donkey's years. John McPhee titled it *The Control of Nature* when he wrote about the Atchafalaya River and the engineers that twist its spigots. The painting by Thomas Cole from 1826, *Falls of the Kaaterskills*, might never have been completed without a hireling in hiding behind a cliff. An old gentleman "[performed](#)" those falls for tourists and artists alike. He cranked a handle for a fee. Cole, who founded the Hudson River School of visual arts, focused many of his panoramas on waterfalls. Art lovers admire *Niagara Falls* by his protégé Frederick Edwin Church (1857), *Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains, California* by Albert Bierstadt (1868), and *Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone* by Thomas Moran (1872). Our nation needs to keep its rivers healthy inasmuch as they represent a repository of great American art.

In the century following those canvases, dams began to alter the arts. [Z. Vanessa Helder](#), trained as a Precisionist, gained fame for watercolors depicting the construction

of Grand Coulee Dam. The Bureau of Reclamation later commissioned [hundreds more artworks](#) to valorize its federal dam projects. In so doing, the agency manipulated public tastes, steering eyes away from wild waters. Instead the painters valorized landscape-scale technologies that thwart those waters. Paintings by [Nicholas Solovioff](#), [Fletcher Martin](#), and [Anton Refregier](#) show the ongoing construction of Grand Coulee Dam.

Naturalistic paintings from the same watershed were superseded—Paul Kane’s *Below the Cascades, Columbia River with Indians Fishing* (1846) and *Hunting Salmon at Kettle Falls on the Columbia* (1848). Sublime wildness, whose appeal had dominated American visual arts for two centuries, began to genuflect before exalted engineering feats. Today in the Columbia River Basin, some three hundred hydropower dams larger than one-tenth megawatt in size are churning. Some two hundred smaller dams have been built for irrigation and flood control.



In 2012, by the time I paddled Idaho’s Clark Fork River delta, an easterly tributary of the Columbia, my regard for dams had withered to contempt. How had agencies managed to stanch those water-bearing capillaries for us all? The river at that delta used to massage and enter Lake Pend Oreille easily. No more. Now it erodes the shore. Erratic emissions come from regulating dams both upstream and down. Floodgates, forebays, siphons, aqueducts, and pumps unravel the Clark Fork delta’s shoreline and its wildlife habitat more and more year by year. Water officials adopt the dodgy talk of bureaucracy to account for it all, acknowledging a need to remediate “the erosion of wetland habitat types in a delta ecosystem due to [altered hydrologic conditions](#).”

The Clark Fork flows through Lake Pend Oreille, emerging as the Pend Oreille River to join the Columbia. Kayaking in 2015 on the Columbia’s [Hanford Reach](#), I could feel the mighty current’s muscles flex. Dams have yet to atrophy the Reach. That largest untrammelled stretch of the Columbia, the most productive fall chinook salmon spawning ground left in the Northwest, signaled I’d be lucky to survive if I capsized. My best bet would be cling to the kayak and kick like hell. Swim it in. I would reach the shore far from the place I overturned and would have to lug the craft up a steep bank. Facing such odds, I hugged the bank, loved it like Hugo tried to do.

The greatest blight in the Columbia watershed is the Hanford Nuclear Reservation. Its production of plutonium helped manufacture the Fat Man bomb the U.S. dropped on Nagasaki in 1945. Visitors can take buses to “the site,” as locals call it. Rebranded now as the [Manhattan Project National Historical Park](#) and proudly open to the public, that dark and euphemistic park commemorates “The Dawn of the Atomic Age” and “the creation of the atomic bomb, which helped end World War II,” among other events. As

a would-be tourist attraction, it plays down the dispossession of the Wanapum band of David Sohapp's people in the 1940s.

Subsistence fishers were displaced when the government claimed eminent domain over 560 square miles. The Natives continued to fish but had to scatter up- and downriver. Fish-heavy diets exposed them to radioactive effluent from the river water used to cool the fuel rods. Ignored as downwinders, the people became downstreamers—a companion word that acknowledges the hazards that flit south and west with the Columbia River's current, compounding those that drift north with the winds. Natives were hit harder than whites because they relied so much on the salmon, sturgeon, and mountain whitefish for food. Native families smoked all three species to preserve them for winter use. According to [a 2002 study](#), boiling the ribs and spines of the fish to make stews set free more deadly and invisible radioactivity than the meat alone.

In the degradation of fish runs that fed the people, scientists have a hard time separating cause and effect. Dams, farms, pesticides, road runoff, and nuclear waste all afflict Northwest rivers. In the Pacific Ocean likewise, fish runs have flagged so badly that orca populations in the Salish Sea have registered a [thirty-year low](#). The so-called killer whales rely on chinook salmon to thrive. Nor are fish alone at risk. Dams also add to climate change. An [article in *Smithsonian*](#) noted, “[a]ging reservoirs have become inefficient . . . and research suggests that hydropower reservoirs may be a much larger contributor of methane—a greenhouse gas roughly 30 times more potent than carbon dioxide—than previously realized.” Organic material builds up in reservoirs behind dams. It consumes oxygen, releases methane, and abrades the ozone layer.

Cultural survival of regional Natives depends on the flow of rivers and fish. Federal judges, year after year, have demanded the Bureau of Reclamation and the Army Corps of Engineers double down to restore at-risk fish, even if that means [breaching dams](#). So far, those federal agencies have stonewalled science. But global rivers are immortal. They might be more resilient than the people and other species that rely on them. Free-flowing water is always being refreshed by natural circulation. I comfort myself that rivers never really die, even if fish and the people depending on them do. Dams are just interruptions. Water is always going to find its way.

The [Elwha River](#), far west on Washington's Olympic Peninsula, was set free in 2014. Two privately owned monolithic dams that shackled it for a century were dismantled—a result of [creative vandalism](#), battles in Congress, and massive fundraising. It is the largest dam removal to have taken place anywhere on the planet. The Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe had lobbied to remove those dams since they were built. Chinook salmon recolonized areas upstream of the former dam sites faster than fisheries experts expected.

We in the region, indigenous citizens in particular, have grown hopeful that their removal might just be the start of something big.

In 2017, the news from the Northwest continued improving. Idaho Fish and Game limited fishing to catch-and-release in the Snake, Clearwater, and Salmon Rivers. Runs of anadromous fish were unsustainably small. Any “harvest” of sea-run migrants, wild or hatchery-raised, would put them too much at risk. Mid-season, though, buckling to pressure from sporting groups and conservative legislators, that Idaho agency reversed its hive-mind. It allowed fish again to be toted home. Then the unexpected happened. Fly-fishing groups organized to oppose all Idaho harvests. Fishermen and -women who wade in wild waters know something that the officeholders seem unwilling to acknowledge. That water is the life-blood of the land. That oceangoing fish are the counterparts of healthy red blood cells swarming in the planet’s body.

River crises are acute in Eastern Washington where I live, but there is also recent cause for hope. That hope rests with the [Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission](#), a consortium of the Nez Perce, Umatilla, Warm Springs, and Yakama Tribes. Those tribes are taking the lead on salmon restoration around the Basin, the same basin where I, diving from cliffs and hunting as a youngster, saw the Wanapum Dam go in. County, state, and federal agencies, manipulated by agricultural interests, will never spearhead the restoration effort. The tribes observe that “it will take everyone who lives in the basin to restore the salmon.” That pitch sounds a lot like [bioregionalism](#), the will of locals bent on seizing control of ecological and economic destinies.

Bioregional campaigns can succeed, but only with collective action. In early 2018 the Supreme Court agreed to hear [the case by twenty-one tribes](#) on culverts blocking fish migration in Washington state. By June 11, 2018, in a 4-4 decision with one judge conflicting out, [the Court ruled on behalf of the tribes](#). The ruling means that within the treaty area the state must replace or repair 817 culverts at a cost of billions. The Northwest salmon crisis is acute. Everyone, including taxpayers, will have to pitch in to restore them.

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In the summer of 2018, at a Leavenworth bed and breakfast in the Washington Cascades, my spouse Karen and I rented rooms during a working vacation. Those rooms were frigid with AC. We asked if we could dial down the thermostat, find our comfort zones, conserve some BTUs. The hostess just laughed. She told us to throw the slider and windows wide. No need to go easy on the AC. The town is so subsidized by Chelan County PUD, she pays a mere 3.22 cents/kilowatt hour. Nearby Rocky Reach and Rock Island Dams on the Columbia River accord those bargain rates. Residents of New York, by contrast, pay 14.2 cents per kilowatt hour.

The willful negligence of our hostess piqued me. Call hers an insouciance, an entitlement, or a studied ignorance. Good dog that I am, though, trained in silent grinding, I clamped tongue between my teeth and kept it there. Those who feel strongly about river issues have to learn to choose our quarrels. Someday maybe, like Henry Thoreau, I will wonder what demon possessed me that I behaved so well. And if I repent of anything, it will probably be my good behavior.

Bad dams in my bioregion might not be bypassed in this lifetime, but their utility is finite. Tons of sediment build up behind the reservoirs, which have to be dredged to keep cargo barges from running aground. Barges that haul sawdust and paper pulp from trees shorn off our federal estate. [Barges toting tiny fish past dams](#). No matter how many hatcheries the states or tribes build, salmon will be overheated, shredded alive by turbines, till rapids and spawning grounds come back into geological play. Breaching the worst of the dams would bring a glorious dawn.

It may be on the horizon. Alternative energies, I calculate, will allow Northwest rivers to run free again in time. I for one, who have tried to do good by installing solar panels atop our Spokane home, will welcome that reversal. Removing the four dams on the lower Snake River would expose passage to five hundred miles of habitat. Fish could fin to the base of the Sawtooth Mountains in Lemhi County, Idaho—all the way to Redfish Lake, so-named for the sockeye that used to be able to thrash their way there. People will celebrate that reclamation when it takes place, acclaim the date when indigenous cultures and treaties come to be honored at long last.

The best cause for hope that Northwest rivers might run again with native salmon rests upon the tribes. For the first time in eighty years, salmon now swim upstream of Grand Coulee Dam. To begin a new cycle for the salmon, the [Colville Confederated Tribes](#) released them there on August 16, 2019. Prayers, songs, and speeches followed. Specially made rubber buckets were handed hand to hand to transport the fish from tanker truck to river. The hopeful goal is that the fish will spawn, and their fry will be small enough to pass through destructive turbines to the sea. In the Pacific they will feed and grow and return to butt the dam and be captured, then transported again to the upper reaches of the Columbia River beyond the dam to repeat the ancient cycle. The theory is being built on an abundance of hope and human intervention.

Some people's hearts get clogged from eating bad food. From lack of exercise or genes that make them weak. Medical providers have to carve side channels to help those clogged hearts plug away. Consider dam breaching the landscape-scale equivalent of heart-bypass surgeries. Procedures to allow the blood to flow free again, the rivers to enjoy refurbished circulation.

The world's body resembles our own more than we think. It might be more like ours than we *can* think. No planet except Mars shows signs of running water, much less evidence of rivers and climes that function in tandem to keep the good stuff flowing, liquids lifting off and drifting back down, the systole and diastole by any other name performing the complex circulatory work.