Chapter 4.6
Cultural Survival, Tribal Sovereignty and River Restoration on the Central Northwest Coast, North America

Colleen E. Boyd and John B. Boyd

4.6.1 Landscapes and Stories

The Elwha River system on the Olympic Peninsula in Washington state (USA) is a storied land. For the Klallam (Coast Salish) people who claim it as their homeland, it is a place filled with narratives about culture, place, and the past. Even so, they have not been able to access many of their sacred sites for several generations because of the development of two hydroelectric dams on the Elwha River. In 1992 the U.S. Congress passed the Elwha River Ecosystem and Fisheries Restoration Act. This legislation brings together tribal, federal, and regional partners in an effort to restore the Elwha River through dam removal, which will allow the river’s salmon and steelhead populations to access pristine spawning ground in the upper reaches of the river, rehabilitate salmon habitat, and replenish beaches starved by the loss of the sediment now trapped behind the dams. For the last two decades, the Elwha Klallam and the U.S. National Park Service have been intergovernmental partners in the effort to implement this act.

The ability to put stories to work through interactions with specific places is a cornerstone for effective cultural survival and environmental restoration, and it fashions a link between these related endeavours. Restoring the Elwha River also reveals the Klallam community’s cultural heritage. The many Klallam stories about their relationships with place, space, and time present a perspective that allows collaboration among the stakeholders in restoring the natural environment and reviving cultural values. This educational process provides access to both Natives and non-natives.

C.E. Boyd (*)
Department of Anthropology, Ball State University, Muncie, IN, USA
e-mail: ceboyd@bsu.edu

J.B. Boyd
Department of English, Ball State University, Muncie, IN, USA
The Nez Perce [niimíipuul] homeland is a place of extreme power and beauty. It is a place where migrating salmon swim nearly 800 miles from the Pacific Ocean to spawn in rivers and lakes born from mountainous snow and ice, ancient cedars and rich pine forests meet fertile grasslands, and North America’s deepest river gorge, Hell’s Canyon, plummets into a hot inland desert.

The Nez Perce have sustained a rich tribal culture in these places since the last Ice Age. Salmon [léwliks] and water [kúus] constitute the ideological and material foundations of both the world and humanity, and these two things express a particular history of place and environment. Nez Perce explain interactions in terms of salmon and water, and without them the Nez Perce world is non-existent. Thus, without the annual return of the salmon and sustainable water resources, the Nez Perce say they will cease to be Indian people.

Salmon are biologically a keystone species. They link biodiversity and productivity because they are “transport vector[s]” for the movement of “materials, and energy and nutrients between (continued)