

Long Tom's future is a study in complexity

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About 135 years have now passed since the first efforts to reshape the river for the utility of the people in our region. In this fourth and final installment, we take an opportunity to consider "where we go from here."

In the spring of 1999, two of the Willamette River's native fish populations were listed as "threatened" under the Endangered Species Act: the spring run of the upper Willamette chinook salmon and the

winter run of steelhead trout. Before human intervention, these native fish migrated to the various headwater streams of the upper Willamette, when high flows leveled the huge drop of the Willamette Falls and made it passable. The threatened status of the fish provides another "milestone" in our relationship with this river.

This "milestone" is different than others marking the history of our river developments; the flooding tragedies, lawmaking, and epic construction. The fish are conceivably our first big indicator of the decline

in the health of our river ecosystems and their natural function.

Now the moment is one of taking stock and understanding what has transpired throughout the system over the last 135 years. Most of the river developments occurred incrementally over many years, and all of the consequences were not fully understood. The process of resolving what can now be done will not be easy — the life of every citizen in the Willamette River basin has been touched by these changes.

Is it possible that expansive renovation of the dams, or perhaps new

ways of operating them, will be required to recover the fish populations? As the dams continue to churn out flood protection, electrical power and summer irrigation water, the other goal of "stream purification" has turned out poorly.

Now we look critically at how to improve fish passage, water quality, sediment transport, floodplain dynamics, flow regimes and other functions that have been adversely affected.

Any significant changes to the 13 dams and hundreds of miles of channelization cannot happen in a

vacuum. Together we have built our cities, farms and much of our livelihood on the floodplains.

Given our mutual reliance on this river system and how we shaped it, the threatened fish is only an indicator. The real question is: how do we solve the widespread implications of changing what we have put in place?

As after the great floods, there are profound stakes in the answers and a direct connection to the people. The dialogue about the future of the rivers will be as complex

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as the improvements that are contemplated and tried. For example, technological wizardry at dam sites may not be enough. In one case near to us, the water temperature control modifications to Cougar dam will cost \$40 million and take the reservoir out of recreational use for three years.

These expensive solutions, in single locations, work only if riparian habitat and river functions downstream are in good working order. The same situation exists for improving fish passage. To protect the investments that we make, a solution bringing fish past major blockages must be done in concert with restoring upstream spawning sites.

So the future is a "neighborhood" issue. Local communities and landowners have a huge role to play, both in the discussion and in the field.

In recent years, such a dialogue has occurred throughout Oregon. Just as the water project of dams and channels built for the Willamette Valley was halted at the time as a national model for developing and using a large river system another

"model" is now developing.

The Oregon Plan for Salmon and Watersheds is designed to restore salmon and steelhead and to conserve and restore crucial elements of natural systems that support fish, wildlife and people. No other state has ever attempted such a comprehensive program. The plan recognizes that local watershed councils are one venue where people are talking about just how to approach such an involved future, and to prepare to make difficult choices work for the majority of people and to improve the function and health of rivers.

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