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TAKE THEM DOWN!

A persistent, inspiring campaign to remove dams choking the Klamath River is on the verge of success. From the United States, Bruce Shoemaker recounts what it took to get there.

Above: Algae backs up in the reservoir behind the Iron Gate dam on the lower Klamath.

ECOFLIGHT VIA KLAMATHRENEWAL.ORG

Below: A sample of toxic blue-green algae from the Klamath's Copco Cove reservoir. Contact with the algae can cause a host of problems including skin rashes, vomiting, diarrhoea and flu-like symptoms.

STORMY STAATS/KLAMATH SALMON MEDIA COLLABORATIVE VIA KLAMATHRENEWAL.ORG

'At first the idea of removing the dams seemed absurd and unattainable,' says Annelia Hillman, a member of the Yurok Tribe, 'but we decided we had to try.' Hillman is talking about the world's biggest dam removal project to date, which is moving forward in northern California and southern Oregon. Four large hydropower dams on the Klamath River are set to be taken down, restoring hundreds of miles of habitat for salmon and other species that are now in severe decline.

The push to remove the dams has been in motion for over 20 years, led by several Indigenous groups who maintain close cultural links to the river and its main tributaries, relying on them for fish. Their campaign is an important part of an equally slow-evolving counter-narrative to the idea of dams being monuments to modernity.

This idea has caused extensive damage in the Global South where big hydropower dams have been often promoted and funded by international financial institutions like the World Bank and by Western countries with little thought for their impacts on the environment or traditional and Indigenous cultures and livelihoods.

It's a line still used by the hydropower industry and other proponents to justify new ones in developing countries – big dams are an inevitable part of development, and those who oppose them are backward or against 'progress'.

But the devastating impacts of large dams have long outweighed their benefits. By blocking fish migration, altering river flows and impairing water quality, they have greatly harmed the natural productivity of rivers wherever they have been built. Indigenous and poor communities most dependent on the common resources provided by rivers have suffered disproportionately. The large reservoirs created by many dams have flooded habitat critical for wildlife, while forcibly displacing many hundreds of thousands of people, who are almost never adequately compensated for their losses and are invariably relocated to inferior, less productive sites.

Defining moment

The Klamath dams will not be the first to go. Hundreds of ageing and outdated dams have been successfully removed in Europe and North America and there is a growing movement to push for many more. The largest restoration to date has been on the Elwha River in Washington in the US. Following the dam removal, there were rapid benefits to biodiversity – not just a bounce-back in fish species, but insects, birds and mammals. Ten years later, the Elwha's recovery continues – demonstrating how rivers are resilient when given a chance. But, to date, nothing has approached the scale of the plans for the Klamath River.

The Klamath was historically an important river for salmon in the western United States. The oldest dam was completed in 1918 and then a second one a few years later. The upper Klamath basin was cut off, blocking migratory access to one third of the watershed, and riverine health plunged.

A second round of construction during 1958-62 resulted in two more large dams, above and below the first two. Impacts on salmon runs and spawning grounds were immediate and have only worsened since. Excessive withdrawal of water for irrigation, upstream and in Klamath tributaries, also took its toll. With fish populations taking a dive and water quality impaired (the reservoirs produce artificially warm water and toxic blue-green algae) at a time of worsening climate change-related drought, conflicts arose between the tribes, upstream farmers and regulatory agencies over the allocation of Klamath water. By the early 2000s they came to a head, first leading to the designation of minimum flows for salmon – and irrigation cutoffs for farmers. The farmers then pushed back and there were reductions in flows, resulting in an unprecedented die-off in 2002 of tens of thousands of fish.

For Indigenous communities, the 2002 fish kill was a defining moment. The revulsion and dismay felt at the sight of thousands of dead salmon – the basis of their traditional livelihoods and culture – launched a wave of activism and resistance aimed at removing the dams and reforming water policy on the Klamath.

Reaching out

The resulting campaign used a wide variety of strategies, including protests in Scotland which pressured a pension fund into disinvesting from Pacific Power, the owner of the dams, and protests at Berkshire Hathaway's annual shareholder meetings in Omaha, Nebraska, after that company bought PacificCorp, Pacific Power's parent company. The campaign

‘We had to fight an idea of these dams as monuments, as symbols of the ways that humans succeeded in controlling and taming the environment’

put pressure on state agencies to enforce California’s water quality laws, ran drives for media coverage and engaged in various public debates and forums. Throughout, the Indigenous peoples most affected by the Klamath dams have been at the forefront. They are also playing a key role in river restoration and the revival of cultural traditions around salmon within their communities.

Vital to the campaign’s eventual success was reaching out to a broad constituency to create consensus. ‘It was a journey that took time, first involving building relationships and allies,’ says Annelia Hillman, one of those compelled into activism by the great fish die-off of 2002. ‘We knew we couldn’t do it alone, just within our Indigenous communities. We built alliances with farmers, commercial fishers and environmental groups, all with their own reasons for fighting the dams. Finally, we were able to reach government leaders and even the owner of the dams and bring them to our side.’

But there was considerable resistance along the way. Despite having an expired licence to use the river, and having profited from the dams for decades, Pacific Power insisted that all the costs of removal be covered by the public and electricity ratepayers. The dams slated for removal do not facilitate irrigation. Their elimination will help ensure a more reliable flow of water for upstream farmers and reduce regulatory burdens. Despite this, the campaign faced ideological, at times irrational, local opposition from some in the ranching and agricultural community. ‘We had to fight an idea of these dams as monuments, as symbols of the ways that humans succeeded in controlling and taming the land and environment,’ says Hillman.

After a negotiated federal settlement for dam removal stalled in the US Congress, the states of California and Oregon stepped in and, in 2020, forged an agreement with the Tribes, the dam owner, environmental groups, farmers and other stakeholders to move forward. Final federal approvals are expected later this year, the budget is set, and contracting for removal and restoration is in place. Preparatory work will continue through 2023, with physical removal of the dams slated for early 2024.

The success of the Klamath dam removal campaign is already inspiring similar, and potentially even larger, efforts elsewhere. One is another Indigenous-led effort on the Snake River, also in the US Pacific Northwest. The fact that hundreds of millions of dollars are being spent – the total budget is $450 million – to reverse a historical mistake on the Klamath River, in the heart of the region where large dam-building was first pioneered, also resonates in countries where they are still being promoted. ‘The removal of large dams in countries like the US shows how their negative impacts were ignored or failed to be considered when they were built,’ notes Premrudee Daoroung, a long-time Thai campaigner now with the citizen network Lao Dam Investment Monitor. ‘This adds credibility to our own arguments against new dams in the Mekong region.’

Asked what message she would like to convey to those working to protect and restore their rivers in other parts of the world, Hillman says: ‘Don’t give up! It won’t be easy and it won’t be fast, but it’s possible. Keep fighting and do everything you can to defend our rivers and the earth. We don’t have time to waste. It’s our job, we owe our ancestors and future generations.’ ●

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Further information
bringthesalmonhome.org
klamathrenewal.org
reconnectklamath.org

Interested in seeing what dam removal looks like? Watch timelapse video of the Elwha river here: nin.tl/Elwha