

Yurok Tribe members Thomas Willson, left, and Son-Son Robbins speed down the Klamath River in Weitchpec, California.

# Stewards *of the* River

Dams have threatened the ecosystem of the Klamath River for decades. Will the Indigenous tribes' efforts save the river — and their culture?

written by CHLOE BRYANT  
photographed by ISAAC WASSERMAN  
illustrated by SEOYEON PARK



# “W

here the hell is Weitchpec?”

It's a common question asked of the Yurok Tribe members in Weitchpec, California. So common, it's now a running joke. Residents have created a “Where the hell is Weitchpec?” Facebook group, and walking around the community you'll find bumper stickers affixed to cars with “Where the hell is Weitchpec?”

Weitchpec, population 112, sits at the confluence of the Klamath and Trinity rivers in northwest California, about 130 miles from the Oregon border. The community resides at the southeast end of the Yurok Reservation, home to the Yurok people, the largest tribe in California with over 5,000 members.

Not far from the rivers' junction, on a large, rocky embankment down Weitchpec Village Road, childhood friends Thomas Willson and Son-Son Robbins prepare a boat to go fishing. On a chilly morning in February, they are hopeful to catch winter steelhead.

For many, growing up on the Yurok Reservation means learning to fish at a young age. Willson's father taught him to fish as a boy. He recalls fishing by himself at just 7 years old. By 12, Willson was helping his father on guided fishing tours as a bait boy. At 16, he could run fishing tours by himself.

“It all started with our love of fishing,” Willson says. “I love fishing, and I love teaching people how to fish. And it makes me happy when I put people onto fish, too.”

Now 30, Willson has his own guide service on the Klamath, called Fish Hawk Guide Service. When he's not running tours, Willson is fishing on the Klamath with his buddies.

Before Willson and Robbins head down the river, they check a net near the bank set the day before. Something silver flashes in the net: a winter steelhead. After Willson kills and guts the catch, his cousin, Jamie Holt, takes the fish home. Tonight, it will be her dinner.

“It's what we do. It's how we survive,” Willson says of why fishing on the Klamath is important to him. “It's what we lived off before stores — we lived off the fish and the deer. Everything goes around the river. Water is life. Everything takes water to live.”

As a fishing people, the Yurok Tribe has heavily depended on fish in the Klamath River for food. It is a way of life the Yurok hope to pass on to future generations, and have been fighting desperately to save.

Beginning in 1903, the construction of dams on the Klamath transformed life for the Yurok, and not for the better. While the dams were constructed to generate hydroelectric power for the comfort of residents in parts of Northern California and Southern Oregon, the dams drastically altered the Yurok's livelihood.

The dams endangered fish populations, blocking more than 420 miles of historic habitat for salmon and steelhead. Four of the dams owned by PacifiCorp lacked adequate fish ladders and in some cases had none. Ladders allow fish to pass through the dams and access

*The Iron Gate dam sits in the middle of the Klamath River in California. Spillover dams like these hurt the health of the river. Only the warm top layer of water gets cycled down the river, which creates perfect conditions for toxic bacteria to thrive.*



habitats blocked by dam obstruction. As fish struggle to navigate the river, their populations have fallen drastically.

Water levels have also decreased thanks to dammed water flows (along with recent and intense droughts). Low water levels affect traditional Yurok practices, like basket weaving and river ceremonies. To perform ceremonies that need high water levels, the Yurok must now request additional water flows from the dams.

Removing the dams on the Klamath River has been a goal of the Yurok since their construction and could be a first step in saving the river's fish and the Yurok's way of life. Only now, after decades of campaigning for the dams' removal, are tribes on the Klamath optimistic the dams may finally come down.

In February, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) released a final draft of its Environmental Impact Statement on plans to remove the dams. It worked with the tribes, commercial fishermen, ranchers and others while drafting the statement. FERC, which is in charge of approving dam construction and decommissioning, could make a final decision to remove the dams in the coming months. If so, the removal of four dams could happen as early as 2023. However, locals in Weitchpec and along the Klamath River worry the removal won't guarantee a return of the river's fish — or their way of life.

*Jamie Holt, 44, wraps the steelhead in a brown paper bag and places it in the trunk of her Chevy. She calls her dog, a pitbull mix named TaaPuuk, to hop in the car before she makes a short drive to her little green house just up the hill. When she gets home,*

she will prepare the fish to be cooked and eaten.

Outside her home, Holt filets the fish into identically-sized pieces. The meat is slightly discolored in some places, bruised from the fish's struggle in the net. Today, the weather is too wet to cook the fish in the traditional Yurok way. If the weather were nicer, Holt would cook the steelhead on redwood pikes.

"Think of it like a giant kebab," Holt says. "You just leave it over your nice hot coals and spin it around as needed to cook it up."

Instead, she cooks the fish in avocado oil in a hot skillet, seasoned with salt, lemon pepper, garlic and onion powder.

Dinners like this, with fish caught directly from the Klamath, are becoming less common, though. Toxic algae blooms and fish diseases have become more prolific since the construction of the dams, causing fish die-offs, or fish kills.

Consider what took place last May: 97% of juvenile salmon recorded by the Yurok Tribal Fisheries Program were infected with the parasite *C. shasta* and were either dead or dying. In two weeks, 70% of the same juvenile fish had died.

This year marks 20 years since the Klamath River's largest fish kill. On September 19, 2002, the Yurok Tribal Fisheries Program received the first reports of dead fish washing up along the banks of the Lower Klamath River. By September 27, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service found that over 34,000 fish, mostly adult Chinook salmon returning to spawn, had died. It was the largest fish kill in western United States history.

At the time, Holt was working at the Yurok Tribal Fisheries Program — a fishery committed to "understanding, managing, conserving, and restoring fish populations," according to the

## THE TENUOUS LIFE OF A SALMON

**1** Juvenile salmon grow up in rivers and lakes. When they become adults, they migrate to the ocean. They return to their spawning grounds when they are ready to reproduce.



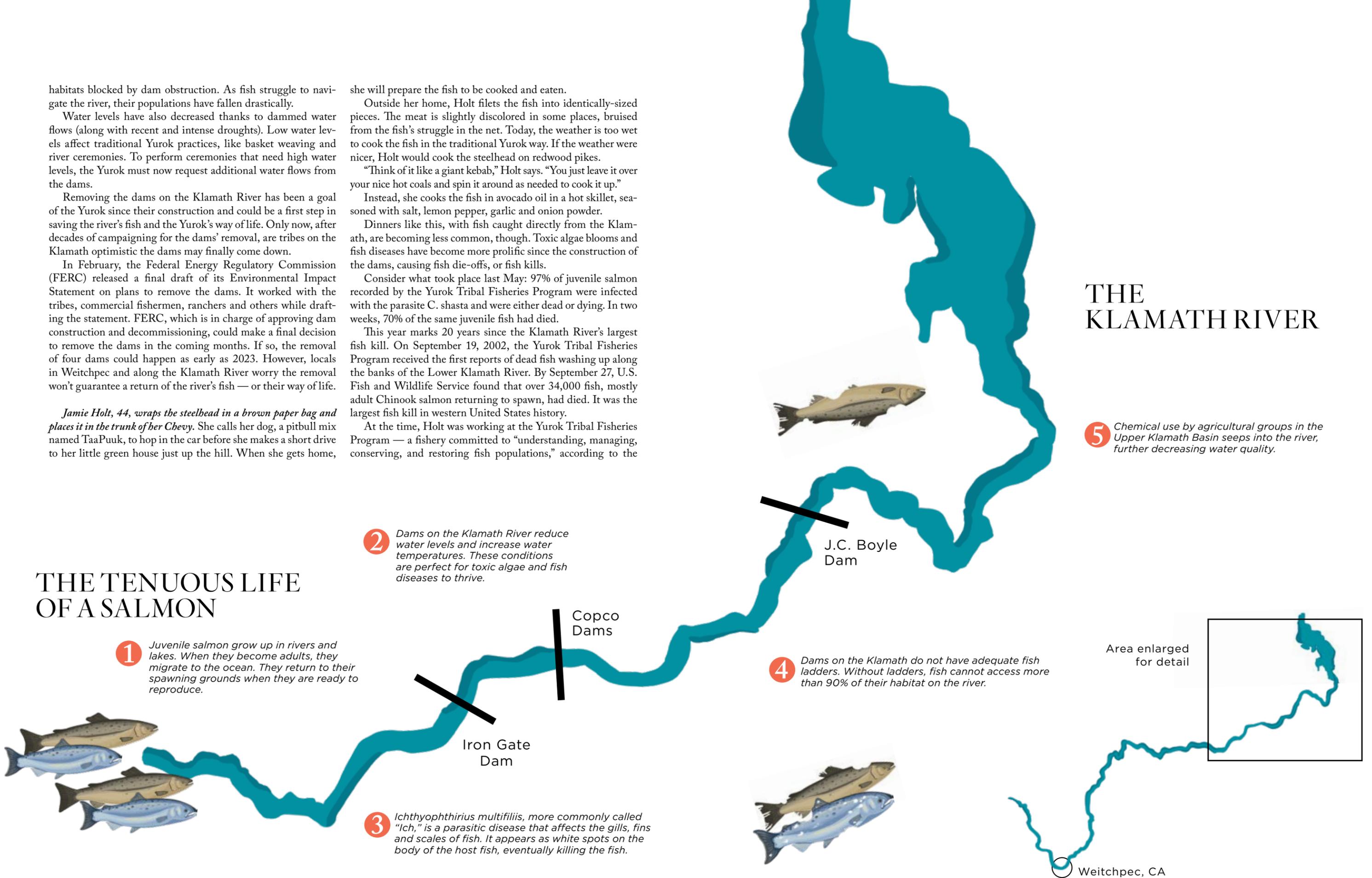
**2** Dams on the Klamath River reduce water levels and increase water temperatures. These conditions are perfect for toxic algae and fish diseases to thrive.

**3** *Ichthyophthirius multifiliis*, more commonly called "Ich," is a parasitic disease that affects the gills, fins and scales of fish. It appears as white spots on the body of the host fish, eventually killing the fish.

**4** Dams on the Klamath do not have adequate fish ladders. Without ladders, fish cannot access more than 90% of their habitat on the river.

**5** Chemical use by agricultural groups in the Upper Klamath Basin seeps into the river, further decreasing water quality.

## THE KLAMATH RIVER



Yurok Tribe website. She recalls preparing for one of the Yurok Tribe's traditional ceremonies, woo-neek-we-ley-goo (or Jump Dance), when she first heard about the dying fish.

"Some of the kids that were down at the river swimming found some dead salmon and they didn't understand why they were able to catch salmon by hand," Holt says. "I got there and went down with the kids and looked and was like, 'No, this isn't right.'"

The Yurok Tribal Fisheries Program discovered many of the dead salmon were located at Blue Creek, a tributary in the lower Klamath River. Low flows and high temperatures, caused by the dams and a drought, forced the salmon into Blue Creek's cool water. Large quantities of fish in a smaller space spread disease among the fish, causing the fish kill.

"As a science department within the fisheries, and as Yurok people, I think it really spurred us toward learning what happened," Holt says. "Why did this happen? How do we make it so it doesn't happen again?"

Tribes on the Klamath River felt freshly motivated to see the dams removed after the 2002 fish kill and increased their involvement in Klamath River dam removal campaigns.

Craig Tucker, 51, served as a spokesperson for the Karuk Tribe in its "Bring the Salmon Home" campaign. Its goal: Remove dams on the Klamath.

Tucker worked closely with tribes on the Klamath to organize protests against owners of the Klamath River dams. At the time, PacifiCorp, the electric power company that managed the dams, was owned by Scottish Power. Tucker and a group of Indigenous activists flew to Glasgow, Scotland, and crashed a Scottish Power shareholders meeting, demanding the removal of dams on the Klamath River.

"Native people, they'll do anything to save their fish," Tucker says. "They'll fly to foreign countries and engage in acts of civil disobedience, if that's what it takes. I think that level of passion on their part cannot be matched by anyone else."

Wendy Ferris-George, 48, an enrolled member in the Hupa Tribe and a descendent of the Karuk, Chamberiko and Yurok people, has been a part of the dam removal campaign since 2002. She was among those who traveled to Glasgow.

Today, Ferris-George is on the Klamath River Renewal Corporation's (KRRC) Board of Directors. The KRRC is a non-profit organization advocating for dam removal on the Klamath. If dam removal is approved by FERC, the KRRC will take charge of removing the dams and restoring the Klamath River. Ferris-George was elected by the Karuk Tribal Council to serve on the board as a representative of the tribe.

The KRRC has worked closely with FERC to ensure compliance with local, state and federal laws,

which can be tedious and time-consuming. It has also worked with individuals in the Klamath Basin — such as the tribes, commercial fishermen and ranchers — to ensure their needs are being met by the KRRC's work.

"The KRRC board is the best group of people I've ever worked with in my life as far as being dedicated," Ferris-George says. "It's literally the largest project in the world."

This summer, FERC will make its final decision on whether to approve Klamath dam removal. If the project is approved, four dams — J.C. Boyle, Copco No. 1, Copco No. 2 and Iron Gate — will be removed. It would be the largest dam removal project in U.S. history. The previous largest removal took place in the Elwha River in Washington in 2014. While the Elwha is still recovering, summer steelhead, once thought to be extinct in the river, have returned.

*The dam removal doesn't guarantee* revival of the Klamath River's health, but tribes on the Klamath are hopeful the river could see rebounds of its own native fish populations.

"Mother Nature has a way of healing itself, and if given time and the proper ability, which is, you know, no dams, I can't help but think that it will start to heal itself," says Holt, who has now worked at the Yurok Tribal Fisheries Program for 20 years. "As it starts to heal itself, it just becomes hopefully a more hospitable home for these babies and adults that have been hanging on through these inhospitable times."

As stewards of the river, the Yurok feel it is their responsibility to care for the Klamath. In return, the river will provide nourishment. Climate change will continue to threaten fish populations after the dams are removed, but the Yurok believe an undammed river is a step in the right direction to restoring the Klamath River's vitality and the Yurok's way of life.

"As Yurok people, we were put here to take care of this little place on Earth," Holt says. "The salmon that live in this river, this little place on Earth — it is our responsibility. We are the stewards of this land."

While many have never even heard of Weitchpec, it is where the salmon have returned to spawn for thousands of years, and a place the Yurok call home.

On a bank of the Klamath River, Willson talks about teaching his 4-year-old son, Thomas Willson III, how to fish — just as Willson's father taught him. On a recent fishing trip, Willson and his son caught a lamprey. When Willson let Thomas hold the fish, the boy grew overfond. As it came time to kill the fish, Thomas clutched it close and refused to let go.

Willson chuckles at the memory. "A long time ago, I heard stories of when you could catch as many fish as you wanted, to where your arms would be so tired from fighting fish," Willson says. "In our lifetime, we'll see a change when the dams come down, and in my son's lifetime, we're going to see a lot of fish." ♦



**ABOVE:** Jamie Holt, Yurok Tribe fisheries technician, prepares a filet of steelhead at her home in Weitchpec, California. She will cook it on a redwood stick.

**LEFT:** Yurok Tribe member Thomas Willson guts a steelhead that he caught from a net on the Klamath River.

*“We have been basically fighting a losing battle with developers, farmers and loggers for the last 40 years to maintain habitat in the rivers for salmon,” says commercial fisherman David Bitts, who stands on his boat, Elmarue, in Eureka, California.*



## fishing open waters

David Bitts bought Elmarue in 1985. The boat is an old salmon troller, but it gets the job done. Bitts, 73, is a commercial salmon fisherman based in the Woodley Island Marina in Eureka, California. However, decreasing salmon populations in the Klamath River have forced Bitts to travel far from home to catch enough salmon. “In the worst of times, we might not get to fish above San Francisco much,” Bitts says.

To prevent overfishing of endangered salmon, California Fish and Game Commission only allows a maximum percentage of Klamath River salmon to be caught. This means commercial fishermen must travel farther from the mouth of the Klamath to avoid catching its salmon.

Bitts says he wants to continue fishing for as long as possible, but he’s not sure how much longer that will be. He hopes that dam removal will increase salmon populations in the Klamath.

“There’s three major hopes that will come about as a result of dam removal: We’ll have a big improvement in water quality, we’ll knock the worm back with the scouring effect of gravel and sand in the wintertime, and we’ll enable the fish to return to, I think, several hundred miles of spawning and rearing habitat,” says Bitts. “The combination of those three things can only be good for fishermen.”

— *Chloe Bryant*