

YOUTH PERSPECTIVE

Fish be not dammed

- Kayla Carpenter and Erika Chase
Sunday, September 25, 2005



For thousands of years our people -- the Hupa, Yurok and Karuk Indians in remote Northern California -- have lived along the Klamath River and its tributary, the Trinity. Our cultures were based on the natural rhythms of acorn and deer seasons, as well as the runs of wild salmon, steelhead and eels. This way of life served our people well for 10,000 years.

Even today, our medicine people lead ceremonies emphasizing balance. "Take only what you need from the land and you will live sustainably for generations to come," they say. Although we have been forced to assimilate into modern culture over the last 150 years, our generation is carrying on Indian traditions.

Within the last century, however, certain changes put our future at stake. Several dams built between 1909 and 1964 on the Klamath and Trinity rivers are reducing the flow of water, allowing toxic algae to bloom and destroy water quality. As it turns out, the water needed for our salmon is also valuable to potato, barley and strawberry farmers to the north. They require heavy irrigation and receive subsidies from the federal government to uphold their practices.

In the fall of 2002, 64,000 salmon died of disease on the lower Klamath River before ever reaching their spawning grounds. Thousands of fish flowed down what quickly became a river of death. Young and old cried in sadness and despair. We fear that with a few more years like this, our generation will see wild salmon become extinct in our rivers, just as buffalo all but vanished from the Great Plains.

With the diminishing salmon populations, which served as a good source of protein, the health of our people is also declining. Epidemics of diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity and depression are leading to predictions of shorter life spans for our children. As young people inheriting such a world, what are we to do?

With help from friends and family members, we decided to organize an event to bring awareness to the plight of the salmon and the threatened health of our people. We created an annual Salmon Run Relay to educate and unite our communities, encourage local political involvement and inspire exercise and healthier eating. The relay route mimics the run of the salmon from the mouth of the Klamath up its two major tributaries, where wild salmon still spawn. Now in its fourth year, the success of the Salmon Run Relay has surprised even us. What began as just an idea has become a major event in which every spring there are more and more participants. In collaboration with the local elementary and high schools, a Fish Fair is held on the same day to inspire students to get involved.

What's even more surprising to us is that the Salmon Run Relay is about to become known nationwide. On Friday, we will join five other young activists from around the country as recipients of the Earth Island Institute's Brower Youth Award, the nation's most prestigious environmental award for young people. One of the other winners, Andrea Garza, founded at the age of 13 an organization to protest a nuclear waste facility in Texas. Another, 17-year-old La Constance Shahid, started a wetlands rehabilitation project in San Francisco's Bayview-Hunters Point. Zander Srodes, a 15-year-old from Florida, is on a mission to save the loggerhead sea turtles from extinction. Daniel Rosen, 19, is working to create a bioregional farming network on the Navajo and Hopi reservations in Arizona to provide healthy foods to local people. And Jessica Rimington, 19, started an exchange program between high-school students in 16 countries to work on international poverty reduction.

The Brower Youth Award is a great honor, but knowing we can help our people and our future by taking action is what drives us, and we're sure that's true for the other winners. Based on all of our stories, we know that any young person anywhere in the country can be a powerful force of change. With all of the problems in a world out of balance, we can't sit back and hope they cure themselves. As Indian people and as young people, our future depends on the defense of our natural resources.

We can all make a difference. All it takes is the spirit to act.

Learn more

What: Ceremony honoring winners of the 2005 Brower Youth Awards for youth leadership in conservation, preservation and restoration

Where: Calvin Simmons Auditorium, Henry J. Kaiser Convention Center, 10 Tenth St., Oakland

When: Friday, 7 p.m. Doors open at 6 p.m. for information about the organization.

Hosts: Van Jones and Julia Butterfly Hill. Featured guests include Crown City Rockers and Youth Speaks.

Admission: Free

More information: www.broweryouthawards.org/files/

Kayla Carpenter and Erika Chase, both 17, are seniors at Hoopa Valley High School in Hoopa (Humboldt County) and recipients of the 2005 Brower Youth Award.

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