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Salmon Without Rivers: A History Of The Pacific Salmon Crisis

By James A. Lichatowich



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"Fundamentally, the salmon's decline has been the consequence of a vision based on flawed assumptions and unchallenged myths.... We assumed we could control the biological productivity of salmon and 'improve' upon natural processes that we didn't even try to understand. We assumed we could have salmon without rivers." --from the introduction

From a mountain top where an eagle carries a salmon carcass to feed its young to the distant oceanic waters of the California current and the Alaskan Gyre, salmon have penetrated the Northwest to an extent unmatched by any other animal. Since the turn of the twentieth century, the natural productivity of salmon in Oregon, Washington, California, and Idaho has declined by eighty percent. The decline of Pacific salmon to the brink of extinction is a clear sign of serious problems in the region.

In *Salmon Without Rivers*, fisheries biologist Jim Lichatowich offers an eye-opening look at the roots and evolution of the salmon crisis in the Pacific Northwest. He describes the multitude of factors over the past century and a half that have led to the salmon's decline, and examines in depth the abject failure of restoration efforts that have focused almost exclusively on hatcheries to return salmon stocks to healthy levels without addressing the underlying causes of the decline. The book:

- describes the evolutionary history of the salmon along with the geologic history of the Pacific Northwest over the past 40 million years
- considers the indigenous cultures of the region, and the emergence of salmon-based economies that survived for thousands of years
- examines the rapid transformation of the region following the arrival of Europeans
- presents the history of efforts to protect and restore the salmon
- offers a critical assessment of why restoration efforts have failed

Throughout, Lichatowich argues that the dominant worldview of our society -- a worldview that denies connections between humans and the natural world -- has created the conflict and controversy that characterize the recent history of salmon; unless that worldview is challenged and changed, there is little hope for recovery. *Salmon Without Rivers* exposes the myths that have guided recent human-salmon interactions. It clearly explains the difficult choices facing the

citizens of the region, and provides unique insight into one of the most tragic chapters in our nation's environmental history.

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Editorial Review

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The image of salmon battling upstream through whitewater cataracts to spawn in their birthplace is integral to any happy vision of the Pacific Northwest. Sadly, because they face more insidious obstacles than swift currents, few people today actually witness this remarkable spectacle. Armed with exhaustive research and an ability to synthesize his findings into a concise, readable indictment of the status quo, Jim Lichatowich, a fisheries scientist for 30 years, traces the sudden decline of Northwest salmon populations following the onset of Euro-American settlement. He points a finger at the usual suspects: logging, mining, damming, grazing, irrigation, commercial fishing, and development. Moreover, he cites the political establishment for a failure of nerve. Since the shift from a Native American "gift" economy based on sustainability to a profit economy based on self-interest and short-term financial gain, the historically resilient salmon have met one adversary after another, with little or no help from the legal apparatus charged with their protection. In fact, federal and state governments have responded to the deepening crisis mainly by building fish hatcheries up and down the West Coast. Contrary to the beliefs of entrenched bureaucrats and sport fishermen, says Lichatowich, hatcheries have merely diluted the gene pools of wild stocks while allowing resource extractors to continue their multifarious operations and politicians to shirk their responsibilities. In 1960, for instance, after decades of declining runs, the Washington Department of Fisheries reported, incredibly (and characteristically), that new advanced management techniques would soon result in "salmon without a river"--more welcome news to those who would continue to exploit these iconic fish and their habitat. At the dawn of the 21st century hundreds of hatcheries still operate, yet Northwest salmon populations have decreased 95 percent.

Lichatowich is a learned and persuasive advocate for wild salmon. He's also eloquent, as in this description of his first visit to the Columbia River's Grand Coulee dam:

As I sat there wondering and swatting mosquitoes, the face of the dam lit up. It was the start of the nightly laser show.... Appropriately, the lasers sent a series of large green dollar signs floating through the darkness. Then a series of laser salmon swam across the face of the dam. Here were the ideal salmon, I thought, the fish that fit perfectly into our worldview. We have complete control over them--press a button and they appear; press another and they change from green to red; press another and they swim over the dam. Salmon and dams are compatible--as long as you are not particular about the kind of salmon.

So what to do? Lichatowich opines that we need a new "worldview," one that places natural resources within a context of respect and sustainability. He looks to state and federal governments to enforce the protections already granted by laws like the Endangered Species Act. And he sees evidence that public perceptions may be changing on such issues as habitat conservation and biodiversity; breaching four dams on the lower Snake River to aid fish passage would have been unthinkable even in the early 1990s. Whether this new worldview can save salmon in time is another question. --*Langdon Cook*

From Library Journal

Lichatowich is a well-known fisheries biologist who has contributed extensively to the literature on salmonid populations during his 25-year career. His book offers a biologist's view of the salmon crisis in the Pacific Northwest, discussing the failure of restoration efforts, which have concentrated on returning salmon to the rivers without understanding the cause of the fish's decline. Two other works have recently covered this

same subject: Freeman House's Totem Salmon: Life Lessons from Another Species (LJ 4/15/99) and Joseph E. Taylor III's Making Salmon: An Environmental History of the Northwest Fisheries Crisis (LJ 9/1/99). Totem Salmon is by far the easiest of the three to read, but Salmon Without Rivers and Making Salmon thoroughly address the complexity of the salmon crisis from both a biological and historical perspective. All three deserve a place in public and academic libraries. For a well-indexed, scholarly treatment of the problem, academic readers should also consider Upstream: Salmon and Society in the Pacific Northwest (National Academy Pr., 1996) for reference needs. A Barbara Butler, Oregon Inst. of Marine Biology, Charleston
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From Kirkus Reviews

A careful account of the making of an environmental crisis. Few people know the biology of the anadromous salmon as well as Lichatowich, a government fishery scientist who has devoted more than three decades to studying the fish in the Pacific Northwest. Lichatowich offers a brief but thorough natural history of the seven species of Pacific salmon, an ancient creature whose lineage can be traced back more than 400 million years. Those species have met with near-extinction in just the last 150 years, a time coincident with the arrival of Euroamericans into the Northwest and their employment of wide-scale, destructive environmental practices that displaced the long-evolved salmon-based economies of the Northwests indigenous peoples. Lichatowich points out that what underlies the salmon crisis is not so much an easily identifiable and corrigible single cause as a set of related issues: deforestation, poor stream management, overfishing, and habitat destruction. Habitat degradation, he writes acutely, has not simply been a long-overlooked by-product of our industrial economy. It has been the direct result of the large-scale ecosystemic simplification that is a central and guiding vision of that economy. That oversimplification, he argues, has led to the false view that salmon are best grown in hatcheries, like so many hothouse flowers, rather than allowed to flourish in free-flowing rivers, a habitat that itself is increasingly rare, replaced by dams and reservoirs. He examines the long battle to preserve the Northwests watercourses, noting that as early as 1928 the state of Oregon unsuccessfully proposed that its rivers be deemed fish sanctuaries and protected from commercial development. We simply cannot have salmon without healthy rivers, he closes by observing and making those healthy rivers will involve restructuring the economy of an entire region, an unlikely prospect. Environmentalists will find much of value, if little comfort, in Lichatowichs pages. (Tables, figures, photos, not seen) -- Copyright ©1999, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

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