

Responding to the Ways Climate Change Threatens the Food, Health, and Culture of the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community

The Swinomish Indian Tribal Community lives near a low-lying reservation on Fidalgo Island, Washington. For centuries, salmon have been a critical part of the tribe's history and cultural heritage, their traditional foods and lifeways.

Yet vanishing habitat and warming waters have now threatened the salmon's very existence, and by connection and extension, the health and well-being of the tribal community. In response, the Swinomish are leading the fight against climate change—rooted in their traditional knowledge and practices.

Larry Campbell, a tribal elder, and Jamie Donatuto, the tribe's environmental health analyst, are part of the efforts to address some of those impacts. They recently sat down with StoryCorps.

Transcript:

Larry Campbell: I grew up playing on the Skagit River. The water was right in our backyard. I think it gave me an inherent sense of knowing why the natural world was so important to our existence.

The foods that we grew up on, they come from the water. The salmon that come up the rivers are the center of our existence, our health, community, and success. We always hear people say, "Oh, I gotta go feed my spirit. I gotta go find the fish."

We are taught that our salmon have souls just like human beings. That's why many of the tribes in this part of the world here have what we call the first salmon ceremonies.

The Swinomish, we call ours Blessing of the Fleet. It's the idea that you pay that honor and respect to the salmon hoping that we would have a successful fishing season.

Jamie Donatuto: When did you become aware that first foods were at risk?

Larry: Growing up there always seemed to be a lot of salmon. And in '91, I put my boat away to go back to college. And the boys were teasing me saying, "Wow Larry, we caught a lot of fish after you put your boat away. We had enough to last us all winter."

Ten years later, the same guys are saying, “Oh, Larry, you saw something we didn't. We're not catching any fish now.”

Our salmon have pretty well disappeared. Kind of feel like it's going to get worse before it gets better. What happens to our culture if there's no salmon? Salmon is culture, culture is salmon.

Jamie: How do you think climate change is affecting Swinomish?

Larry: When our tribe declared their war on climate change, the scientists and politicians were still arguing, “Is climate change a reality, or is it a figment of someone's imagination?” And that political argument is still going on. So what happens to us little by little, our culture gets shortchanged.

We're still following our ancient patterns. And any time that you upset a pattern, it's going to cause a distinct effect on your health.

Jamie: How do you feel like what we do is helping?

Larry: Well, we always got to have hope, otherwise we wouldn't have motivation to do our work. And one of the things that we've been doing here at Swinomish is that we've been sending some people like me and you out to talk on behalf of the tribes.

We have to bring in our neighbors to find a way to make them partners in what we're trying to do. How can we work together in a way that is complementary?

Jamie: Such Swinomish way.

Larry: Yeah.

Jamie: Gather the people.

We also talk about improving access to first foods and bringing youth back out on the land and reconnecting them with their elders and all these different little pieces that all come together.

Larry: I'm a firm believer that if we know who we are as a people through our cultural and spiritual laws, that we'll be stronger as people. We'll be healthier, and we'll be happier. And so that's the thing that we're trying to do.

Jamie: I think about how fortunate I am for you and I to be able to be doing this. I mean, 21 years ago? It's so funny to think about how long ago that was.

I knew that you were an elder and a knowledge holder, and it was an intimidating process to walk into your office. But then, we just started talking and laughing and it felt so comfortable. And I think that's when we really started to work together.

Larry: It's really been a mutual understanding there. We need each other.

Jamie: We're a good team.