

A New Deal for the Columbia River

The Sierra Club's Columbia River Team is mobilizing for a modernized Columbia River Treaty - one that addresses historic harms by placing Ecosystem Health, Indigenous Sovereignty, and Public Participation at its center.

We have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to redefine the future of the international Columbia River.

In May 2018, the U.S. and Canada began negotiations to modernize the 1964 Columbia River Treaty. The capstone of the dam building era, the CRT is an international agreement that governs water flows throughout the Basin. It has just two purposes: hydropower production and flood-risk management, with no consideration for ecosystems. It was designed without input from sovereign Indigenous nations. The general public was also excluded. An artifact of institutional racism and narrow thinking, the modernized treaty must do better.

The river embodies countless relationships. It flows 1,243 miles to the ocean from its source in southeastern British Columbia, drawing water from Idaho, Montana, Washington, and Oregon. The watershed is the size of France. Today, more than 5 million people live here. For many Indigenous nations, it has been home since time immemorial.

Once among the world's richest salmon watersheds, the Columbia is now the most dammed river system in the world.

Salmon used to swim all the way to the river's headwaters, spawning in countless tributaries and enriching whole ecosystems. Today, they are blocked from the upper 698 miles past Chief Joseph, Grand Coulee, and other upstream dams. The U.S. and Canada can repair some of this damage by designing a new treaty that returns salmon to blocked areas and shapes river flows to improve ecosystem health.



The Columbia River is the Northwest's most important ecological and economic artery. The Columbia system supports Indigenous, commercial, and recreational fisheries, hydropower production, irrigated agriculture, commercial transport, flood plain development, river recreation, and more. Beyond human uses, the Columbia has life of its own. It's time to give back to the river itself.

A modernized Columbia River Treaty is a historic opportunity to reshape the relationships that govern the river. People of the region are standing up to demand that the U.S. and Canada add "Ecosystem-based Function" as a 3rd primary purpose of the treaty and reform treaty governance to support this new mandate. We can't miss this chance to prioritize ecosystem needs in dam operations, restore salmon to blocked areas, build climate resilience, bolster public participation, and redress historic injustices to Indigenous nations.

Now, we're building the Columbia River Team. As part of the Grassroots Network, we work for the Sierra Club on the Columbia River Treaty and the reintroduction of salmon above Grand Coulee Dam. We generate progress through the power of grassroots action.

We work closely with regional partners. We work in support of Indigenous nations. We coordinate with NGOs in the U.S. and Canada, and other Sierra Club teams working on connected issues like the restoration of the lower Snake River. We educate and involve the public.

We need volunteers to seize this unique opportunity!



SIERRA CLUB
Grassroots Network

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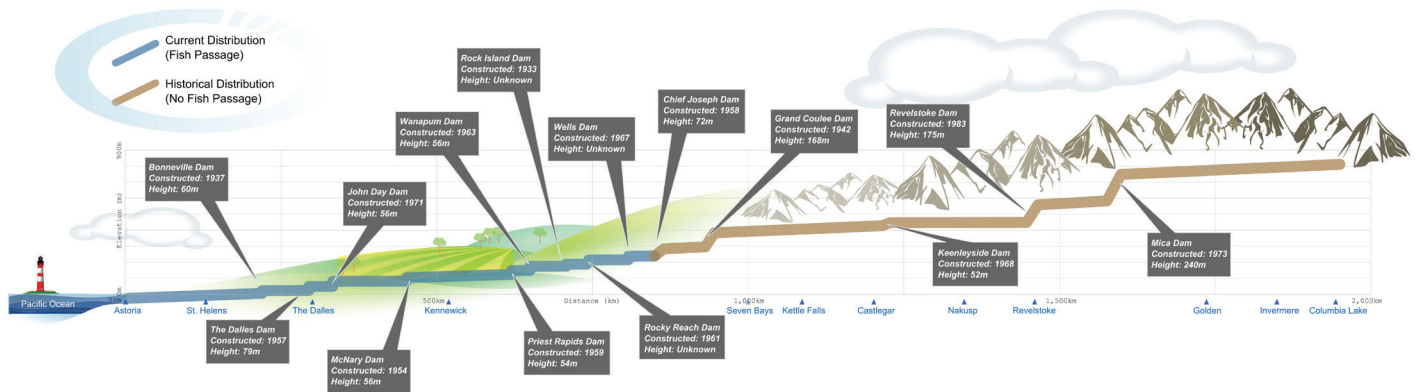
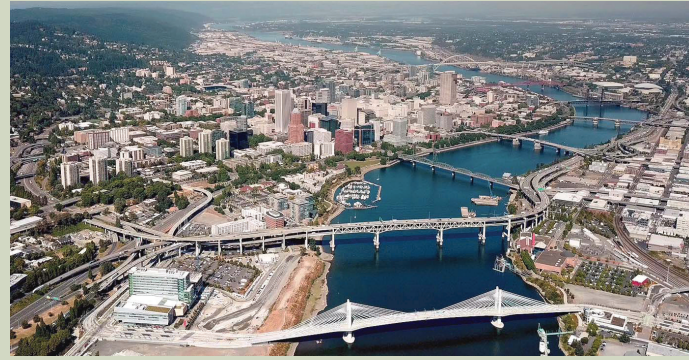
How did we get here?

1948 - 1964: The infamous Vanport Flood in Portland and a desire to increase regional hydropower capacity motivates the two countries to begin treaty negotiations. Ultimately, the treaty is signed in 1961 and ratified in 1964.

1964 - 1975: Canada builds the three dams used to implement treaty operations (Hugh Keenleyside, Duncan, and Mica). The United States builds Libby Dam in Northwest Montana with its cross-border reservoir (authorized by the treaty but operated separately).

2010 - 2014: Both countries conduct domestic reviews of the existing treaty and set out initial priorities. This results in the “U.S. Regional Recommendation” and the “B.C. Decision” as guiding documents for each country.

2018 - Present: Negotiations begin in May 2018. Initially, both countries choose to exclude Indigenous nations from the process. One year in, Canada reverses this decision by inviting the Ktunaxa, Secwepemc, and Syilx Okanagan nations to serve as formal observers. In the U.S., tribes are still not at the table. Negotiating sessions are ongoing and confidential.



The Road Ahead:

1. International negotiations conclude and the two countries present a modernized agreement to the public. Depending on how much is changed, it may or may not require ratification by each country's legislative body. As negotiations continue, we need to keep pressure on negotiators to craft a genuine new deal for the river's future.
2. Domestically, each country reviews its representative(s) for the treaty's governing system. Currently, the “U.S. Entity” consists of the Bonneville Power Administration and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The “Canadian Entity” is just BC Hydro, the provincially owned electrical utility. Entity membership needs to be reformed to support Ecosystem-based Function as a new treaty purpose. The rights of Indigenous nations must be respected. The public needs a stronger voice.
3. Pending full agreement, the modernized treaty comes into force for a period of time yet to be determined. With climate change and a complex future, it's not enough to implement a static system. Treaty operations must be guided by the principles of adaptive management with ongoing research and refinement to respond to changing environmental conditions and ensure goals are met.