

Background Information on the Lummi Nation

The Lummi Nation of Washington State has depended on salmon as an important resource for thousands of years. As residents of the northern Puget Sound area, they call themselves the Lhaq'temish, (LOCK-tuh-mish) or People of the Sea. "The Lummi are salmon people; salmon is culture, and culture is salmon," says Merle Jefferson, director of the Lummi Natural Resources Department. For more than 20 years, the community has been involved in numerous programs to preserve and enhance the severely threatened salmon populations that migrate along the watersheds of their "usual and accustomed lands"—lands addressed in treaties between the Lummi and the United States.

With strong cultural, economic, and political ties to salmon, the Lummi reach far beyond the reservation borders to mitigate the environmental challenges to this important resource. They operate two hatcheries and have conducted numerous efforts to repair and protect the salmon ecosystem. These projects include building logjams to ease problems caused by severely eroded lands, particularly in key salmon spawning areas; encouraging reduction in the use of upstream agricultural fertilizers; replanting deforested areas; and preserving old-growth forests. The Lummi Nation works in partnership with numerous intertribal, government, academic, and scientific groups to secure a sustainable future for the salmon and the Lummi people.

Before the arrival of Europeans, the Lummi lived in a large area that included much of today's Puget Sound area in Washington State and British Columbia, Canada. They established villages near the sea and in the forests, and moved according to the seasons. They lived in multi-family cedar-plank longhouses. The freshwater streams and estuaries of Lummi territory are home to crabs, shrimp, marine fish, salmon, and birds. It is estimated that this rich environment contains more than 200 species of fish, more than 200 kinds of sea birds, and about 26 species of marine mammals.

The traditional means of subsistence for the Lummi were fishing for salmon and other kinds of fish, gathering shellfish and plants, and hunting waterfowl and mammals. Salmon, however, were their most important food source. Because salmon migration is cyclic, Lummi people's lives revolved around the fish. Their movements coincided with the arrival of the salmon, and their fishing success depended on the size of the annual salmon runs. Thousands of years of close observation and experience in their environment allowed the Lummi to develop sophisticated and ingenious ways to create everything they needed—from clothing and shelter to tools—and to invent unique methods of catching salmon.

Knowing that fish on spawning runs would rise toward the surface as they neared underwater reefs, Lummi fishermen developed a reef-netting technique that took advantage of this behavior. The Lummi harvested their abundant resources effectively, but they also observed an important cultural ethic of respect and preservation, which remains an essential element of their traditional culture. Although reef-netting is no longer practiced by Lummi fisherman, they remain proud of this traditional innovation.

Today, the Lummi reservation comprises about 20,000 acres in Whatcom County on Puget Sound, in northwestern Washington State. Most Lummi people work in tribal government or tribal enterprises or in nearby towns, although many still earn an income from fishing. Their elected government, the Lummi Indian Business Council, is made up of 11 members.

In the 1855 Treaty of Point Elliott, the Lummi handed over all but a small portion of their vast traditional lands for the rights to fish in their “usual and accustomed” places, as well as some other provisions. Over time, it became increasingly difficult for the Lummi to gain access to the important fishing sites they had always known, and to compete with commercial fishing operations. In 1974, in a landmark legal case known as the Boldt Decision, the right of the Lummi and other tribes in Washington State to harvest salmon was affirmed as guaranteed in their treaty.

The Lummi not only rely on salmon, but they embrace their responsibility to sustain it. Salmon is part of their identity and their culture, and they see the survival of this fish as integral to the health of their culture, their economy, and the lands on which they have thrived for millennia. Overfishing and especially the destruction of habitat have contributed to the decline of the salmon. Much of the salmon habitat has been lost because of population growth, degraded watersheds after generations of farming, and logging that left rivers without shade and choked with pollutants and silt.

Pronunciations of Lummi language terms in the videos:

Schelangen (shuh-LANG-un)—word in Lummi language that means “Lummi way of life.”

Soy’eqw (SOY-yook)—word in Lummi language that means “fishing.”

Schaenexw (STCHAN-ook)—word in Lummi language that means “fish.”