

# Rivers, salmon and the natural church



## Highland Views

Chris Highland  
Guest columnist

I've often said that I have saltwater flowing through my veins, since I grew up in the Pacific Northwest where cold, clear rivers meet the salty sound and sea. My family had a small cabin in the Cascade Mountains a short walk from the Skykomish River. It's icy flow from the snowcapped peaks was perfect for wading, tubing and fishing. On the weekends when we skipped church because we were up at the river cabin, I would wake up early to smell fresh forest air, and hear the sound of waking birds and a crackling fire. Later in the day, we'd be back at the smoky firepit to roast trout, gifted from the bounty of the river. That immersion in wild mountain beauty filled my senses so much more than Sunday morning services (I could spend a whole Sunday in cut-off jeans and a t-shirt!). I have no doubt there were times, dressed up and sitting in a carpeted sanctuary, surrounded by colored glass obscuring the outdoors, my mind wandered away, up to the high for-

est and river — the natural church.

A series of dams are being removed from the Klamath River in California and Oregon. This follows the removal of a dam on the Elwha River on Washington's Olympic Peninsula. I have been to both streams and felt their power and beauty. Native tribes have depended on the Klamath and its sacred salmon for centuries, but the damming of the river has caused destruction not only to the environment but to culture and religion. As one tribal leader explains: "To the Natives, the church is our river, and the cross on top is our spring salmon, and that is the pedestal of our religion...The salmon is not just something we eat, not just something from the river; it's a way of life." ("Nature Undammed," Washington Post, Dec. 14, 2023). My boyish heart feels a connection to this way of thinking and believing.

I would suggest there are some dams to remove in our thinking and believing too. And it may begin with a more natural understanding of religion as a way of life in relation to the earth. Damnably difficult, I know. Consider these words from another Native elder: "It's like you're removing a clot — we've got four clots in our artery...and now we're getting surgery done."

Nature is an open sanctuary for those

who believe in other worlds, and for those who believe this world is enough. If we honor and respect, even reverence, the world as we know it, we can have more curiosity and humility — there's so much more to know, to learn, to experience. Could we take a cue from indigenous people and welcome the salmon to be our teachers, even our preachers? What if we sought wisdom and "spiritual guidance" from the non-human world, the wild things including trees, rivers and all wild things? This isn't about becoming naturalists or even environmentalists; it's about understanding our small place in the puzzle of the living world to which we belong. Believing we are dominant and superior only exposes our hubris and ignorance. Consider the ancient words from the Book of Job (12): "Ask the animals, and they will teach you, or the birds in the sky, and they will tell you; or speak to the earth, and it will teach you, or let the fish in the sea inform you." Scriptures point to the divine. Yet they also hint at becoming more naturally human, and humane.

Dad took me deep sea fishing once. I was about 10 and quickly found the rolling motion of the ocean too much for my sensitive stomach. Dad helped me keep my line in the water and somehow I

caught the largest salmon of the day. Not surprising, I never went ocean fishing again, but I never lost my taste for the silvery salmon from the sea. If these amazing creatures disappear because of over-fishing, pollution or dammed streams, I would feel the loss. I think the Earth would too. Certainly those who depend on the health of the sea and streams, who enjoy a symbiotic relation with the waters and wildlife, would suffer, if not disappear themselves.

In my mind, any spiritual beliefs "worth their salt" ought to care about the streams, the sea and the salmon — all life on earth. Any religion that has its head in the heavens without a commitment to preserving a "heaven on earth" — a home in the here and now that must be shared — is not only a distraction from what truly matters, but a danger to all. A "secular church" is not disrespectful to super-natural congregations, it merely reminds us: Nature, as any respectable deity, requires a free-flowing channel, like an undammed river.

*Chris Highland was a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville. His books and blogs are presented on "Friendly Freethinker" ([www.chighland.com](http://www.chighland.com)).*