Sacred and shared: The future of the Columbia River

by John Rosenberg in the July 19, 2000 issue

What do a Catholic bishop, a Nez Perce tribal elder, a wildlife biologist, a flyfishing surgeon and a commercial fisherman have in common? Each one values a personal connection to the Columbia River and has a passionate concern for its future. Yet the commercial fisherman's vision of the river's future may conflict with that of the tribal elder; the wildlife biologist who wants to control river access may disagree with the surgeon who wants to fly in for a fishing vacation. Can these conflicting visions be shared, let alone crafted into some kind of consensus?

The Great River of the West, along with its tributary, the Snake River, drains a 259,000-square-mile watershed that includes parts of six western states as well as British Columbia. It is the river of Chief Joseph and of Lewis and Clark. It is also the home of the Pacific salmon, the regional icon and key to the northwesterner's identity and self-understanding. "The Pacific Northwest is simply this," writes journalist Timothy Egan: it is "wherever the salmon can get to. Rivers without salmon have lost the life source of the area."

Unfortunately, in large portions of the watershed the life source has been lost forever. Once the most prolific salmon-producing river in the world (historic annual runs were as large as 16 million fish), the Columbia has seen many of its salmon runs become extinct. Fourteen stocks of Pacific salmon are listed as "threatened" or "endangered" under the Endangered Species Act. Most of the salmon runs that sustained a thriving tribal economy for millennia now exist only in history books and in the memories of the region's oldest residents.

The salmon's demise has been brought on by a variety of factors. Analysts call them "the four H's": harvest, hydropower, habitat and hatcheries. Overharvest of the fish dates from the rise of commercial fishing in the late 19th century. Then, with the New Deal and the commissioning of Bonneville Dam in 1938, the Columbia was developed for hydropower. A disastrous loss of habitat has resulted from damming

the river, from urbanization and from a relentless exploitation of the region's abundant natural resources. Finally, in an attempt to mitigate all of the losses brought on by the other factors, the Northwest reacted with an indiscriminate overreliance on fish hatcheries.

The various "stakeholders" fiercely debate each of these factors and propose conflicting visions of the river's future. One vision is shared by the four major tribal groups, who foresee restoration of a more free-flowing river and the removal of four major dams on the lower Snake River to provide increased spawning habitat for endangered salmon. These groups—Warm Springs, Yakama, Nez Perce and Umatilla—retained rights to half of the salmon in exchange for ceding their lands to white settlers in the mid-19th-century westward expansion. These reserved treaty rights have been tenaciously defended by the tribes and upheld by the Supreme Court in numerous court battles.

The second vision is summed up in Woodie Guthrie's famous ode to Grand Coulee Dam: "Roll along, Columbia, you can ramble to the sea / But river while you're rambling, you can do some work for me." Twenty-nine federal dams have transformed the free-flowing river that Lewis and Clark first encountered into a series of slackwater pools that irrigate the high-desert orchards and wheat farms of the Columbia plateau. A barge transportation system has made Lewiston, Idaho—450 miles from the Pacific Ocean—into a major inland port. Most important, the river generates inexpensive hydroelectric power that fuels the region's booming economy and is the envy of electric ratepayers throughout the country.

The book *Salmon Without Rivers* is one of the best summaries of the current salmon crisis and its wider context. Author and biologist Jim Lichatowich refers to these two competing visions as the natural economy and the industrial economy. He would agree with historian Richard White, who says that "the Columbia runs through the heart of the Northwest in ways we never imagined. It flows along the borders of the numerous divisions in our fractured society. To come to terms with the Columbia, we need to come to terms with it as a whole, as an organic machine, not only as a reflection of our own social divisions but as the site in which these divisions play out."

In September 1999, the Columbia River brought 75 concerned people to Richland, Oregon, for a "Day for Moral Deliberation." Among them were bishops, retired farmers (most working farmers were in the middle of harvest), barge operators,

scientists, government workers, elected officials, concerned citizens, tribal representatives, anglers and clergy. The conference, titled “The Columbia River: Many People, Many Perspectives,” was a forum for listening and speaking about hopes and fears for the river’s future. It was presented by the Lutheran Public Policy Office of Washington, the Lutheran Advocacy Ministry of Oregon, the Washington Association of Churches and Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon.

Moral deliberation, as a practiced art and a commitment to process, needs more energy from the Christian community. While tribal leaders have given long and eloquent witness to the spiritual meaning and significance of Nch’I-Wana, or the Big River, Christians have been slow to follow suit. Much of this reluctance is due to what theologian Paul Santmire calls Christianity’s historic ambivalence about creation. But these days, theological reflection on the environment relies too much on abstract principles. Only rarely is it tied to an actual location.

Last year, Roman Catholic bishops in the Pacific Northwest challenged that inertia by launching the Columbia River Pastoral Letter Project (see www.columbiariver.org). Bishop William Skylstad of Spokane is helping lead the eight dioceses of Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana and British Columbia in a three-year process of analysis, reflection, imagination and action that will culminate with a pastoral letter in the fall of 2000. Drawing on biblical themes of jubilee and living water, the bishops invite the people of the region into conversation about the future of the Columbia. They offer a vision of the Columbia River as a sacramental commons—a tangible sign of God’s creativity, presence, grace and blessing, and a common home providing for the needs of all God’s creatures. Their effort has met with enthusiastic ecumenical response.

The pastoral letter project has been widely hailed in the media and welcomed by regional leaders and policymakers. Antone Minthorn of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla told the Richland group, “This is the first time we’ve been invited to the table.” His words are a well-taken reminder that the church needs to listen more closely and carefully to its neighbors. When it agrees to join in the slow, painstaking process of moral deliberation, the church brings insights from its biblical and theological tradition that add a rich dimension to the conversation.

It’s not a moment too soon. The region has already invested over $3 billion on salmon recovery, and the looming prospect of energy deregulation promises to complicate the debate even further. As White points out, “Our society faces exactly

the kind of dilemma it is least prepared to deal with; the quarrels of the Columbia cannot be settled by dividing up the pie. Dividing the Columbia up among the users has not worked and will not work. Nor can a solution be found by reducing uses to dollars and selecting the most valuable ones."

Along the Columbia, Christians are learning that the relationship of human beings to the place that provides them with life and livelihood is too important and complex to be determined by a cost-benefit analysis. The questions raised during these days of moral deliberation go to the heart of our theological self-understanding. "Ironically," says Seattle Mayor Paul Schell, "as we work together to save the salmon, it may turn out that the salmon saves us."