

What's in a Tradition?

White Bluffs Tigraych, from the Hanford Reach installation, photo by Glenn Cole-Klee (glenncoleklee.net).



By Simone Anter
(Yonemichanilla
Apache), Staff Attorney

Tradition: the passing down of customs or beliefs from generation to generation.

Columbia Riverkeeper's founders believed that a thorough cleanup of the Hanford Nuclear Site was essential to protect people's health and the Columbia River. Our predecessor group, Columbia River United, formed in 1989, the year the U.S. government's mission at Hanford changed from plutonium production to cleanup. Since that time, the custom of advocating for Hanford cleanup was passed down, year after year, and remained at the forefront of our work.

You could say that we have a tradition here at Riverkeeper, a tradition of tireless advocacy for Hanford cleanup.

What does it mean to carry on a tradition—to pick up the bag your predecessors packed and continue to carry it forward? How do you pick up that bag when it seems impossibly heavy to lift? How do you add your own contribution?

A legacy of this country's insatiable military industrial complex and its total disregard for the sacred spaces of indigenous people, Hanford is a behemoth. The toxicity and quantity

of contamination set it apart from other cleanup sites, meaning that advocacy presents a unique, challenging, and multi-generational effort devoid of many visible "successes." Oftentimes, working on Hanford advocacy means convincing folks that we can actually do something about the problem. Lucky for my work, Riverkeeper's tradition of advocacy over the last 20 years provides plenty of examples of how people have changed the course of cleanup, without which Hanford would be a drastically different, more dangerous place.

I like to remind people that without their collective voices, stories, actions, and adamant commitment to holding state and federal governments accountable over the years, Riverkeeper and our allies would never have accomplished the following:

- Blocked several proposals to make Hanford a dumping ground for Greater Than Class C radioactive waste and toxic mercury.
- Convinced the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to invest in groundwater treatment, which led to a massive pump-and-treat system that treated billions of gallons of groundwater and removed tons of toxic and radioactive pollution before it reached the Columbia.

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- Persuaded EPA and the U.S. Department of Energy (Energy) to address toxic hexavalent chromium contamination, which was upwelling into critical salmon habitat near decommissioned plutonium reactors. In response to our collective public pressure, EPA and Energy started cleanup with deep digs near the Columbia, reducing the amount of chromium entering the river.

- Successfully challenged President Trump's proposal to shrink the Hanford Reach National Monument, a proposal that would have degraded the Reach's natural, cultural, tribal, and fisheries resources.

- Gathered over 200 people along the Hanford Reach for a day to celebrate the memory and legacy of Yakama Nation leader Dr. Russel Jim and his extraordinary contribution to the cleanup of Hanford. Boat rides, shared stories, food, dance, and song coalesced to remind people that Yakama Nation calls this area their home and that everyone has a right to a clean and safe Columbia River.

current of the Columbia. I see children tossing rocks into the river, squealing with unabashed glee as they splash in the cold water. From the shade, elders sit back watching them. Not far away, a group of people, hands a kaleidoscope of colors, paint. Laughter erupts behind me and bits of scattered conversation float towards the water on the hot afternoon wind. As I sit here, I think about how the generations before me fought to keep and protect this area, this homeland, so that we can sit here today and breathe it all in.

So, what does it mean to carry on a tradition? I believe it means picking up the bag and recognizing that it's heavy because it is filled not only with setbacks and disappointment, but also with victories, unity, and a commitment. You and I can choose to carry on the tradition of fighting for a cleanup of Hanford that protects all people, plants, animals, salmon, and the Columbia River.

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Flashback to the event last summer honoring Dr. Jim. I sit on the rocks, watching the unusually slow, glassy

20 YEARS STRONG

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YEARS OF VICTORIES!