

Sucker Harvest

By US Bureau of Reclamation

For thousands of years, the Lost River suckers and shortnose suckers have been important to the Klamath Indian culture and essential to their subsistence. In 1983, the Klamath Indian Tribes, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service jointly initiated a biological study of Klamath Basin suckers. The data concluded that the sucker population was decreasing due to poor water quality and levels in Upper Klamath Lake. This prompted the Klamath Tribes to restrict their sucker fishing in 1985, and by the next year, tribal leaders agreed to terminate all sucker fishing. Rather than hold their traditional sucker harvest celebrations, as pictured here in 1905, the Klamath Tribes today hold "Return of the C'wam" (Klamath language for the Lost River sucker, pronounced "cha-wam") ceremonies.

The decision to curtail irrigation water to Klamath Reclamation Project users in 2001 was based on a federally mandated Biological Opinion that determined that Project water was needed to protect endangered coho salmon and Lost River and shortnose suckers. The events of 2001, however, polarized Klamath Basin communities and created conflicts between farmers and conservationists, farmers and government agencies, and farmers and tribal members. During the spring and summer of 2001, faculty from Oregon State University and the University of California Cooperative Extension studied the economic, social, institutional, and natural consequences of the Klamath Basin crisis. They interviewed, among other groups, Klamath Basin Native Americans, all of whom recounted recent incidents where tribal members were shunned or treated badly by non-Natives. Some were threatened with guns and run off the road in retaliation for the water restrictions. In one case, a tribesman was beaten by non-Natives. Tribal officials advised members to walk away from arguments or other tense situations.

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