

## The Impact of Hanford Nuclear Reservation on Pacific Northwest Tribes.

When you hear the word Hanford, what do you think of? Nuclear power? Toxic waste cleanup? Contamination? Would you be surprised to think about Northwest Indians? You should.

The Hanford nuclear facility was created as the final processing site for the Manhattan project – the project that created nuclear materials for the United States military’s weapons projects. Hanford was the site of the B reactor, the world’s first fully functioning plutonium production reactor. Among other uses, materials created at Hanford went in to the atom bomb dropped on Hiroshima at the conclusion of World War II.

With this in mind, it may surprise you to know that the swath of land Hanford sits on has been the hunting and fishing grounds for a number of Northwest tribes, including the Walla Walla, Cayuse, and Umatilla, since time immemorial. The waters of the Columbia running through Hanford are Chinook spawning grounds, and, prior to Hanford, provided bountiful salmon that these nations harvested in abundance without the fear of being poisoned by radioactive materials. While settlers now occupy much of the land once home to many Northwest tribes, 1855 Treaty rights guarantee Native people “usual and custom” access to much of the land and river that Hanford occupies.

Sadly, today the 586 square miles of land known as Hanford Nuclear Reservation, including a number of tribes’ “usual and custom” hunting and fishing grounds, is the largest toxic waste cleanup site in the world. Hanford contains millions of gallons of toxic waste that the United States government is now charged with cleaning up and removing. The waste created over the history of Hanford has been leaked by wind, land, and air into the eco-system over the nearly 70 years of Hanford’s existence. While most Hanford’s reactors were shut down by 1971, the devastating effects of nuclear contamination to the environment continue today.

The negative impact of Hanford on the surrounding tribes and communities is hard to fully measure. For decades Hanford funneled water directly from the Columbia River to cool its reactors, then, returned the water, without treatment directly to back into the river. This practice was finally ended in 1972, but its devastating effects are still being measured. In addition to contamination of the water, communities in the surrounding geographical regions, known as “down winders,” suffer high rates of thyroid disease and, some suggest, elevated leukemia levels in children born to fathers living near Hanford in the early years of its nuclear production.

Many Northwest tribes rely on the Columbia River for their sustenance, both physically and spiritually. The effect of Hanford on the Columbia's Salmon population has disproportionately affected the Indian people whose livelihoods and spiritual life are centered on the Salmon. Members of the Umatilla, Yakama, and other fishing communities along the Columbia have a disproportionately higher exposure to Hanford's toxic byproducts do to their Salmon consumption. In a 1992 article, the New York Times reported that, "[a] Government contractor's preliminary study of radiation released over the years from the Hanford Nuclear Reservation into the Columbia River has found that the radiation reached the Pacific Ocean 200 miles away, contaminating fish and drinking water along the river and exposing as many as 2,000 people to potentially dangerous doses." The report continues, "most of those exposed to such doses were subsistence fishermen, primarily Indians who live along the river."

Many of the Tribes of the Columbia are now engaged with the Department of Energy and the Environmental Protection Agency to develop strategies to restore the habitat of the Columbia basin devastated by the Hanford facility. In the words of the Nez Perce's Environmental Restoration and Waste Management organization, "[e]nhancing the expertise of our people will ensure that the Nez Perce people will outlive radioactive and hazardous materials."

### Reflection Questions

1. Discuss the affects of Hanford's waste materials on the Indian people of the Columbia? What do you think you would do if the source of your physical and spiritual self were contaminated?
2. The 1855 treaty guaranteed tribes usual and accustomed access to the area occupied by Hanford for hunting, gathering, fishing, and religious customs. Based on what you know, do you think that these promises were honored? Why or why not?
3. It has been nearly 50 years since Hanford stopped releasing water used to cool reactors into the Columbia, yet Hanford's long term affects have yet to be measured, and the cleanup process has been slow and difficult. If you were a member of one of the affected tribes, how would you want the government to respond?