



# The Original Salmon Stewards

## How the Winnemem Wintu Tribe Helped Return Endangered Chinook Salmon to the Homeland They Share

The original habitat of California's endangered winter-run Chinook salmon is also the ancestral home of the Winnemem Wintu Tribe. In the summer of 2022 the Tribe joined federal and state agencies to bring winter-run Chinook salmon eggs back to the McCloud River, where the fish once spawned in cold mountain water that kept their eggs alive through the heat of the California summer. The return of Chinook salmon to the river for the first time since Shasta Dam blocked their migration in the 1940s was a response to repeated years of severe drought. It was also an important step toward restoring California salmon and the culture that has long surrounded them.

This is the story of the Winnemem Wintu people and their relationship with winter-run Chinook salmon, which they call the Nur.

### California Grows, Salmon and Tribes Decline

Salmon and steelhead flourished in Central Valley rivers for millions of years, but are now at risk of extinction. The salmon of the Central Valley brought food and vital nutrients from the ocean to the inland watersheds, supporting lush and balanced ecosystems from mountain headwaters through the Sacramento San Joaquin Delta and San Francisco Bay and beyond. Like the endangered Southern Resident Killer Whales, California tribes including the Winnemem Wintu relied on salmon to sustain them. When gold was discovered, settlers flocked to California and decimated streams and rivers by washing away stream beds and gravel bars where salmon spawned. Businesses capitalized on the miners and exploited the abundant salmon runs, taking millions of pounds of fish out of the Bay and the rivers, amassing untold wealth. During this time, tribes and their cultures plummeted, suffering a similar fate as the salmon; driven from their homelands and hunted for bounties.



*Chief Sisk of the Winnemem Wintu Tribe*

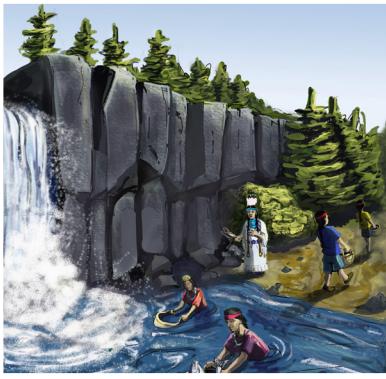


### Funneling Water to the Desert

After the gold rush, the Central Valley developed into the major agricultural producer it is today. A consistent freshwater supply was scarce and the demand to grow crops outweighed the needs of the salmon and decreased their survival odds in California's mediterranean climate. A system of high rim dams were built encircling the Central Valley, blocking salmon from the cold upper headwaters they need to spawn. When Shasta Dam, the eighth tallest in the United States, was built, returning salmon could not reach their spawning grounds in the Upper Sacramento, Pit and McCloud rivers to lay their eggs and complete their life cycle. Similar to the salmon, the Winnemem Wintu were forcibly removed and made homeless, the dam flooded hundreds of Winnemem Wintu villages and took away their Nur.

*Left: The Winnemem Wintu and other tribes lit fires along the river, believing they would help guide the fish upstream. Illustration by Blane Bellerud.*





Left: Tribal members collected fish in baskets and transported them around barriers, like waterfalls. The fish were transported so they could continue upstream to lay their eggs in colder waters. Illustrations by Blane Bellerud.

## The Middle Water People of the McCloud River

The Winnemem Wintu Tribe know themselves as the Middle Water People of the McCloud River. Their culture and lifeway is dependent and intertwined with their relatives the Nur, the Central Valley salmon, that is thousands of years old.

The salmon sustained an indigenous Central Valley population in the tens of thousands and indigenous peoples recognized their responsibility to protect and care for the salmon. Recovery and reintroduction is the traditional language of fisheries managers as they describe how they will save Central Valley salmon from extinction. Tribes like the Winnemem Wintu have been caring for salmon for centuries, ensuring that they return to their spawning grounds to lay their eggs and support the next generation of fish and people. The Tribe would light fires along the rivers mimicking stars to guide the fish upstream toward their Mount Shasta headwaters.

When fish met impassable barriers like waterfalls, tribal members collected fish in baskets and transported them around the falls on foot so they could continue upstream to lay their eggs in the colder waters. The Winnemem Wintu always allowed enough of the first fish in a run to continue upstream to reproduce. They harvested only what they needed, and kept the waters pristine. Tribal ceremonies continue to teach younger generations about the importance of the Nur, as well as how to honor their relations. "We are dependent on the salmon as the salmon are dependent on what we do to the Environment." - Mark Miyoshi, Winnemem Wintu Tribal Historic Preservation Officer



Above: In partnership with the Winnemem Wintu Tribe, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, United States Fish and Wildlife Service, and NOAA Fisheries celebrate the return of endangered winter-run Chinook salmon to the McCloud River. Tribal members of the Winnemem Wintu Tribe, led by Chief Sisk, perform a ceremony wishing the fish a fighting chance.

Right: A satellite view of California Central Valley, the Winnemem Wintu Tribe's ancestral homeland and historical habitat of California's endangered winter-run Chinook salmon. The map features the locations of Shasta Reservoir, Shasta Dam, and the Sacramento and McCloud Rivers.

## A Partnership for the Future

The return of winter-run Chinook salmon eggs to the McCloud River in 2022 hinged on the support and knowledge of the Winnemem Wintu people. They are original stewards of the species and are partnering with government agencies like NOAA Fisheries, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, and the California Department of Fish & Wildlife to restore passage for winter-run Chinook salmon to their safest and most productive habitat. The government agencies are testing specialized remote site incubators designed to support reintroduction of winter-run Chinook salmon on a larger scale. Please visit our NOAA Fisheries website for the latest progress in bringing salmon back into the Central Valley, back to the McCloud River, and back to its keystone role in all the ecosystems where they swim.



Produced in partnership with the Winnemem Wintu Tribe



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