



Drought Relief Bill Threatens to Drown Sacred Sites of a Northern California Tribe

Wednesday, 26 August 2015 00:00

By Rucha Chitnis, Truthout | Report

The McCloud River gurgles and gushes down the Cascade Range, gathering streams from the towering Mount Shasta, a mountain of mythic and sacred symbolism to many. The river pours down three waterfalls over basaltic lava flows, where Chinook salmon once heroically jumped up the falls to spawn and propagate. This August, members of the Winnemem Wintu tribe gathered for their annual "salmon challenge," an effort to trace the path of their revered fish as it once swam its way up the McCloud River. The venerated salmon are long gone: The Shasta Dam's construction in 1944 framed a permanent deleterious barrier, and the salmon were unable to reach their spawning grounds upstream to regenerate as they had for millennia.



(Photo: Rucha Chitnis)

Winnemem Wintu men dance by a sacred fire on a morning of cultural dances from different indigenous communities.

"We are a salmon state. We believe that whatever happens to the salmon, happens to us," said Chief Caleen Sisk, tribal and spiritual leader of the Winnemem Wintu, a tribe of 125. "Shasta Dam destroyed the homes of the salmon. The dam also drowned our homes and sacred sites, and we were left homeless like the salmon."

The Winnemem have survived a violent history and legacy of colonization, diseases and dispossession. During the California Gold Rush, according to Pratap Chatterjee's [Gold, Greed and Genocide: Unmasking the Myth of the '49ers](#), the US government paid bounty hunters to kill Native Americans - \$5 for a head in some instances - which decimated their population and drove them off their land. The Winnemem estimate that they had some 15,000 members before colonial contact. By 1910, their numbers had dwindled to 395.

“Whatever happens to the salmon, happens to us.”

The Winnemem Wintu are known as the Middle Water people, their identity inextricably and spiritually linked to the McCloud River and the anadromous salmon that once thrived in the waters. According to their creation story, the Winnemem emerged from an artesian spring at Panther Meadows on their sacred Mount Shasta at 7,500 feet. As the humans emerged with other animals, the nur (salmon) gifted the voiceless humans its voice in return for an unbreakable covenant that the people always speak on the fish's behalf. The Winnemem have not forgotten.

At their annual salmon challenge on the McCloud River in August, the Winnemem mimicked the journey of the salmon, swimming in the lower falls and hiking their way to the middle and upper falls for the dips and dives that the salmon used to follow before they were exterminated by the dam. This salmon challenge is a way for the tribe to remind the Native youth of the Chinook, which are considered a beloved relative and were once a vital source of nourishment and spiritual strength to the tribe.

The Shasta Dam and a Long History of Injustice

Chief Sisk's parents lived through the gut-wrenching horrors of the construction of the Shasta Dam and the scarring legacy of the boarding school system, where Native children were forbidden to speak their languages or practice their traditional spirituality. Shasta Dam displaced the tribe and drowned 90 percent of the Winnemem sacred and ceremonial grounds that now lie underwater in Shasta Lake, the largest artificial reservoir in California.

"My father fought for the US during World War II," Sisk said. "He returned from the war to find his homeland under water." The dam, heralded as an engineering feat at the time, was built to provide water to the Central Valley Project to irrigate California's crops, including those in the arid lands of the San Joaquin Valley, far to the south.

“For the Winnemem, this dam project is adding insult to injury.”

Gary Mulcahy, a Winnemem member, described the construction of the Shasta Dam as inherently unjust: "The government was supposed to pay just compensation for the land, purchase like land for the tribe, and remove all our ancestral graves and put them in a cemetery and hold it in a trust in the name of the tribe or family." But not one of these promises was fulfilled.



(Photo: Rucha Chitnis)

The Winnemem Wintu's annual "salmon challenge" is an effort to remember their revered Chinook salmon that once heroically swam up three waterfalls on the McCloud River to spawn and propagate.

"They didn't pay for the land," Mulcahy told Truthout. "They removed 183 graves and didn't name the cemetery after Winnemem Wintu. They called it Shasta Reservoir Indian Cemetery." The Winnemem have suffered greatly for these omissions. "Since the Bureau of Reclamation did not put the cemetery in a trust under our name, we did not receive federal recognition as we didn't have an asset in a trust," Mulcahy said. This lack of federal recognition as a California tribe is yet another reminder of the long history of injustices meted out to the Winnemem and precludes them from protecting their remaining sacred sites in a trust.

The California Water Rush

The Winnemem's fate has repeatedly been linked to California's thirsty fields and the seemingly insatiable search for taxpayer-subsidized water to benefit powerful water interests in the state such as the Westlands Water District, the largest agricultural water district in the nation, comprised of roughly 600 farms. In July, Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-California) introduced a \$1.3 billion drought relief bill, touted as a solution to the state's alarming water woes. The bill includes programs to support long-term projects, such as water storage, recycling and desalination. The bill authorizes \$600 million for Calfed water storage projects, which may involve increasing the height of Shasta Dam by 18.5 feet. If approved, this increase in the dam's height will drown most of the 10 percent of the remaining sacred and ceremonial grounds of the Winnemem, fragile remnants of cultural and spiritual sites where the tribe prays, chants and holds its rights of passage ceremonies for young women.

Now the tribe is bracing itself for a long and arduous battle against some of the most powerful and wealthy interests in the state. As California enters its worst year of drought, the stakes are high for many. "Agriculture is 2 percent of the economy but eats up 80 percent of the developed water. With climate change and declining rainfall, we will reach a breaking point and need to seriously examine this archaic system," said Trent Orr, staff attorney at Earthjustice, a group that has represented the Winnemem in the past. "For the Winnemem, this dam project is adding insult to injury. They have already lost their traditional homelands, and now a proposal to flood what remains of their cultural and historical resources is just dreadful from a societal standpoint."

California is a vital fruit, nut and vegetable basket, producing 98 percent of the pistachios and 99 percent of the almonds in the United States. These nuts, especially the almond, have been vilified in recent times as acute water guzzlers. A [Mother Jones investigation](#) revealed that it takes 1.1 gallons to grow one, tiny almond. The almond farms also swallow 10 percent of California's agricultural water supply. These nuts are an impressive cash cow and a tremendously lucrative agricultural export with nearly two-thirds of the harvest shipped to overseas markets, like China and Hong Kong. However, defenders of the almond industry note that its water footprint pales in comparison to that of the meat industry - a pound of beef chugging an astonishing [1,799 gallons of water](#).

“This water is not going to benefit the millions of people in California. It’s going to benefit a small, privileged group.”

When Gov. Jerry Brown ordered sweeping cuts in water use in April, he noticeably did not touch the 80 percent water use by agriculture. "Do the math," said Sisk. "How can the 80 percent of water users have no restrictions?" Both Brown and Feinstein are known to have received contributions from agribusiness: Billionaires Stewart and Lynda Resnick, the almond and pistachio giants of Paramount Farming Company, have made contributions to Feinstein and hosted a party in her honor in their palatial Beverly Hills home. The Resnicks are among other wealthy farmers, whose sprawling operations have received plentiful taxpayer-subsidized California water.

Meanwhile in stark contrast, hundreds of families in the parched San Joaquin Valley have experienced the worst impact of the drought with no running water in faucets at home. And not all farmers are created equal: Small farmers have also suffered the consequences of the drought as wells dry up and drilling deeper is a costly proposition.

California's poor groundwater extraction has taken an ominous toll. Recently a NASA study revealed that California's prized Central Valley was sinking - some parts by two inches every month due to the drought and the indiscriminate pumping of groundwater without sufficient recharging of the acutely stressed aquifers.

A Changing Climate; An Unchanging, Archaic Water Policy?

In light of these developments, Senator Feinstein's drought relief bill might make sense to some but faces intense opposition from others. The cost of raising the height of Shasta Dam by 18.5 feet isn't cheap; it is estimated at \$1.3 billion, which coincidentally equals the dollar amount of Feinstein's drought relief bill.

"The history of federal water projects in California is a way for taxpayers to subsidize dams that could never have been built if they were paid by the beneficiaries," said Ron Stork, senior policy advocate at Friends of the River, a statewide river conservation group. "We need to look at the brutal truth of arithmetic. The \$1.3 billion will probably double the debt of the Central Valley Project [and increase project yield by only 1%]. These dams don't make economic sense today. You cannot squeeze any more water out of these rivers that have already been developed," Stork told Truthout.

“These dams don't make economic sense today. You cannot squeeze any more water out of these rivers.”

There are a couple of legal hurdles in favor of the Winnemem: The McCloud River is protected under California's Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. Stork notes that increasing the height of Shasta Dam would mean unprotecting the McCloud in the state legislature, which would set a dangerous precedent for California's already stressed rivers and wildlife and offer a huge win

for "water buffalos," a term Stork uses to describe politicians serving big agribusiness interests. Another possible hurdle for the dam proponents is the fact that Proposition 1 funds, a 2014 water bond approved by California voters, cannot be used for federal projects.

"We can't solve 21st century problems with 19th and 20th century solutions," said Peter Gleick, president of the Pacific Institute, a group that promotes sustainable water policies. "It's easy for politicians to focus on dams when they ought to be tackling inequitable allocations of water, impacts of local community and impacts on ecosystems. Through agricultural efficiency improvements, expanding water treatment and reuse and urban storm water capture, there is potential for saving millions of acre feet of water, far more than raising the height of Shasta Dam."

One of the purported benefits of the dam height increase, as stated by the Bureau of Reclamation, is the potential to improve the health of the Chinook salmon. "The US Fish and Wildlife Service have already issued an excoriating report saying that this dam project will not serve the purpose of helping the fish," said Orr from Earthjustice. "There are so many entrenched interests in this. The drought offers an opportunity to think more creatively about the solutions. There are legal concerns about the long-term water contracts. The whole system should be entirely revisited," he said.

California's staggering drought has also increased scrutiny of water allocated for activities like fracking and bottled water plants run by corporations like Nestle and Crystal Geyser, not just for the plastic pollution clogging the waterways, but also for the privatization of a public resource.

Two Small Groups Fight Over the Water

"Some people think that this group of 125 people are in the way of progress," said Chief Sisk. "But this water is not going to benefit the millions of people in California. It's going to benefit a small, privileged group of corporate farmers that is going to sell the water to others who can afford it. So it's two small groups fighting over this water," added Sisk, who also has concerns about the toxic mining waste at the bottom of Shasta Lake - a legacy of copper mining that was also flooded by the dam. [Recent reports of mercury](#) in Shasta Lake fish have alarmed environmental groups and avid anglers. "What we are doing is protecting the interests of the people and the salmon's way home. We are protecting people from the toxic waste at the bottom of Shasta Dam," Sisk said.

In the face of the legal hurdles ahead, Sisk believes her tribe is a significant threat standing in the way of dam proponents. Why? "Justice. People in California do believe in justice. Our land was stolen, and there have been no reparations," she told Truthout. The Winnemem are determined to continue educating the public about their history and California water politics.

"This dam is another way of a cultural genocide that keeps us from accessing our traditional lands that make us who we are," Sisk said. The Winnemem would also like to meet Senator Feinstein, whom they have tried to meet on several occasions in Washington, DC. So far, they have only been able to speak with her aides. "We want to meet her face to face. She won't speak to her own constituents, whose culture is almost destroyed because of agribusiness," said Mulcahy, the Winnemem member. Truthout reached out to Senator Feinstein via phone and email for a response and received no reply.



(Photo: Rucha Chitnis)

Chief Caleen Sisk, spiritual leader of the Winnemem Wintu tribe, stands with her children after a sunrise ceremony, with their sacred Mount Shasta in the background.

Meanwhile, Sisk and the Winnemem are determined to bring the Chinook salmon back to the McCloud River. There have been ideas for creating swimways for the Chinook, such as a tunnel. "We are holding the space for the salmon to come back," Sisk said. "If they have a home here, then we, too, may have a home on the McCloud River. Whatever happens to the salmon, happens to us."

Copyright, Truthout. May not be reprinted without permission.

[Want to challenge injustice and make real change happen? That's Truthout's goal - support our work with a donation today!](#)

<http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/32509-drought-relief-bill-threatens-to-drown-sacred-sites-of-a-northern-california-tribe>

[Rucha Chitnis](#)

Rucha Chitnis is a San Francisco Bay Area-based photojournalist and writer, whose stories highlight the power, dignity and counter narratives of women and grassroots movements. She is interested in exploring the intersectionality of gender, race and class in issues of economic and food justice at a time of ecological and climate chaos. Her stories highlight how women of color, indigenous women, women farmers and immigrant women are reclaiming their stories, debunking the victimization dominant narrative and are shaping their futures and destinies through women's rights organizing and by promoting worker rights, immigration reform and people-centered resiliency efforts. Check out her website: [A Woman's Lens](#). Follow her on [Twitter @RuchaChitnis](#).

Related Stories

[Winnemem Wintu War Dancers: Shasta Dam a "Weapon of Mass Destruction"](#)

By Dan Bacher, Indy Bay | Report

[California Water Wars: Another Form of Asset Stripping?](#)

By Ellen Brown, The Web of Debt Blog | News Analysis

[California's Drought Is Part of a Much Bigger Water Crisis - Here's What You Need to Know](#)

By Abrahm Lustgarten, Amanda Zamora, Lauren Kirchner, ProPublica | News Analysis