

Native Currents

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Posted: January 25, 2008 by: [Billy Frank Jr.](#) / Guest columnist

## **People and salmon: We're in the same boat**

Who comes first? Salmon or the humans?"

Washington State Minority House Leader Richard DeBolt asked this important question recently, criticizing salmon protection measures he believes contribute to increased flooding in the region.

He's understandably upset because his community of Chehalis was ravaged by this winter's floods. Our hearts go out to the thousands of people in western Washington who suffered through some of the worst flooding in decades.

Salmon and people are not in a race. There is no first or second place. People and salmon must succeed together.

My tribe, the Nisqually, and every tribe on the Pacific Coast have lived with rivers and with salmon since before recorded history. We've lived with floods, and our success has always been the success of the salmon.

Historically, most floods have been an important part of the salmon life cycle. They bring down riverbank trees that provide in-river habitat for salmon and other fish. Floods also create new salmon habitat by reshaping rivers and providing important side channel habitat for young salmon.

But now that the land around rivers has been changed so much, floods are dangerous to both salmon and people. Hard surfaces like roads and parking lots don't let water slowly seep into the ground. Instead, they flush the water into rivers and streams quickly and violently.

It's like putting your finger on the end of a garden hose and turning it on full blast. The more you try to control the water, the faster it flows.

December's rains came in full force. Many lost everything as rivers overflowed their banks and rolled over dikes. Salmon lost their homes, too, when their egg nests were scoured from rivers and streams and lost forever.

With good stewardship, most ill effects of such floods can be reduced - for people and salmon. In Pierce County, they're making a way for both salmon and people to win.

The Old Soldier Home levee set-back project was recently completed near Orting. By moving an old levee about 1,000 feet back from the river, flood protection will be improved while protecting and restoring habitat for salmon. With the dike set-back, the Puyallup River can act more naturally and has more room to flood. It's like releasing your

finger on the end of the garden hose.

Clearly, we need to focus our energies on helping the people of western Washington recover from the devastating floods. But let's not let that deter our mission to recover the salmon resource - a true indicator of our own well being.

Tribes have always known that people and salmon share the same boat when it comes to survival. We sink or swim together. With that in mind, we should be better prepared for the next big flood.

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