



The Legend of the Lost Salmon

Yakima People - USA

The Creator gave The People good words. He instructed The People in how to care for his creation. The People could live in harmony with Creation by remembering and following these good words.

The Creator told The People that Salmon had been created especially for them. He told them to be sure to show respect and care for their well-being. The Creator told The People, “Be sure that you only bring in as much Salmon as you need to eat, and you will always have plenty.”

For many years, The People lived according to these good words, and lived in harmony. There was always plenty of food.

However, there came a time when The People forgot their role in living in harmony. They thought Salmon would always be there for them, and they thought that harmony did not require anything from them. The People sometimes wasted Salmon, and then neglected to dry all they had caught. Then the young who grew up this way strayed farther from the good words and farther from harmony. The young were distracted by Coyote. While they lived like this, time passed them quickly, and one day, they found there were no Salmon! The People walked up and down the river, looking for Salmon. The children and the elderly grew hungry, and it was a sad time with few answers.

One day, they came upon a dead salmon on the bank of the river. They remembered the good words of The Creator and realized what they had done. The People called a council to talk together about how they

could correct what they had done. They talked about how in past times, those with supernatural powers could bring life back by stepping over a creature five times. Each one of The People tried stepping over the salmon five times, and each time, the same result. The salmon did not come back to life.


The People counseled together and asked each other what else they could do. Then someone suggested that Old Man Rattlesnake hadn't stepped over the salmon five times. Old Man Rattlesnake lived by himself and stayed alone. They sent a runner to fetch the old man and tell him, "Help us! We need your help to bring back the salmon!" The old man asked the runner, "What makes you think I have supernatural powers?" And the runner told the old man, "You are our only hope. Everyone else has tried and failed." Finally, the old man agreed to come, but because he was so old, it took him a long time to make his way to The People.

While they were waiting, Coyote tried his best to convince The People that he had supernatural powers. He told them to watch while he stepped over the salmon. He stepped once, twice, three times, four times, and on the fifth time stepping over the salmon, he moved it with his foot. Coyote tried to convince the people, "Look! Did you see the salmon move? I am indeed supernatural and I have caused Salmon to return!" But The People had finally realized that Coyote was tricking them. The People had finally realized that following Coyote had led them to neglect The Creator's good words. They did not listen to Coyote telling them he had revived the salmon.

Finally, Old Man Rattlesnake arrived. Slowly he made his way to the salmon, and stepped over. On the fifth time, the supernatural powers The People had hoped for were there. Old Man Rattlesnake suddenly disappeared and went into the salmon. The salmon came back to life, and Salmon came back to the rivers.

From that time, The People committed themselves to living in harmony with Salmon. They remembered to follow the good words. And they knew The Creator had told them to show their children how to live in harmony, remembering the example of their grandmothers and grandfathers. □

Adapted by Laurie Roberts, from Oneida-Iroquois descent (2019).

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Comments

Salmon was a fundamental element of the diet of the Yakima or Yakama people during the long winter months, in which survival could not have been easy in the region inhabited by them, in the state of Washington, United States, near the Canadian border. Hence, the creation of a legend that warned against salmon overfishing must have been a vital necessity at some point in the history of this people.

It is believed that the Yakima arrived in these northern territories of the United States 12,000 years ago, but did not form an identifiable tribe until 1750. By 1775 they suffered the first smallpox epidemic, brought by European settlers, and were decimated. By 1910 there were only 2,300 people remaining from the Yakima ethnic group.

Sources

First People (n.d.). Legend of the Lost Salmon. First People: Educational website on Native American peoples from USA and Canada.
Retrieved from: <http://www.firstpeople.us/FP-HTML-Legends/Legend-Of-The-Lost-Salmon-Yakima.html>.

Associated text of the Earth Charter

Preamble: The Global Situation.- The dominant patterns of production and consumption are causing environmental devastation, the depletion of resources, and a massive extinction of species.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Principle 6c: Ensure that decision making addresses the cumulative, long-term, indirect, long distance, and global consequences of human activities.

Principle 7: Adopt patterns of production, consumption, and reproduction that safeguard Earth's regenerative capacities, human rights, and community well-being.

