

Sacred Land Film Project

Around the world,
indigenous people stand up
for their traditional sacred lands
in defense of cultural survival,
human rights and the environment.



Run Salmon Run BY CHRISTOPHER MCLEOD

PHOTOS BY CHRISTOPHER MCLEOD

IT'S DAY THREE of Run4Salmon and Winnemem Wintu Chief Caleen Sisk is on a motorboat, heading from the salty waters of San Francisco Bay to the fresh water of the Sacramento River. A hundred pilgrims have walked for two days through the Delta—Ohlone territory—following the route of migrating winter-run Chinook salmon, as we proceed on a two-week ceremonial journey. Now a dozen of us are on the water, speeding toward historic spawning grounds in the cold rivers on the flanks of Mt. Shasta, 300 miles to the north—if only the salmon could get past towering Shasta Dam.

Gazing down into the water, trying to be a prayerful participant, I imagine that I'm a salmon. I try to see their world. It's murky

and warm—and it gets scarier every day. Hidden among the high-tech windmills by the side of the river are dozens of fracking wells. There are new natural gas pipes being laid down across the river as we motor by, accompanied by five state water officials who are listening to Caleen's insights while seeing the sad state of the river for themselves.

"The mountain called for this ceremony and it's calling the salmon home," says Caleen. "That's the importance and power of this run for salmon."

Caleen points out how the straight, channelized river—with cars whizzing by on each side, on top of artificial levees—provides no place for adult salmon swimming upstream to rest in the shade, or for little

fish headed to the ocean to feed in seasonally-flooded tule wetlands.

We reach the Delta Cross Channel, an artificial canal almost as wide as the main river. Engineers and bulldozers built the canal to move Sacramento River water toward giant pumps that push the water into aqueducts leading to farms and cities far to the south. It's water from Mt. Shasta that feeds the world, and makes a handful of corporate farmers rich—and they want more of it.

The captain cuts the motor. We drift down the middle of the main river and suddenly are pulled toward the eastern side and straight into the Delta Cross Channel. The pumps must be on.

"Imagine being a small, young salmon,



ALL PHOTOS BY CHRISTOPHER MELEOD

Demonstrating at the Bureau of Reclamation in Sacramento, Run4Salmon mascot held by Netchi, with the three people who dreamed up the pilgrimage—Nahko Bear, Pua Case and Caleen Sisk—in the background.

swimming down the river,” says Caleen. “You feel the current going this way, and you follow that flow—you’re thinking ‘the ocean must be this way!’” She nods toward the east and shakes her head. “They get sucked into the pumps, and that’s the end.”

Caleen calls salmon “the magical fish.” The juvenile fingerlings that head down from their home river toward the ocean are three-inch-long freshwater fish. When they get to the Delta—if they can avoid the pumps—they transform themselves into saltwater fish and grow to 30–100 pounds. For the next four to seven years they mingle with salmon from other rivers, traveling far and wide, and feeding everyone in the sea— Orcas, seals, sea lions—as well as people on land. Then, answering a mysterious call, they head back home, re-adapting to fresh water, starting the long upward migration against the flow of the rivers, seeking their birth streams, sensing the Earth’s magnetic field, and “smelling” their original waters.

“The fish have to climb the mountain,” says Caleen.

Along the way the adult salmon continue to feed eagles, otters, bears, wolves and people. Once home in the cold, oxygen-rich water where they started, they spawn and die within a few days, giving life to the next generation, and fertilizing rivers and forests.

As Caleen says, “They never stop giving.” And as Run4Salmon participants learn, it’s not just uphill all the way—there are new obstacles every day.

Sacramento River winter-run Chinook salmon were listed as endangered in 1994. That means they are likely to go extinct without real, substantive changes in their habitat. In waters warmed by climate change, pollution from farms, factories, logging and cities continues unabated. Flood control measures have altered the mean-

Along with her small, determined Winnemem Wintu Tribe, Caleen is fighting for the salmon—and she needs an army of allies. She’s found it in the community that has formed over four years of Run4Salmon, a fourteen-day direct action that balances spirituality and politics. People come and people go. Some participate for a day, some for the full two weeks. These water protectors and prayer warriors make superb use of social media. It is educational storytelling in motion over 300 miles. For many, it is a life-changing experience: protecting sacred land and water under the leadership of local indigenous people. At the end everyone is elated, and exhausted. Like the salmon, we all swim in troubled waters.

When the boat docked in Sacramento, we were met by a dozen Miwok singers who welcomed Caleen and the Winnemem as the sun set. The following day, 50 red-shirted activists stood outside the domed State Capitol chanting and giving media interviews. Six teenage girls from the New Village School in Sausalito



Day one of Run4Salmon 2019—walking through Ohlone Territory in the Delta.

dering course of once free-flowing rivers. And when the salmon approach the high country where Caleen’s people honored and ate them for millennia, they now run into the concrete impasse that is Shasta Dam. There is no bypass, no way around. Now the government wants to make the dam 18.5 feet higher.

held letters spelling “N-O D-A-M R-A-I-S-E.” We sang our way into Governor Gavin Newsom’s office and Caleen delivered a letter demanding that Newsom sign SB1, a bill passed by the California legislature, committing the state to fight Trump administration efforts to weaken the endangered species act, a direct threat to



Direct action at Shasta Dam—the 602-foot-high salmon killer.

salmon recovery. Newsom had unexpectedly announced he would veto SB1, honoring his ties to corporate water and agribusiness interests that provided him with \$637,398 in campaign contributions. A chief from the Amazon happened to be in the Capitol to oppose carbon-trading schemes that threaten indigenous land rights in his homeland. He joined Caleen for a photo op, and then invited her into his meeting with Newsom's staff. Sacred site guardians look out for one another, and are especially sensitive to the irony of politicians who are willing to meet with foreign indigenous leaders while ignoring those who are their constituents.

From bicycles, we saw almond and walnut monoculture, widespread fracking, and sluggish waters in surreal, straight-as-an-arrow, concrete aqueducts. We paused at a giant oak tree in Tehama County, where gold rush settlers lynched Maidu and Wintu people while stealing their lands. There was a cryptic sign that contained no information but a name: "The Witness Tree." A prayer ceremony was held there, tobacco and water sprinkled on the roots.

When it was my turn to run, I carried the eagle-feathered salmon staff through an oak grove along the Sacramento River, with Mount Shasta straight ahead on the northern horizon. I felt fully grounded, a link in an unbroken but fragile chain, part of a vibrant community reaching out to ancestors, salmon kin and future generations.

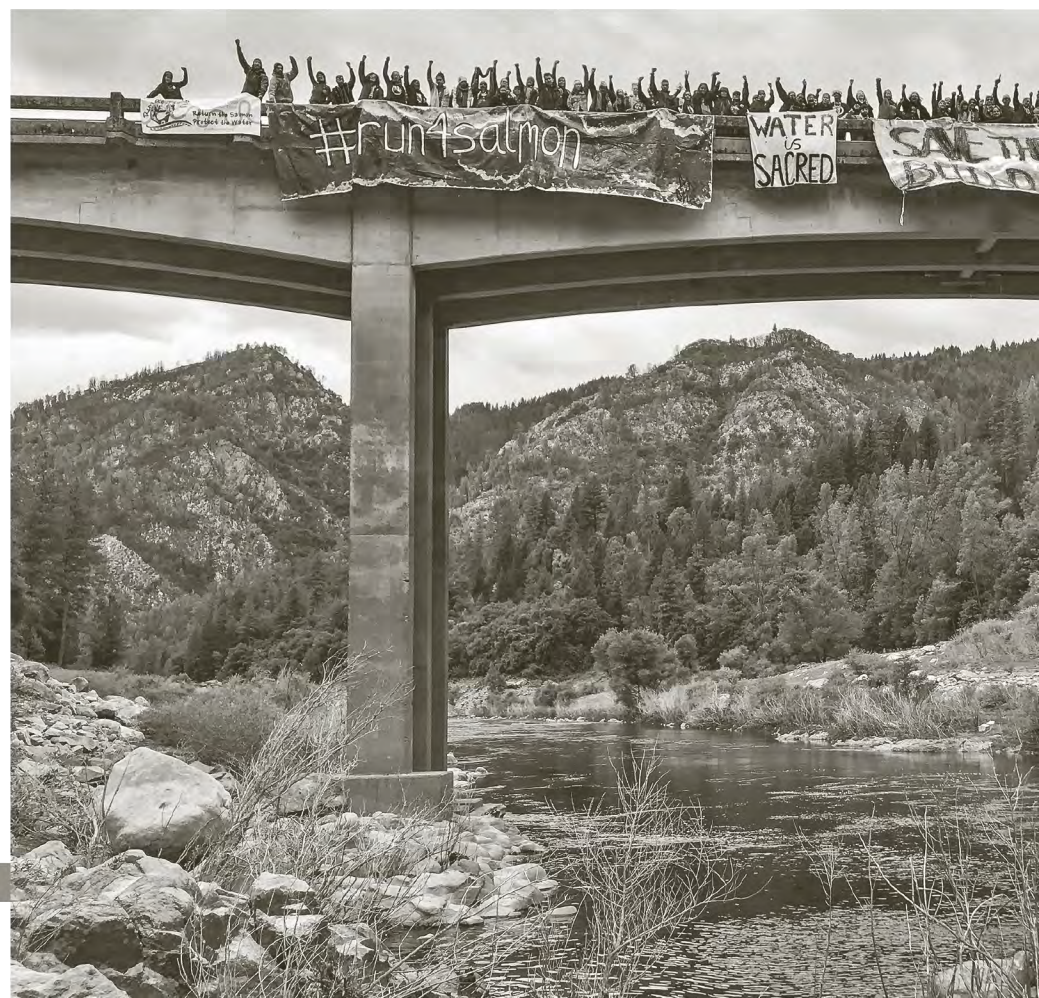
When we reached Shasta Dam, 75 people flooded the visitor center to protest the story told by the Bureau of Reclamation: a glorification of empire and progress and the taming of wild nature. The Winnemem story is entirely absent, no mention of how the dam flooded 82 historic village sites, numerous

burials and sacred places, and more than 100 allotments inhabited by Winnemem families when 26 miles of the McCloud River was turned into a giant reservoir.

The next morning, I climbed into the front of a two-person kayak with a young, strong friend from Chicago, writer Gavin Van Horn, in the back. Amidst a fleet of 20 kayaks and canoes, we began to paddle across Shasta Reservoir (not "Shasta Lake" as the government would have you believe). It was a beautiful blue-sky day as we glided over the drowned Pit River, over submerged copper smelters, toxic waste dumps and towns that all disappeared when Shasta Dam was completed in 1945.

When we turned north up the McCloud River canyon, after twelve days of travel and 1,000 feet in elevation gain, we had finally entered the heart of Winnemem Wintu territory. Making camp that first night beneath a tall mountain known as Gray Rocks, I could only imagine the villages and the history beneath the water. It was right below us that biologist Livingston Stone proposed to build a fish hatchery in the 1870s, only to be confronted by Winnemem men who staged a war dance to defend their river. Under this very water was the village where the renowned Wintu healer Florence Jones grew up and started her initiatory 40-mile solo pilgrimage to Mt. Shasta when she was just ten years old. When the dam was finished and the valley began to flood, Florence helped move 183 burials—including her parents and baby—disinterring them from family cemeteries beneath Gray Rocks and reburying them in a new government-controlled cemetery near the dam.

Padding up the canyon was sobering and sad as we passed Dekkas Rock, where a stone feature known as "the guardian" will go under if Shasta Dam is raised. Beneath me I imagined the flat bench where elders used to meet in councils to discuss acorn gathering and village conflicts, and where



Big Time ceremonies were held. As I looked at two young Winnemem women paddling a wooden dugout canoe, leading us all up their drowned river, it was painful to imagine the feelings their Winnemem ancestors must have had as their homes were bulldozed, allotments lost, and sacred sites drowned.

But the women were smiling, and the people were singing. Our calm liquid pathway was mesmerizing, its velvet smooth surface connected to the waters that bubble up from the sacred spring above us on Mt. Shasta. That life-giving spring is the origin place of the Winnemem people, where they made the commitment to always speak for salmon.

We saw three bald eagles that day as we collectively prayed that the salmon Livingston Stone exported around the world more than 100 years ago—some of whose descendants are thriving today in New Zealand’s Rakaia River—will soon make their way up a new swimway around the dam and home to what’s left of the McCloud River.

The roundhouse captain and singer Gary Thomas led three Winnemem dancers down through tan oak trees, their orange flicker feather headbands radiant amidst backlit green leaves, a stunning image, as they



Gary Thomas (Pomo) sings at the closing ceremony.

walked slowly along a ridge, 20 feet above the crowd that had assembled below in a circle around the fire. Our journey was ending.

The three barefoot dancers swayed like salmon tails, whirled and bobbed like birds. Caleen came over to a couple of Native Californian men I was standing with and asked us to move over and stand behind Gary as he sang. She nodded down toward her moccasined feet, encouraging us to stomp ours in rhythm with the drum.

“This is how we call the salmon,” she said to one of the elders from Hoopa.

As we touched the earth for the next half hour, it turned out to be the perfect place to snap some photos of Gary and the dancers, who finished each short song with a cry as they circled a few feet away.

The ceremony drew to a close with the whole group of 100 people moving in a circle around the fire. The dancers exited

At left, gathering on McCloud River Bridge on the last day of the Run4Salmon pilgrimage. Below, Chief Ninawa Huni Kui from Amazonia with Chief Caleen Sisk at the California State Capitol.



and walked back up through the forest. In the stillness that followed, Caleen pointed at me and filmmaker Will Doolittle and signaled that we should come over to the fire. She said, “Bring your cameras.”

Caleen blew tobacco smoke over Will, placed her hand on his heart, and talked to him in a soft voice.

She blew smoke over my face and hands. Then she looked down and nodded toward my camera, which I lifted so she could blow smoke on the lens and then over the body. Dance Captain Rick Wilson smudged us from behind with sunflower root. The world seemed silent and still as warm sunlight showered down from overhead. It was a blessing, a perfect moment.

Caleen put her hand on my heart and said, “Thank you for telling our story. We need you to do it with this camera and with your words. Always tell it true.”

She looked into my eyes. “Always share our story in a good way. Even if they don’t want to listen, let’s keep telling the story.”



A Victory for the West Berkeley Shellmound

Welcome to Berkeley. Ohlone Territory.

That's the greeting on street signs that went up around the border of my hometown this year—a direct outgrowth of our three-year-long battle to protect the West Berkeley Shellmound. The site of the first Ohlone village on the shores of San Francisco Bay is under threat by a five-story retail/condo project, which has activated an army of indigenous rights advocates and prompted action by the city.

Five thousand years of Ohlone habitation in a thriving fishing village created a 20-foot-high shellmound that covered an area larger than a football field and was the site of hundreds of burials. Between 1850 and 1950, it was leveled. The shells were used to pave Berkeley's streets, and salvaged cultural artifacts and human remains were placed in storage at UC Berkeley.

What's left of the historic sacred site is below ground under a layer of parking lot asphalt, which the proposed building project would unearth to a depth of ten feet. Public outrage was swift: 1,500 letters opposing the project were submitted, with just five letters in support.

The developers switched course. They tried to use California's new affordable housing law, SB35, to get a fast-track permit. The City of Berkeley denied the permit, partially on the grounds that the project would destroy a "historic structure," which would disqualify it from fast-track consideration. Scoffing at the idea that the shellmound site is a historic structure, the owners sued. Berkeley went to court in partnership with Ohlone leader Corrina Gould's Confederated Villages of Lisjan to defend the West Berkeley Shellmound, a city landmark since 2000.

In 1992, Berkeley was the first city in the nation to change Columbus Day to Indigenous Peoples Day. On March 12, 2019, Berkeley Mayor Jesse Arreguin and City Council members Cheryl Davila and Sophie Hahn stood with Ohlone leader Corrina Gould and elder Ruth Orta to unveil the new "Ohlone Territory" signs. They continue a historic tradition of reminding us all of our unresolved past, recognizing the indigenous people who still have a spiritual relationship to this land, and pointing the way to a better future.

But can the shellmound legally be considered a historic structure? In October, Judge Frank Roesch agreed with the City and the Ohlone that it could. The judge wrote:

"A historic structure does not cease to be a historic structure or capable of demolition because it is ruined or buried. That proviso is without basis in the text of the statute and would exclude many of the world's most beloved archeological treasures, such as Hezekiah's tunnel in Jerusalem, the Roman ruins in Pompeii, the mausoleum of Qin Shi Huang, the cave cities of Cappadocia, and the tombs in the Valley of the Kings. Any reading of a statute protecting historic structures that would exclude such features from protection must be rejected."

PHOTO BY JEONNA MCLEOD



From right, Mayor Jesse Arreguin, Cheryl Davila, Corrina Gould, Sophie Hahn and Christopher McLeod unveil street signs. Below, Corrina Gould and Caleen Sisk at the West Berkeley Shellmound.

OUR
NEXT
FILM



Victories are rare. We need to celebrate this one, and also reflect on the factors that created the success: the strong leadership of Corrina Gould, excellent collaboration with growing public support, and a great social media strategy—including six short films contributed by the Sacred Land Film Project—all added up to an exceptional victory.

Stay tuned, it's not over.

—CHRISTOPHER MCLEOD

