

Twenty-two years restoring the Klamath River and Klamath Salmon: Lessons Learned

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The first thing you need to understand is that there is compelling evidence that “we” have not learned a thing. Here’s the evidence:

- ◆ We are currently moving toward creating a little CalFed with federal agencies, state agencies and tribes managing illusory environmental water while the richest and most politically connected irrigators get a guaranteed allocation of water up front along with lots of economically-ruinous subsidies and incentives for inefficient use of energy.
- ◆ We are also on the verge of recreating the same sort of restoration program we have had over the past 22 years, that is, highly collaborative and stakeholder driven with no standards, no requirement for performance evaluation of projects or program. In other words, the “stakeholders” will fund each other and the difficult things – those that involve someone actually giving up something or exercising some restraint – will remain undone year after year. As it turns out, in most cases those difficult things are precisely what needs to be done to achieve “restoration”.

So, because collectively “we” – that is the collection of individuals, organizations and governments that have been involved in Klamath River and Klamath Salmon restoration for the past 22 years – have apparently not learned a thing, I will instead tell you what I think I have learned over the past 22 years:

- ◆ Stay focused on what the best available scientific judgment indicates is needed. Once you stray from doing what truly good science and independent scientists indicate is needed you are on the road to ruin. On the Klamath we thought we were following the best science. But over time we became so collegial and collaborative that we developed group think – our scientific judgments became narrow – as if we had blinders on - influenced by the political, social and financial needs of our organizations and collaborative structures. We became myopic and unaware of our own myopia. So, when the National Research Council (Independent scientists) were brought in and told us we had been prioritizing the wrong areas and not doing the science correctly we politely thanked them and then went back to doing what we were doing before.
- ◆ Pay attention to what is going on in other river basins, particularly western river basins. This will provide a perspective in which your own issues and efforts are seen within the context of broader efforts; it will help you avoid repeating the mistakes and missteps others have made.
- ◆ Don’t forget your own basin’s history. The old adage about those who forget their history applies to our restoration and management efforts.

- ◆ Restoration is not a substitute for regulation: Once you go along with the agencies that want to substitute funding for collaboration and restoration for fair and adequate enforcement of existing laws and codes you are on the road to failure. Restoration and regulation must be kept separate; accept no quid pro quos. A corollary to this lesson is that restoration is not mitigation; allowing restoration funds to be used to mitigate negative impacts for purposes of regulatory compliance (as in CEQA) will guarantee that real restoration will not occur.
- ◆ Don't put off doing the difficult things. As it turns out the difficult things are precisely the ones that are most needed to actually achieve restoration. Putting them off does not make them easier to achieve; it makes them harder to achieve. The tough/critical issues must be front and center from the beginning.
- ◆ Do everything in public; don't agree to private, secret or confidential negotiations. Democratic process is messy, corporations and government bureaucrats don't like it, and it is time consuming. However, there is nothing like the light of day and the oversight of the people as an antidote to mischief and corruption.
- ◆ Don't ever agree to anything important without first sleeping on it. Human beings are social animals. We evolved in small, tightly knit groups and we are genetically programmed to sublimate our own best judgment to the will of the group. When we spend a significant amount of time in any group we – most of us anyway – develop an overwhelming compulsion to agree – whether or not this is in our own interest or in the interest of the species and habitats we are supposed to be representing. Getting away from the group – telling them you need to consult with colleagues and sleep on the proposal before deciding – provides time and space for you to gain perspective and make better decisions.
- ◆ A corollary to the point above is that we do well to cultivate the ability to just say no. In any negotiation, if you are not able to say no, if you are incapable of walking away from the table, you will be taken to the cleaners. Bear in mind that walking away is not final; most good negotiations – those that created durable solutions - involve one or more cycles of walking away and coming back together.
- ◆ Restoration programs that do not have standards and that do not require that all projects be subject to effectiveness evaluation – and that those performance evaluations be considered when allocating future project funding – is a recipe for failure.
- ◆ Spend quality time with the resource/river/stream/land/species you are working to restore. This is the best antidote to group think and losing ones focus. Let the River and its needs – not your needs or societies needs – be your guide and your refuge.