

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.

Salmon Come Home

BY CHRISTOPHER MCLEOD



ALL PHOTOS BY CHRISTOPHER MCLEOD

A half dozen Winnemem women stood in dappled sunlight on the banks of the McCloud River, dressed in regalia, singing softly. As the aqua blue river rushed by, four children in basket hats and orange flicker bird masks carefully poured cups of peach-colored salmon eggs into a cannister filled with frigid river water. Government agencies were launching an emergency plan to hatch 20,000 fertilized eggs. Endangered winter-run Chinook salmon were back in McCloud River water for the first time in 80 years. Not since Shasta Dam blocked the migration route to their high-country spawning grounds had salmon (*nur*) swum with the Winnemem in their home river, the *Winnemem Waywaket*.

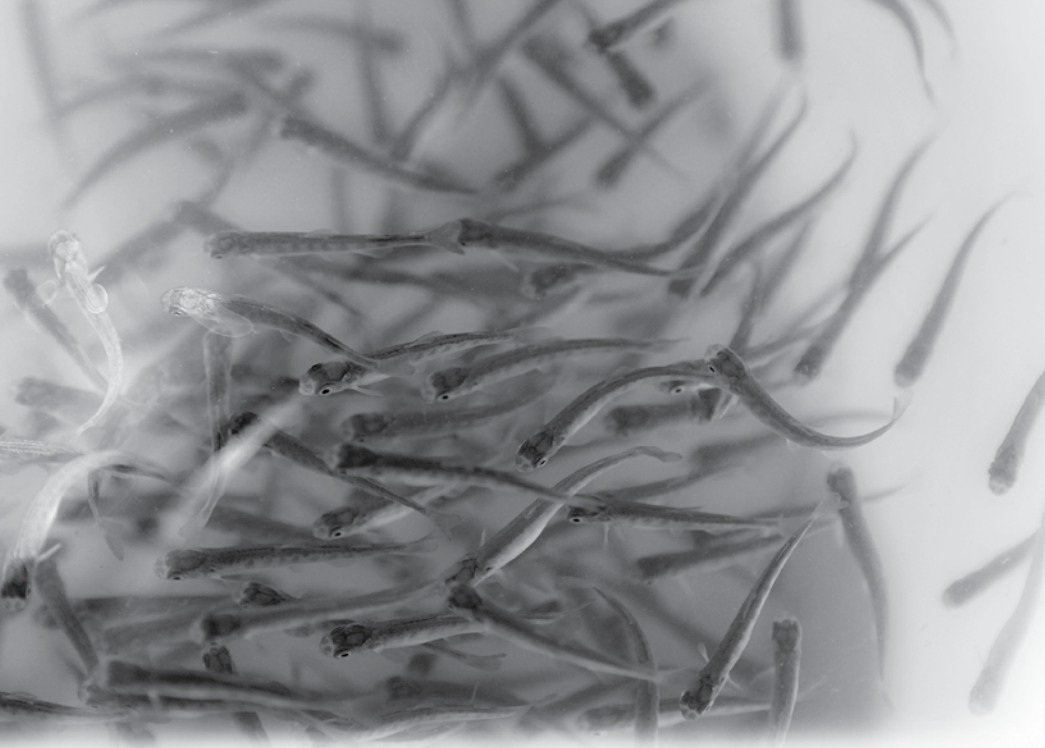
During the summer of 2022, as California endured its worst drought in 12,000 years and the dwindling waters of

the Sacramento River warmed alarmingly in the furnace of the Central Valley, a handful of anxious scientists, distressed about plummeting numbers of winter-run Chinook, decided to take action. The water in the Sacramento River was too warm for the beleaguered salmon to spawn and the massive dams built in the 1940s with no fish passageways continued to prevent migrating salmon from reaching the cold waters of high elevation rivers where the salmon spawned for millennia. So, a group of bold, renegade scientists and administrators from the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) did something that has been woefully missing for the last two centuries: they decided to recognize the traditional ecological

knowledge of the Winnemem people, in the form of Chief Caleen Sisk. Bucking the fact that the federal government does not recognize the Winnemem Tribe, state and federal agencies offered Sisk a co-management agreement, and significant funding, if she would allow them to bring 40,000 fertilized salmon eggs to hatch and grow in the icy waters of the McCloud River, which originates in the snow and glaciers on Mt. Shasta.

This prime salmon habitat is the traditional homeland of the Winnemem, an enchanting, forested canyon where we have been filming for the last 30 years.

Young Winnemem men built an arbor and lit the sacred fire. Women donned regalia to sing the eggs back into the river. Dancers called ancestor spirits to the old Winnemem village site of *Way*



El Xopormas, now a U.S. Forest Service campground.

Caleen's granddaughter Mya carefully scooped a cupful of eggs from an orange Home Depot cooler and lowered them gently into the incubator. Filmmaker Will Doolittle dipped his GoPro into the water for a magical shot of vibrant orange spheres descending through nutrient-rich liquid. His short film was on YouTube the following day.

After the eggs were safely in the water, Caleen invited a dozen excited scientists into a circle around the fire, where they stood in broiling sun for an hour, expressing their feelings, praying together for success. They listened as Caleen shared the Winnemem creation story, in which salmon offered the gift of speech to the people in exchange for a Winnemem promise to always speak for salmon.

Caleen continues to honor this original covenant. The fate of her people is tied to the salmon, and everyone around the fire could feel that tribe and salmon—and let's face it, humanity—are all endangered.

"What happens to salmon happens to the people," Caleen told the sweating scientists.

As the unofficial "media coordinator" for the Winnemem, I interfaced with the government agencies on a media release, checking their facts, adding some history, inserting a quote from Caleen, and vetoing the use of ceremonial photos. Caleen refused to allow government agencies to

use photographs of ceremony as a way to imply Winnemem endorsement of government work. Trust takes time. No matter. In a world starved for good news, this story went viral. In dark times, here was a glimmer of hope. Clearly, people are hungry for hope.



After years of government harassment and duplicity, Caleen remains skeptical. For one thing, she initially agreed to the co-management offer based on the promise that the hatchery-fertilized eggs would be flown in by helicopter to avoid the long, rocky road that leads to the remote site where the eggs would be incubated for a month before entering the river. A few days before the eggs were to arrive, the agencies notified Caleen that a helicopter flight was too risky so the eggs would come on the road. We all knew about daredevil helicopter pilots. The weather forecast predicted calm air. There is a helicopter pad at the site, so this sudden change of plan seemed an obvious, disingenuous move to save money. It was not explained well. The emergency project was not off to a good start.

Caleen was angry about the change, and in our first conversation about the delicate eggs bouncing down miles of rugged road, her daughter Marine weighed in, "Great idea—introduce intergenerational trauma right from the start."

For the first egg delivery, we all put

on a happy face and made the most of it. Then, the agencies relented. The second batch of 20,000 eggs came by air.

Caleen feels she was right about the helicopter vs. truck delivery. Sitting on the riverbank two months later, watching her daughter pull scores of inch-long fingerlings from a collection net, 20 miles below the incubation site, Caleen said. "The first batch had a thirty-seven percent mortality rate. The second batch had a three percent mortality rate."

Over the two hours we were there, Marine and her fellow workers delicately extracted 667 little fish from the cone-shaped "rotary screw traps" in the center of the river. It was four times more fish than any previous day's catch. The salmon fry were later trucked to the Sacramento River below the dam and released.

A lifeless salmon fingerling floated to the surface of the holding tank. I lifted it out of the water, showed it to Caleen, and took a photo of the endangered species on my pale white fingers.

Caleen gazed out at the water, and nonchalantly uttered a sentence that rocked me to the core.

"Traditional thought comes from traditional food," she said, as the light went on in my thick skull.

I'd heard the late medicine woman Florence Jones lecture young Winnemem about the perils of eating junk food and drinking soda. It made me think about advertising, and poverty, and education, as my monkey mind wandered off to the next thing. Here was Caleen explaining it all, once again, as she so often does, if only I could hear her. Though I've been seeking traditional indigenous wisdom for 40 years with regard to sacred sites, land rights, cultural values, biodiversity, human survival, until that moment on the riverbank, I don't think I ever understood or appreciated how settler colonialism's separation of native people from their land *and their ancient foodways* was one of the most destructive and effective tools of conquest and empire. Free, healthy, wild salmon inspire traditional knowledge—are essential—but they are no longer there. A sad aha moment. The quality and nature of our thoughts and feelings comes directly from the food we eat. Duh.

Once again, thank you, Caleen.

SHELLMOUND UPDATE

Ohlone Land Back?

handed Ohlone elder Ruth Orta a paintbrush and a can of red paint. She smiled as she lifted herself out of the lawn chair from which she'd been watching the action. In downtown Berkeley, during a rare pandemic citizen action, we were painting street murals! In the morning, we'd touched up the yellow letters asserting **BLACK LIVES MATTER** on Allston Street. Now, with our film crew documenting the celebration, we were on the other side of City Hall, painting **OHLONE TERRITORY**—with the City Council's blessing—on

Center Street pavement. Ruth was all smiles as her brush enlivened the logo proclaiming support for the ongoing struggle to protect the West Berkeley Shellmound from commercial development.

The site of the first village on San Francisco Bay, where the freshwater of Strawberry Creek met the saltwater of the bay, lies in what we now call Berkeley. An Ohlone maritime village flourished there for 5,000 years as a massive shellmound grew to a height of 20 feet and sprawled across an area



state and federal historic registers. The landowners sued the city and Corrina Gould's Confederated Villages of Lisjan joined the city to fight for the site.

Though we initially won in court, the victory was overturned by the California Court of Appeal. Earlier this year, real estate developer Dana Ellsworth bought out the Spenger family's 50% interest, so now Ellsworth owns the site. She has received a use permit. But amidst a global economic downturn during which inflation has made the Bay Area the most expensive place in the world to build, Ellsworth's commitment to build affordable housing makes the project economically shaky. High cost, limited income, staunch native opposition, big risk. Indeed, several economic analyses have shown that Ellsworth is holding a worthless permit.

Meanwhile, a meeting with U.C. Berkeley Chancellor Carol Christ led to a commitment from the university to consider rematriating the 95 human remains taken from the shellmound in 1950. This could be a game changer that tips the scales in the legal/PR battle to protect the site and return the land to the Ohlone.

Stay tuned. We are slowly gathering footage to produce a film about two indigenous women leaders—Corrina Gould, as she builds a community center in a green, open space park, daylights Strawberry Creek, and returns her ancestors, in partnership with her soul sister and ally Caleen Sisk, as she brings New Zealand salmon home to the McCloud River.

It will take a while to make this film, but what else is new?

At right, Cameraman Andy Black films as former Berkeley City Council member Cheryl Davila paints the Shellmound logo. Below, Ohlone elder Ruth Orta joins the celebration.



the size of a football field. This site of ceremony and burial was later taken down by settlers, with the last remnants extracted by U.C. Berkeley archaeologists in 1950. They removed 95 human remains and 3,400 artifacts.

When developers proposed to dig down eleven feet so they could build luxury condos in 2016, we joined with Ohlone leader Corrina Gould to defend the site, and have waged a six-year campaign to protect the West Berkeley Shellmound. Determined citizen resistance to date has led to a six-year delay.

After the original luxury condo developers walked away, the landowners tried a new strategy. They invoked a new California affordable housing law (SB35) and proposed a new project. The City of Berkeley denied the permit on the grounds that the site included a "historic structure" that is listed on local,

FROM THE ARCHIVES

Winnemem War Dance at Shasta Dam

When biologist Livingston Stone built a fish hatchery across from the Winnemem village of Wydepom in 1872, he was met by formidable resistance. An old black-and-white photograph shows seven wide-eyed men carrying bows and arrows, their faces painted beneath feathered headdresses and fur hats, confronting Stone and his camera with a “war dance.” In essence, the Winnemem were telling Stone that this was their communal land, the *nur* (salmon) were under their care, and they would die before letting the government take their land and their relatives. Stone was a diplomat, and he respected the Winnemem, so they worked out their differences. Winnemem built the Baird Fish Hatchery and worked there for many years.

In 2004, Winnemem dance captain Rick Wilson had a dream, which he later described as being closer to a vision. The Winnemem needed to take their fight to Shasta Dam itself. The government was proposing to raise the height of the dam by as much as 200 feet, threatening to flood the Winnemem homeland for a second time. After the September 11 attacks, Shasta Dam was designated a potential terrorist target and specifically mentioned in the Patriot Act. So when Rick and Chief Caleen Sisk went to the Bureau of Reclama-

tion to apply for a permit to perform a four-day war dance ceremony in the grassy park next to the dam, their request raised some eyebrows. But they got the permit.

I decided to film the ceremony and joined the media team, which included Julia Butterfly Hill, fresh from her 600-day “tree-sit” protest, during which she had lived on a platform high in Luna, the name she gave to an old growth redwood slated for clearcutting. There was a new storytelling vehicle emerging—the World Wide Web—which offered a free pathway around America’s corporate media. We all set to work to get the “Winnemem War Dance at Shasta Dam” story out. Julia brought a younger generation’s media savvy to the campaign. Indians staging a war dance in remote mountains was intriguing, but this famous white woman could draw a crowd.

Before the ceremony began, Julia hosted a press conference. Caleen stepped to the microphone with the surreal sight of the gracefully arcing dam soaring behind her, the gray concrete wall holding back an ocean of tranquil blue water. Four eagle feathers rose above her dark hair, backlit in the afternoon sun. Caleen’s two braids extended down to her knees. A dozen writers and photographers gathered, including *New York Times* reporter Dean Murphy.

Nine Winnemem warriors danced around the fire for four days and nights. They fasted and drank acorn water for strength. Moving to the thump-thump rhythm of a wooden drum half-buried in the earth, abalone necklaces swayed and orange flicker headdresses flashed in firelight. The energy was intense—the cries, the yells, the whoops, as spears, bows and clubs were lifted toward the dam by the earth guardians. A dozen women sang day and night from the outer edge of the arbor, calling to the ancestors for strength.

We filmed *Hu’p Chonas*—“dance in the old way”—over four exhilarating days, including Caleen’s interview with the *New York Times*. “We are here to face the dam, to face the enemy,” she told the *Times*. She explained that Winnemem sang songs that “came down” to her from the spirit world. “Just now, a song came down, and it was like the osprey came flying by and it brought that song in. They are flying up there with the Creator. They are the ones that take the message up.” In an article titled “At War Against Dam, Tribe Turns to Old Ways,” Murphy reported that Caleen stopped their interview to recite the words that had come to her into a tape recorder, as a new song of resistance was born.

On the final day of *Hu’p Chonas*, a dancer appeared wearing a giant brown bear’s head, with a glistening fur pelt draped behind, and the energy reached a fever pitch. In a frenzy, the spirit bear joined the people, standing against the dam, bringing the power of the four-legged world to unite with the two-leggeds in defense of land, water, sacred sites and salmon.

New millennium technology spread the word quickly. Bursting through national boundaries, a dozen stories appeared on the web. The story clearly had international appeal.

A few weeks later, Caleen got a phone call from a Maori professor in New Zealand. “We have your salmon in the Rakaia River. Livingston Stone exported fertilized eggs here a hundred years ago, and your salmon are thriving. You should come see them.”



When *Standing on Sacred Ground* was first broadcast in 2014, I felt my job was done.

My thirty-year goal of producing a four-part PBS series on contested sacred places around the world had been fulfilled. It has been a long and richly rewarding journey. As both an outsider and a cultural bridge, I collaborated with indigenous communities in Ethiopia, Peru, Australia, Papua New Guinea, Russia, Canada, Hawai'i and California to tell stories of environmental tragedy, native resistance and resilience, and spiritual devotion to homeland.

When the job was completed, I realized films can tell only part of the story. So much had been left out. I'd been told far more than could be included in the

at Devils Tower in the Black Hills; a journey to Standing Rock with Winnemem spiritual leader Caleen Sisk; and (for comic relief) the antics of Hopi clowns.

While most of the book is about indigenous peoples and their stories, I also relate my own journey from Yale to the planet's sacred places as a spiritual search for awakening. Admittedly, in many places I bungle my way across the terrain. I hope to serve as a portal for the reader; not the subject of the book but the lens through which readers can glimpse unfamiliar cultures, wise people, places of power, and challenging concepts.

As a supporter of the Sacred Land Film Project, you may recall that my journey started in 1978, when I was a graduate

place, and to document an industrial, technological society that is committing ecocide and suicide. Eventually I came to see that the cultural values of indigenous people offer many of the answers we need, from the Hawaiian cultural practice of *aloha 'aina*, love for land, to *ayni*, reciprocity, a guiding principle for the Qeros in Peru. Ironically, native people have been offering these alternatives for centuries, embodying values and worldviews that preserve biodiversity and offer hope. Sacred places are at the heart of all these stories.

During four decades of film work, I watched the world evolve from ignoring indigenous people to admiring them, from zero understanding of the importance of sacred landscapes to curiosity and finally

A FILMMAKER'S MEMOIR *by Christopher McLeod*

films themselves. I had witnessed such drama, experienced so many powerful synchronicities, collected more wisdom and insight than could ever be squeezed into a documentary. And so, I resolved to write the stories behind the films. Six years later that journey has found its proper end. This fall, I completed a 500-page first draft of a personal memoir.

For decades I have walked a razor's edge. As a white male journalist trusted to film ceremonies, ask about sensitive, taboo subjects, and explore the meaning and significance of sacred sites, I was always aware of the risky nature of my work. So far it has been a thoroughly positive experience, demonstrating that allies from outside can work within communities to tell valuable stories. The memoir explores how I discovered this calling, and how interactions with indigenous elders and sacred land around the world shaped my storytelling and changed my life.

Soon, readers will travel with me to cinematically rendered scenes, including a shaman's pilgrimage in a raging blizzard to his sacred mountain in Siberia; Christians disrupting what they deem to be pagan ceremonies in Ethiopia and Peru; our film crew detained in a sweltering shipping container by Chinese security guards at a mine site in Papua New Guinea; a Lakota pipe ceremony

student in journalism at U.C. Berkeley with an environmental focus that included documenting coal stripmining and uranium mining in the Four Corners area. But Hopi and Navajo elders wanted me to understand sacred mountains, the role of prayer and ceremony in cultural and ecological cohesion, and finally and most importantly, the spiritual dimensions of nature. I quickly realized that, despite my Ivy League history degree, I was out of my league; my fancy education had managed to ignore an entire dimension of human experience.

The key moment came when Hopi elder Thomas Banyacya told me: "I know you want to make a film about the rape of the earth, stripmining, power plants polluting the air, radioactive uranium tailings blowing in the wind, lung cancer, birth defects. Those are material things," he said. "But the environmental crisis is a spiritual crisis, and until your people—and until you—learn that, overcome your blindness, and reconnect to the natural world spiritually, the environmental crisis will continue. The violence will go on and on. We can stop the stripmining here, but we're facing a much bigger problem."

I began to investigate my own people's disconnection from the natural world, to explore why my culture provides no guidance on how to be spiritually connected with a

respect. I believe our films helped educate the public and contributed to this change. Stories comprise my memoir—the sometimes magical things that happened, the esoteric knowledge that was shared, the crazy dramas that unfolded as we traveled and filmed and audaciously tried to capture moving images of "the sacred."

In 1978, when I started, I "acquired" the means of production by transporting U.C. Berkeley's \$10,000 film camera out to Hopiland to gather and tell stories in a world where there were as yet no native filmmakers. By the time I went to Standing Rock in 2016—intentionally leaving my film crew behind—an iPhone in the hands of an indigenous activist would create a short film seen by a million people the following day. A cultural bridge is no longer what's needed. For me, it's time to publish a book that completes the stories begun in the films.

At its core the memoir contrasts indigenous cultures that prioritize community responsibilities with a dominant culture that relentlessly prizes individual rights. My main motivation is the responsibility I feel to the elders I have worked with, to go deeper and to share more of the insight I have been given over the last forty-four years.

I look forward to sharing it with you.

≈ ≈ ≈ ≈