



Sammy Gensaw III

Fighting to Save the Salmon

Co-founder, Ancestral Guard

WORKS: Klamath | LIVES: Crescent City

FIELDS: Fishing, Advocacy

Sammy Gensaw III grew up on the Yurok Indian Reservation and spent his childhood fishing on the Klamath River in Requa, Del Norte County, in far Northern California. Like his father, grandfather, and great grandfather before him, Gensaw, a member of the Yurok tribe, expected to make his living as a fisherman. But in recent years, salmon supplies have been so depleted that he has had to find other ways to put food on the table. To help preserve his indigenous culture, Gensaw founded Ancestral Guard to teach youth—both native and non-native—about the traditional foodways of his tribe.



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Before he could even walk, Sammy Gensaw III was in a boat fishing with his family on the Klamath River, the lifeblood of his ancestors for centuries. Gensaw grew up on the mouth of the mighty Klamath, a remote land of salmon runs, misty mountains, and coastal redwoods near the Oregon border.

Fishing for salmon is in his blood, part of his DNA, he says. It is important for cultural, spiritual, health, and economic reasons. “I have been fishing my whole life,” says Gensaw, 24. “It’s not just a financial hardship that I am the first generation in my family who can’t make their living as a fisherman. It causes me physical and spiritual pain.”

In recent years, the river’s yearly migration of salmon from the Pacific Ocean has dwindled significantly, the result of decades of drought, disease, and habitat destruction. The Yurok maintain that the bulk of the blame for the salmon scarcity belongs to seven upstream hydroelectric dams that have prevented the fish from entering their preferred spawning grounds for more than a hundred years. After years of protest, debate, and negotiations, four dams are slated for demolition by 2020. That’s a big victory for Gensaw and his fellow tribe members, and one of the largest

river restoration projects in United States history. Gensaw hopes that within three to five years of the dam removal the salmon will return in significant numbers.

Every year, the Yurok tribe works with government agencies to estimate the fall salmon run and decide how many salmon can be caught. So few Chinook were expected to return to spawn in 2017 that commercial fishing was shut down by the California Fish and Game Commission to protect the fish. The Yurok, with a population around 6,000, were allowed to catch just 650 salmon as part of a subsistence allocation, even though salmon has long been a source of nourishment and commerce for the community. “The salmon scarcity shook people up. It woke them up. It’s had a really detrimental impact on our community,” says Gensaw, who relocated from the reservation to Crescent City in summer 2017 and has earned money tending plants at a legal, organic cannabis farm, the Humboldt Seed Company. Many out-of-work fishermen, he says, have found temporary employment doing similar work. He also works as a cultural consultant.

Every August, the tribe has a celebration to acknowledge the river’s bounty and cultural traditions. But at the 55th annual Yurok Tribe Salmon Festival in 2017, organizers had to buy salmon from



Alaska because of the fish scarcity at home. The year before, no salmon was served; instead attendees ate from food trucks.

As its way of life and livelihood has been decimated, the reservation has seen an increase in poverty, joblessness, addiction, lawlessness, and suicides. “It’s a slow genocide,” says Gensaw. “That’s how important salmon is here.”

Since he was 14, Gensaw has been active in protest efforts to remove the dams from the Klamath. He was a student community organizer for Un-dam the Klamath. Gensaw held bake sales and car washes to raise funds to travel to Omaha in 2009 to disrupt meetings at Berkshire Hathaway, the company led by billionaire Warren Buffett that is the parent of dam owner PacifiCorp, a private utility.

He said that trip, in which he worked to educate shareholders about the damage the dams were doing, changed his life. “I realized this is something I have to do in order for my people and the salmon to survive. This touched something deep within me and I decided to dedicate my life to teaching indigenous people the proper way to fish,” says Gensaw, who has travelled to Malaysia and Brazil to confer with other indigenous leaders about protecting culturally significant rivers that have been affected by damming.

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The Yurok are California’s largest Native American tribe. The tribal name means “downriver” in the native Yurok language. For hundreds of years, the Yurok sustained their communities by catching Chinook and coho salmon, steelhead trout, green sturgeon, candlefish, and eel-like Pacific lamprey. Historically, the Yurok traded with other tribes, traveling up and down the river in giant redwood canoes to sell their fish.

When the Gold Rush hit, the Native American community was decimated by crime, violence, and disease at the hands of miners, soldiers, and criminals. The community is no stranger



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to battling for its rights: it has since endured the forced removal of Indian children to boarding schools, as well as a violent dispute in the late 1970s over a salmon fishing ban that pitted local Indians against federal agents.

Still the Yurok’s ability to fish kept them rooted to the area. By the 1970s, the dams built hundreds of miles upstream began to take a toll on the river. The spring salmon run, traditionally the biggest of the year, dropped dramatically. Toxic algae blooms became commonplace. Indians began to depend on government food subsidies, and that’s when diabetes, heart disease, and obesity hit their communities hard.

Fighting for traditional foodways isn’t just a cultural and spiritual practice, says Gensaw, it’s about the health of a community. Most reservations are located in rural areas where access to nutritious food from grocery stores is limited. And Native Americans have poorer health outcomes across a broad range of medical conditions compared with the general population.

He co-founded Ancestral Guard to keep indigenous traditions alive. Under the umbrella of the non-profit Nature Rights Council, Ancestral Guard has been active for more than six years. The organization, which obtained non-profit status in 2017, teaches children how to catch and smoke salmon with traditional Yurok methods by using gillnets and cooking salmon on redwood skewers over a wood fire.

Gensaw, who aspires to public office, hopes to make sustainable fishing a commonplace skill by the time the dams come down in 2020. “This is part of the restorative revolution. We’re trying to bring back balance to our land, our river, and our people,” says Gensaw, who is also active in what might be the region’s next big battle: a proposed natural gas pipeline that could contaminate the water. “This is about protecting our community, building resistance, and maintaining our identity. It’s about our very survival as a people. Once the salmon are gone, it’s the first sign of the end of the world, that’s our prophecy. I have to do this work.”—Sarah Henry