Opinions

How your power use is destroying Eklutna River salmon, and how to fix that

Author: Charles Wohlforth Updated: 2 days ago Published 3 days ago

Water flows over the sand and rock filled Eklutna dam on Wednesday, June 8, 2017. Built in 1929 to provide power to Anchorage, it has been unused since the 1950s, and now serves only to impede salmon runs. (Loren Holmes / Alaska Dispatch News)

Buy This Photo

Electric utilities in Anchorage sat by as others worked to save a salmon river their power plant destroyed. It's time for them to take responsibility.

A private conservation group raised the money and won the permits to remove a derelict dam from the Eklutna River, work that began this summer. The dam had been the utilities' problem.

ADVERTISING

But after the dam is gone, the river still won't have enough water to bring back the rich salmon runs of a century ago. For that, the utilities will have to give up some water that is producing electricity.

They haven't committed to do that yet, although they are legally required eventually to mitigate fish and wildlife impacts of the power project.

[Demolition set to begin on Eklutna's 'deadbeat dam']

The Eklutna dam is a fascinating pivot point in Anchorage history.

Frank I. Reed started Anchorage's power company and built the dam, finished in 1929, a hugely difficult multiyear project in a wilderness canyon. But the company struggled financially without enough customers.

Reed owned the Anchorage Hotel, which still stands on E Street, while an influential city councilman owned a competing hotel in town. The councilman opposed building power lines that would help Reed's electrical business.

Power sales picked up after Bill Stolt, an electrician who owned an appliance store, got on the council and reversed the anti-power policy. As mayor, Stolt also bought the utility for the city. Reed sold out because his son, who he hoped would run it, had instead joined the Navy in World War II.

The dam was much too small to supply Anchorage's postwar power needs and was replaced by a new dam up the river, at Eklutna Lake, in 1955. The lower dam sat forgotten, a useless barrier.

But our history goes back much further than that.

Before Anchorage was built, Dena'ina people lived richly from the resources of the bowl, spreading out from Eklutna Village in the spring to their fish camps on each of the creeks.

The arrival of crews to build the Alaska Railroad in 1915 displaced that lifestyle. Natives were forbidden from even entering the city of Anchorage, and their stream sites were taken by newcomers.

The last traditional potlatch held in Anchorage was at a fish camp near Cairn Point, just north of the Port of Anchorage. The next year, the military made that sacred site into a garbage dump.

The Eklutna River may have been one of the area's richest streams. All five species of salmon spawned there. Historical photos of the village show big fish racks, and a biologist told me a huge salmon skeleton was found nearby.

Eklutna Inc. gained ownership of the canyon in the 1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, and Eklutna Natives called for dam removal more than 15 years ago.

"It was a very productive system before those dams went in," said Ron Benkert, acting area manager for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game Habitat Division. "It looks like a great place for coho. It's steep and deep. If we got water back in there I think we would have coho and chinook."

Water is the problem. After The Conservation Fund finishes its $7.5 million project to remove Reed's original dam, the river will still be mostly empty.

A siphon tunnel drains Eklutna Lake to produce power and provide Anchorage with drinking water. The lake's level is controlled by Municipal Light and Power, which allows essentially no water to flow in its natural course. The trickle going over the old dam is groundwater and runoff.

Fish and Game stocks salmon at the outlet of the power plant, near the Glenn Highway, creating a popular sportfishery. Eklutna villagers have a small fishery, too.

Benkert said some salmon still go up the Eklutna River, but he suspects they are headed for a tributary, Thunderbird Creek, not the dried-up main channel.

The streambed below the 1929 dam is poor fish habitat because small sediments are missing — it is mostly cobbles and boulders. When the dam is gone, the gravel it held back will rehabilitate the streambed for spawning.

A hero in the story is Brad Meiklejohn of The Conservation Fund, who raised $6.5 million to take out the dam. He said he is still looking for another million to finish the project.

But even after taking care of the utilities' problem for them — they would have had to take the dam out on their own by 2027 — Meiklejohn said they have been mostly unreceptive to giving back water to the river.

Neither city-owned Municipal Light and Power, majority owner of the power project, nor the other two owners, Chugach Electric Association and Matanuska Electric Association, would consent to an interview.

Speaking for their joint operating committee, MEA provided a statement saying the utilities will comply with their future legal obligation to study fish and wildlife impacts and develop mitigation proposals.

Mayor Ethan Berkowitz provided a statement through a spokesperson that the municipality will work with stakeholders to balance the needs of fish, power and drinking water.

Anchorage is stolen land. Its founders abused resources and the original residents.

We can't right all those wrongs or live without impact, but we should do what we can. Out of the enormous plenty Alaska gives us, preserving fish and wildlife is not a large sacrifice.

While Eklutna power is the cheapest in the area, with old facilities and no cost for fuel, little would be lost to bring back these historic fish runs. The plant provides less than 3 percent of Railbelt Alaska's generating capacity.

Meiklejohn estimates the fish might need a fourth of the river's natural flow to return, although that has not been studied in detail. He's frustrated the utilities have stayed on the sidelines.

As a voter and a power user, I'd like to see them get a new attitude, and step forward strongly to their responsibility to bring back the fish.

The views expressed here are the writer's and are not necessarily endorsed by Alaska Dispatch News, which welcomes a broad range of viewpoints. To submit a piece for consideration, email commentary(at)alaskadispatch.com. Send submissions shorter than 200 words to letters@alaskadispatch.com or click here to submit via any web browser.

About this Author

Charles Wohlforth

Charles Wohlforth's column appears three times weekly. A lifelong Anchorage resident, he is the author of more than 10 books, and hosts radio shows on Alaska Public Media. More at wohlforth.com.

---

29 Comments

Sponsored

Sponsored Links by Taboola

You're In For A Big Surprise in 2017 If You Own A Home in Alaska
Morning Finance | LendingTree Quotes

There Are 7 Types of Irish Last Names — Which One Is Yours?
Ancestry

Finally a CPAP Mask That Actually Helps You Sleep
Easy Breathe

23 Baby Names that New Parents Say they Regret
Livingly

Alaska Landlines Get Replaced (But Not With Cell Phones)
Talk Tech Daily

Perfectly Timed Pictures Taken Before a Disaster
Two Red Dots

Enter Any Name, Wait 14 Seconds, Brace Yourself
Truthfinder People Search Subscription

3 Foods To Avoid in 2017
BIO X4 Supplement