



Restoring the Columbia River

Summary Brief of Columbia River Treaty Symposium May 28, 2018

June 18, 2018

By Oliver M. Brandes and Jon O’Riordan

Columbia River Treaty Context and Background

- On May 29, 2018 the United States and Canada commenced formal negotiations on updating the Columbia River Treaty.
- Controversially, both governments failed to formally include Indigenous representation as part of the negotiating teams or positions.
- For the past five years the counties have been exploring their respective opportunities to improve the more than 50-year-old treaty based on consultations with the public, all levels of government, Indigenous peoples, and experts.
- The original treaty was based the concept of shared benefits with two commercial objectives: 1) reducing the risk of flooding and 2) enhancing hydro-power generation.
- These objectives were achieved through the development and joint operations of dams on the international river, but came at the expense of the rights of Indigenous peoples on both sides of the border; communities were displaced and the basin’s ecosystems were damaged.
- Prior to the first dams on the Columbia River, the system supported over 12 million Pacific salmon with immense value to Indigenous peoples, residents, and commercial fisheries throughout the basin. Now the river supports less than two million salmon and only 63 per cent of original salmon habitat remains available due to river development.

Columbia River Treaty Symposium, University of Victoria, May 28

- On May 28, the Canadian Water Resources Association (CWRA) and the University of Victoria’s POLIS Project on Ecological Governance and Centre for Global Studies held a symposium on issues and opportunities for innovative governance and the Columbia River Treaty.¹ This event was part of the CWRA 2018 National Conference being held that week in Victoria, B.C., and was also part of the POLIS Project’s *Watersheds 2018* series of events.²
- An explicit purpose and stated goal of the symposium was to consider how restoration of ecosystem function in the Columbia River basin could be reconciled with hydropower and flood risk management to meet the challenges of the 21st century—especially given the looming changes to the basin’s hydrology due to a changing climate. Indigenous roles and responsibilities as part of innovative and modern governance of the Columbia River Treaty and the broader basin was a second cross-cutting focus of the event.

Key Issues Facing the Columbia River and the Treaty Renegotiation

The issues currently facing the American and Canadian negotiators are substantially more complex than they were at the time of the initial treaty agreement in 1964, including:

- A changing climate significantly affecting the quantity and quality of water supporting ecosystems, communities, and a wide range of uses.

¹ For program agenda and session recordings see <https://poliswaterproject.org/polis-event-webinar/columbia-river-treaty-symposium/>

² See <https://poliswaterproject.org/polis-event-webinar/watersheds-2018/>

- Shifts in energy supply and demand to include a range of renewable sources as well as technology changes in power storage and delivery.
- Legal requirements along with public support to restore Pacific salmon stocks and associated ecosystems throughout the Columbia, which were lost or damaged due to reservoir flooding and downstream river impacts, many of which predated the Columbia River Treaty.

Minister Katrine Conroy, the lead minister on the Treaty for the B.C. Provincial Government, emphasized the importance of sharing benefits from a restored Columbia River to reconcile legitimate rights of Indigenous peoples, in line with the principles of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), and community interests, to ensure that local concerns are addressed and that the best science is used in the negotiations to inform an evidence-based regime.

Summary of Options and Solutions Proposed

The symposium took up the challenge of offering solutions. A wide range of experts commented on a variety of issues, including changing hydrology; modelling storage releases to meet a range of water uses; restoring fish, wildlife, and associated ecosystems; changes to energy supplies and demands; and ways to control flooding using both natural and engineered designs.

Three key themes emerged:

1. There is urgency around the need to reconcile both the rights of Indigenous peoples, which were ignored in the original treaty, and the interests of all citizens in the maintenance of healthy and functioning ecosystems. Broadening the range of shared benefits through reinvestment in an aging system to restore damaged ecosystems is an identified priority for adapting to the forthcoming changes to climate and hydrology.
2. Future management in the Columbia basin will have to be more innovative and flexible. The existing static model of the Treaty extending over 60 years is no longer viable. Improving the balance of benefits from flood control, energy systems management, and ecosystems maintenance and restoration will require innovative approaches to future water storage and release regimes. Adaptive management for rapidly evolving values, both in commercial uses of water and ecosystem restoration, negotiated over ten-year periods will establish greater resilience.
3. Participants agreed that the Columbia River and its basin are a single functioning entity and that negotiations will have to integrate the interests of the parties within the basin as a whole. This will require a different governance model that includes a new focus on ecosystem-based function in place of the current arrangement based on management by utilities with a singular focus on flood control and power generation. A governance system that provides a decision-making body with oversight of operating entities and authority to adapt within agreed upon limits, combined with a science advisory body and a citizen advisory body, would enhance both the adaptability and integration of shared river management over the coming decades.

Next Steps

The results of the symposium will be captured in a forthcoming proceedings report,³ as well as an op-ed scheduled to be published in the Vancouver Sun on June 21, 2018.⁴ These outputs, along with this summary brief, will be sent to both teams of negotiators in the coming weeks.

³ When published (expected July 2018), the proceedings report will be available on the POLIS Water Sustainability Project's website: <https://poliswaterproject.org/publications/>

⁴ When published (expected June 21, 2018), the op-ed will be available on the *Vancouver Sun's* website, as well as the POLIS Water Project's website: <https://poliswaterproject.org/media/>