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**Ceremony marks start of Elwha Dam removal**

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By TED WARREN, Associated Press September 17, 2011

PORT ANGELES, Wash. (AP) — A few hundred people and several dozen Chinook salmon gathered near the Elwha Dam on Saturday to witness the beginning of the process to set the Elwha River free and restore five species of Pacific salmon to more than 70 miles of river and stream.

An emotional ceremony was marked by references to the spiritual and cultural importance to the Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe of the removal of two dams from the Elwha River near Port Angeles.

The ceremony included drumming, singing, dancing and a blessing by tribal elder Ben Charles Sr., who made several references to tribal ancestors looking down from the clouds and witnessing the event.

Jordan Saluskin, 2, performs with the Klallam Drum and Dance Group at a ceremony to mark the beginning of the removal of the Elwha Dam and the restoration of the Elwha River, Saturday, Sept. 17, 2011, near Port Angeles.

The ceremony concluded with Interior Secretary Ken Salazar leading a call, echoed by whoops from the crowd, to have a large piece of earthmoving equipment with a golden bucket break up a piece of concrete just upstream of the dam and carry some pieces to the bank where dignitaries were waiting.

"America's rivers are the lifeblood of America's economy — from the water for farms that produce our food to the fish and wildlife that sustain our heritage," Salazar said.

The $325 million project is expected to last three years and eventually restore the Olympic Peninsula river to its wild state and restore salmon runs.

Before two towering concrete dams were built nearly a century ago, the river teemed with salmon but the structures blocked the fishes' access to upstream habitat, diminished their runs and altered the ecosystem.

An excavator began chipping away at the top of Glines Canyon Dam on Thursday. Removal of that 210-foot-tall dam and the 108-foot-tall Elwha Dam is part of the second-largest ecosystem restoration project ever undertaken by the National Park Service, after the Everglades.

"This restoration project is a testament to what can happen when diverse groups find a way to work together and achieve shared goals of restoration for a river, a people, an ecosystem and a national park," said National Park Services Director Jon Jarvis.

Biologists estimate the Elwha River salmon populations will grow from 3,000 to more than 300,000 as five species of Pacific salmon return to the river. The return of the fish will bring bear, eagles and other animals back to the ecosystem that has been stunted since 1911 when the Elwha Dam was constructed.

Officials also expect fisherman, rafters and other recreation seekers to return to the river and add to the local economy.

Salazar noted that the river restoration will help support the culture of the Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe, which has lived along its banks for centuries. Tribal members will again have access to sacred sites now under water and the opportunity to renew cultural traditions.

