

The irony is not lost on the tribal people of Eastern Washington who believe the land where the Creator made first man is also the same land where the most destructive weapon known to mankind was made. The federal government established the Hanford Nuclear Reservation in 1943 on the traditional hunting and fishing grounds of local Indian tribes. In the early 1940's Hanford had a small population of less than 300; however, by 1944 about 51,000 people were living in and around Hanford, some working in construction and some working as scientists as part of the Manhattan Project. Very few of these people knew their collective work would result in the world's first atomic explosion and atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki, Japan. Even fewer people realized the lasting impact the Hanford Nuclear Reservation would have on tribal sovereignty.

The 569 square mile area known as the Hanford Site was chosen by the federal government, because it was sparsely populated, the Columbia River provided water to cool the nuclear reactors, and cheap electricity was available from the dams on the river.

Amongst tribal people in the area the change was felt immediately when a young female member of the Klickitat tribe emerged from



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Two Indian men talk at the entrance to the Hanford Reservation Gate.

the River with a rash on her belly that spread to her back and looked like burn. Traditional fishers started pulling salmon that had severe deformities out of the river. The ceded area of the 14 Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation is now pockmarked with leaky tanks of waste material buried in the ground. The Columbia River, a centerpiece for all tribes along her banks, has forever changed after a decade of 20 to 50 pounds of radioactive radium was poured into her waters daily.

The creation of the Hanford Nuclear Reservation has forever changed the way the Indian Tribes along the banks of the river will provide for their people. The pollution of the land and water has burned a hole into tribal sovereignty by further limiting the ability of tribal governments to protect their people and land.

The negative impact of Hanford on the surrounding tribes and communities is hard to fully measure. For decades Hanford funneled water directly from the Columbia River to cool its reactors, then, returned the water, without treatment directly to back into the river. This practice was finally ended in 1972, but its devastating effects are still being measured. In addition to contamination of the water, communities in the surrounding geographical regions, known as "down winders," suffer high rates of thyroid disease and, some suggest, elevated leukemia levels in children born to fathers living near Hanford in the early years of its nuclear production.

Many Northwest tribes rely on the Columbia River for their sustenance, both physically and spiritually. The effect of Hanford on the Columbia's Salmon population has disproportionately affected the Indian people whose livelihoods and spiritual life are centered on the Salmon. Members of the Umatilla, Yakama, and other fishing communities along the Columbia have a disproportionately higher exposure to Hanford's toxic byproducts do to their Salmon consumption. In a 1992 article, the New York Times reported that, "[a] *Government contractor's preliminary study of radiation released over the years from the Hanford Nuclear Reservation into the Columbia River has found that the radiation reached the Pacific Ocean 200 miles away, contaminating fish and drinking water along*

the river and exposing as many as 2,000 people to potentially dangerous doses." The report continues, "*most of those exposed to such doses were subsistence fishermen, primarily Indians who live along the river."*

Many of the Tribes of the Columbia are now engaged with the Department of Energy and the Environmental Protection Agency to develop strategies to restore the habitat of the Columbia basin devastated by the Hanford facility. In the words of the Nez Perce's Environmental Restoration and Waste Management organization, "[e]nhancing the expertise of our people will ensure that the Nez Perce people will outlive radioactive and hazardous materials.

Resources:

"Picture of Manhattan Project life unearthed at Hanford"

<http://www.tri-cityherald.com/901/story/762751.html>

"Washington Nuclear Plant Poses Risk for Indians"

<http://www.nytimes.com/1990/09/03/us/washington-nuclear-plant-poses-risk-for-indians.html>

"Testimony: Russell Jim, World Uranium Hearings, 9/17/92, Salzburg"

<http://www.ratical.org/radiation/WorldUraniumHearing/RusselJim.html>

"Prof. Albright's memoir of the Manhattan Project"

<https://engineering.purdue.edu/ChE/AboutUs/News/ProfAlbrightsmemoiroftheManhattanProject>

Reflection Questions

1. Discuss the affects of Hanford's waste materials on the Indian people of the Columbia.
2. The 1855 treaty guaranteed tribes usual and accustomed access to the area occupied by Hanford for hunting, gathering, fishing, and religious customs. Based on what you know, do you think that these promises were honored? Why or why not?
3. It has been nearly 40 years since Hanford stopped releasing water used to cool reactors into the Columbia, yet Hanford's long term affects have yet to be measured, and the clean-up process has been slow and difficult. If you were a member of one of the affected tribes, how would you want the government to respond?
4. What is the government's responsibility to the tribal people affected by Hanford's pollution?
5. HOMEWORK: Compare the three sites' perspectives on governmental responsibility to tribal people and other "downwinders."
 - a. Department of Energy's Tribal Affairs and Cultural Resources Program <http://www.hanford.gov/page.cfm/INP>
 - b. Hanford Tribal Service Program http://www.npaihb.org/programs/project/arch_hanford_tribal_service_program/
 - c. Downwinders Litigation Site: <http://www.downwinders.com/index.php>