

Northwest Indian Fisheries

Oysters are important to many Indigenous groups in the Pacific Northwest. They harvest oysters and other shellfish for important ceremonies. These ceremonial harvests are subsistence harvests, meaning the people only harvest what they will eat. Some Indigenous groups also harvest oysters through commercial fisheries and sell them to support their tribes.



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When Washington state was formed in the 1800s, the United States government made treaties with the sovereign Indigenous nations that lived there.

Those treaties guaranteed that they would be able to maintain their ways of life. Unfortunately, many of those treaties were not followed and the Indigenous people were prevented from harvesting shellfish where they lived. The tribes went to court to protect their rights. In 1974, the court ruled that the 20 tribes impacted by the treaty had the right to co-manage the natural resources of the Washington coast along with the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Today, the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission helps support these tribes in their role as resource co-managers. For example, the Suquamish (soo-*kwaa*-mish) Shellfish Program conducts research on ocean acidification and its impacts on different species. The program employs biologists who monitor ocean water in different areas to study the changing pH of the ocean and predict how it will affect plants and animals in the oceans. One of their projects restores bull kelp beds and other ocean plants to help capture carbon dioxide that can acidify the water. They also educate other local people, including students, about what is causing ocean acidification. The tribes that make up the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission have been taking care of the ecological resources in the region for thousands of years and are able to contribute their knowledge, alongside the ongoing ocean monitoring done by the biologists. Together, these groups are working to keep the land and ocean healthy so that people can continue to harvest oysters for many years to come.

References

Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission. (n. d.). *History*. Retrieved December 9, 2021 from <https://nwifc.org/about-us/>

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Suquamish Tribe. (n. d.) *Shellfish*. Retrieved December 9, 2021 from <https://suquamish.nsn.us/home/departments/fisheries/shellfish/#tab-id-1>