

*Swimming Upstream: A Remembrance of Jim Lichatowich (1941 – 2024)*



It is hard to exaggerate Jim Lichatowich's contributions to fisheries science, salmon management, and environmental history, philosophy, and ethics. Jim was a beloved father, husband, and grandfather and a gifted research biologist, agency administrator, consultant, writer, and woodcarver. He died April 28, 2024 in Portland, Oregon. Jim was our mentor and friend. His unconventional career path left an extraordinary legacy to salmon conservation.

Jim enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps and served for four years immediately after graduating high school. He was proud of his military service. In 1962 during the height of the Cuba Missile Crisis, he and thousands of other young marines were sent to enforce a U.S. naval blockade of Cuba, a decision that ultimately averted an apparent threat of nuclear conflict with the Soviet Union. Perhaps Jim's military experience became the real-world standard by which he gaged the comparatively mundane scientific, political, and legal disputes he later encountered as a fisheries professional and occasional courtroom defender of wild fish. Regardless, anyone who knew Jim can bear witness: he was unflappable under pressure.

In 1973, after receiving his Oregon State University master's degree in fisheries and working for a few years as a consultant, Jim took a research position with the Oregon Wildlife Commission (soon to become the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife—ODFW). He initiated a study to evaluate effects of the Lost Creek Dam and associated hatchery mitigation program on the anadromous salmon populations in the Rogue River. Jim later recounted the “many unanswered questions” about fishery managers’ plans to integrate the new hatchery program with management of the large Rogue River salmon runs. He concluded, “The hatchery was being operated as though it were independent of the ecosystem, so to the managers those questions were not relevant (Lichatowich 2002).” Jim’s “many unanswered questions” followed him to Corvallis, when he became the supervisor overseeing the agency’s fisheries Research Section in 1979, and to Portland, when he became Assistant Chief for the Department’s entire Fish Division in 1983.

During 15 years of state government service, Jim nudged the agency toward a more rigorous science-based approach to salmon conservation and fisheries management. The rapidly growing research group thrived under his capable leadership. He institutionalized project planning by objective, provided in-house training in statistical methods and computer programming, and strengthened the reporting process. He established a periodic Research Review to share information across projects and to encourage dialogue about research studies with statewide district fishery managers and Oregon State University scientists.

The collapse of Oregon’s expanding coastal Coho Salmon troll fishery in the late 1970s—a period of rapidly increasing hatchery production—was a defining event during Jim’s early career. The management failure reinforced his concerns about the unquestioned faith in salmon hatcheries and exposed the lack of understanding of ecological processes responsible for natural fluctuations in salmon productivity, particularly in the marine environment. Under Jim’s supervision, the ODFW research agenda expanded to include basic studies in the life histories, habitat requirements, and ecology of wild salmon and steelhead populations and their interactions with hatchery-reared fish. Jim and members of his research staff became immersed in historical analyses of salmon abundance and survival trends, hatchery production levels, harvest rates, and natural variations in ocean productivity. As Assistant Chief of Fisheries, Jim assumed responsibility for developing species management plans, including the first statewide plans for Coho and Chinook Salmon, steelhead, and native trout.

Transparency and accountability were common themes throughout Jim’s career in state government. He strongly believed in the public’s right to access information about the programs and results supported by tax dollars. For Jim, accountability started with an explicit statement of the objectives for evaluating “success,” whether the proposed action was a research project, a hatchery program, or a species management plan. Jim applied the same approach to the Fish Division’s budget, which, for transparency’s sake, he proposed restructuring around the agency’s management objectives rather than vague

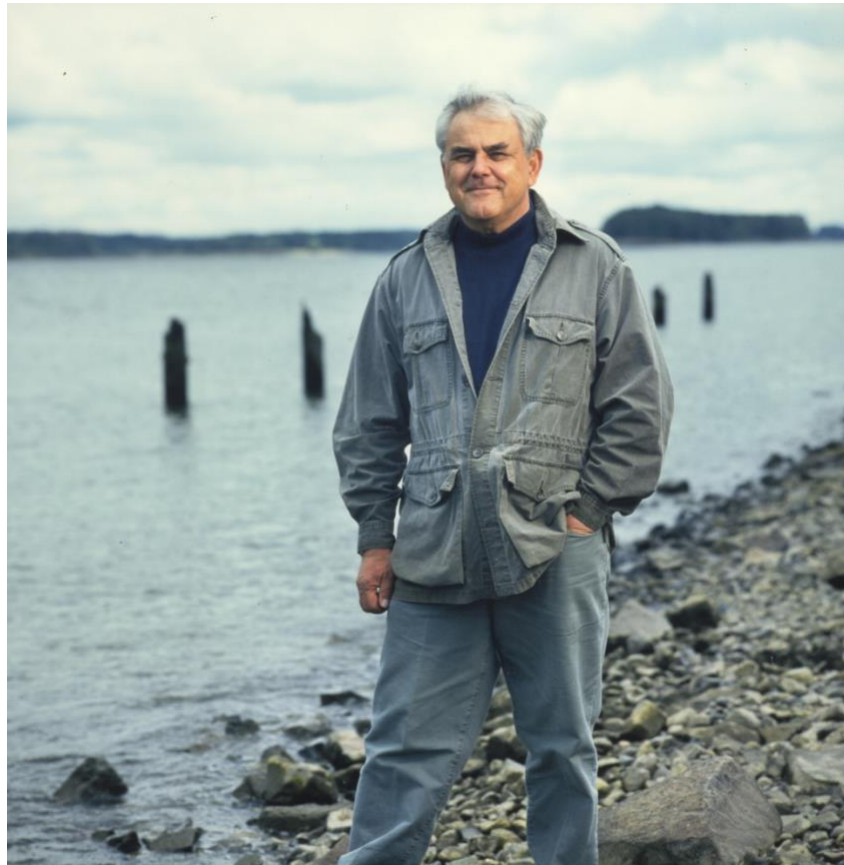
administrative categories. Ultimately, this was a bridge too far for more politically minded superiors who preferred the flexibility of ambiguous spending authorizations. Jim's budget proposal was never implemented.

Many of his agency colleagues were devastated in 1988 when Jim unexpectedly traded his prominent role as a state fisheries administrator for a field biologist position with the Jamestown S'Klallam Tribe on Washington's Olympic Peninsula. Jim was liberated. The change allowed him to reconnect with the salmon rivers he loved, to focus his full attention on wild salmon conservation, and to write.

In 1988 Jim received a call from Willa Nehlsen, a member of the American Fishery Society's Endangered Species Committee, to assist her and Jack Williams with a broad West Coast status assessment of Pacific salmon stocks. Jim later described his participation in the project as a turning point in his career. Indeed, it was a turning point for the entire fisheries profession. The seminal 1991 paper in *Fisheries* titled, "Pacific Salmon at the Crossroads: Stocks at Risk from California, Oregon, Idaho, and Washington," made it painfully clear that salmonid decline was not confined to a few scattered watersheds (Nehlsen et al. 1991). The paper's list of several hundred at-risk stocks of Pacific salmon, steelhead, and cutthroat trout revealed a systemic management failure over a vast North Pacific region. The Crossroads paper prompted salmonid stock additions to the federal list of threatened and endangered species and shifted conservation priorities for harvest management, habitat protection, hydropower operations, and hatchery programs.

By 1991 Jim had spent nearly 2 decades documenting the decline of Pacific salmon populations and its many proximate causes. His decision to become an independent consultant allowed greater flexibility to set his own priorities and to explore the historical and ecological roots of the crisis. Over the next decade Jim and his co-authors published dozens of peer-reviewed scientific papers, book chapters, and technical reports. He produced influential publications on the diagnosis and treatment of depleted salmon populations (Lichatowich et al. 1995) and the stream nutrient deficits resulting from diminished salmon returns (Gresh et al. 2000). As a consultant, Jim accepted appointments to numerous scientific review panels and provided technical advice for salmon studies and recovery programs from the Skeena River, British Columbia to the Sacramento River in California. He served for 10 years on the Independent Scientific Advisory Board (ISAB) for the Northwest Power Planning Council (currently the Northwest Power and Conservation Council). Jim and his ISAB colleagues concluded most of the Council's salmon recovery measures had substituted hatchery and fish passage technologies for salmon habitats and ecological functions (ISG 1999; Lichatowich et al. 2006). Their comprehensive review and recommendations, published in the book "*Return to the River: Restoring Salmon to the Columbia River*," proposed an alternative conceptual foundation for salmon recovery based on natural ecosystem functions, habitat connectivity, and salmonid population and life history diversity (Williams 2006).

For all his scientific achievements, many knew Jim primarily as a storyteller, an engaging writer of conservation and natural history essays and books. Jim had that rare talent for translating complex ideas and relationships with engaging clarity, wisdom, and even passion. He honed his writing skills in the frequent essays he drafted for conservation-minded readers of Oregon Trout's *Riverkeeper*, *Trout* magazine, *Peninsula* magazine, *Shirkin Comment*, and *The Osprey*. It may not be coincidental that his writing sometimes drew comparisons to *A Sand County Almanac*. Jim credited Leopold's classic work as inspiration for his career (Lichatowich 2002).



For Jim, science and storytelling were inseparable. “The story” was his shorthand for a conceptual foundation or paradigm of a scientific discipline. Jim spent his career reconstructing fishery management’s story—the widely accepted but rarely stated principles and assumptions that predetermined which scientific questions and interpretations were relevant. Jim’s first book, *Salmon Without Rivers: A History of the Pacific Salmon Crisis*, received wide acclaim for its insightful synthesis of geology, environmental history, and ecology, tracing the salmon’s decline to “a vision based on flawed assumptions and unchallenged myths” (Lichatowich 1999). At least 18 colleges and universities have used *Salmon Without Rivers* in their classrooms. His second book, *Salmon People and Place: A Biologist’s Search for Salmon Recovery*, offers a personal and philosophical view of the salmon crisis and proposes an alternative fish conservation story

grounded in “the history of the human-salmon relationship” and “an ethics of place” (Lichatowich 2013).



On March 3, 2016 Jim received the Oregon Chapter of the American Fisheries Society’s Lifetime Achievement Award, an honor he greatly appreciated given the criticism he had often provoked for questioning status quo fishery management. During the next 8 years, Jim suspended most of his consulting and writing activities to teach himself wood carving and to create beautiful replicas of the birds and fish he loved. However, Jim’s resolve to promote an alternative salmon story—a task he proudly labeled “swimming upstream”—never waned. The final installment of Jim’s salmon trilogy, written with his good friend and frequent collaborator, Rick Williams, will be published this fall (Williams and Lichatowich In Press). *Managed Extinction: The Decline and Loss of Salmon and Steelhead in the Pacific Northwest* includes examples of scientific progress toward rebuilding salmon populations. It also exposes the wide gap between ecological understanding and fishery management. Jim’s vision for creating a new human-salmon story clearly remains a work in progress. His life’s work has left an enduring impact on the fisheries profession and has provided a framework for meeting the many challenges ahead. Jim’s conservation legacy ultimately will be written by all those who continue swimming upstream. [Jim Lichatowich video](#)



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