



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Suquamish Tribe hosts seafood bake

For years, tribal shellfish harvests in Puget Sound sparked controversy. Northwest tribes and Washington State negotiated over treaty rights to collect shellfish until talks broke down, and the matter went to court. A 1998 court ruling settled the matter, reaffirming the rights of tribes to harvest “in common” with non-Native harvesters, including on private tidelands.

On a sunny afternoon in Suquamish on June 1, that controversy was a distant memory. Owners of tidelands along the Silverdale area’s Dyes Inlet and Poulsbo’s Liberty Bay gathered with members of the Suquamish Tribe to enjoy a seafood feast at the Tribe’s House of Awakened Culture.

Some came to learn about opportunities to partner with the Tribe’s shellfish program; others to celebrate or deepen their ongoing relationships with the Suquamish people. Others may have been attracted by what was on the menu: geoduck chowder, baked clams and crab, and the setting overlooking Puget Sound.

“This event was created to express our gratitude to the owners of tideland properties where Suquamish Tribe members exercise their treaty rights to harvest clams,” said Rob Purser, Suquamish Tribe Fisheries Director.

The Tribe first began holding these events in 2014, inviting tideland owners to gatherings at the Silverdale Yacht Club Broiler. This year was the second year the event was held in Suquamish.

A tribal tradition continues

Members of the Suquamish Tribe have harvested shellfish in Puget Sound for thousands of years. The archaeological record shows evidence of clam, oyster, and other shellfish harvesting over the past 2,000 years at more than 30 sites in Suquamish ancestral territory, according to tribal archaeologist Dennis Lewarch. Oral histories also show shellfish have been an important component of the Tribe’s diet, commerce, and ceremonial practices across the generations.

In recent years, pollution, tideland privatization, population growth, and disputes over fishing rights limited the Tribe’s access to shellfish resources. It was not until after lengthy court proceedings and sustained cleanup efforts that tribal members could begin again to harvest shellfish.

In 1998, Federal District Court Judge Edward Rafeedie ruled tribal members have the right to harvest 50 percent of available shellfish on private tidelands, except those cultivated by private parties.

Shellfish are very sensitive to pollution levels, so it took the sustained effort of the Tribe in collaboration with state and local governments, the U.S. Navy, and interested members of the public to significantly reduce sewage input into Puget Sound. Tribal harvests finally resumed in 2004 in Dyes Inlet. And just last year – after a 27-year hiatus – tribal clam diggers returned to harvest on the shores of Liberty Bay.

Today, proceeds from commercial tribal clam harvests go directly to the participating fishers and their families, providing an important source of income to the tribal community. Many tribal fishers also harvest and preserve clams for their families and for ceremonies.

Longtime waterfront residences have welcomed the return of tribal harvesters to their traditional fishing grounds.

“I do dig clams for myself,” said Ron Lund, tideland owner, “but there are so many clams down there I couldn’t eat them all.”

Sustainable harvests

Harvest on a given tideland typically occurs once every three years, for approximately four hours during a low tide.

“There is no damage whatsoever to our beach,” said Art Nelson, tideland owner. “After a couple of tides, all signs of digging are gone.”

Following a tribal harvest, tidelands recover naturally. Larval clam in the water column find their way to harvested beaches, where they settle and repopulate the shellfish bed. In certain cases, the Tribe augments recovery by planting hundreds of thousands of juvenile clams directly on the tideland.

Some tideland owners have opted to enter into a closer working relationship with Suquamish clam diggers via a lease agreement with the Tribe. In these cases, the Tribe harvests both the property owner’s and the tribal share of clams, and the owner receives a portion of the earnings from the sale of the clams.

Following harvest, tribal staff reseed the beach at no cost to the owner. The enhanced clams grow to harvestable size in approximately three years and act as ecosystem engineers, reducing excess nitrogen in the water and improving overall water quality.

Landowners who choose to participate in the lease program continue to use their tidelands recreationally, and both the Tribe and tideland owners share in the economic, cultural, and environmental benefits that result from sustainably managed shellfish beds.

“We’re very happy to share this,” said Art Nelson, tideland owner, “it’s also a lot of fun for us to watch when they come down. They can really dig clams!”

Celebrating a Partnership

At the June 1 gathering, Suquamish Chairman Leonard Forsman greeted the tideland owners and welcomed them to the gathering.

“We’re pleased to be working with our neighbors on cleaning up Liberty Bay and Dyes Inlet, and sharing the harvest of shellfish from these waters,” he said. “Our ancestors relied on the abundance of these shores since time immemorial, and our work together should make it possible to continue that harvest for generations into the future.”

The group also enjoyed a retelling of the Suquamish Creation Story, narrated by renowned tribal storyteller Barbara Lawrence. The story highlights the central role local waters play in the cultural and spiritual life of the Tribe. After a blessing on the food, participants were served a sumptuous array of traditionally prepared seafood, ranging from baked clams and oysters to a rich seafood stew.

Tribal biologists and staff answered questions and provided additional information about the variety of ways the Tribe partners with tideland owners and others to protect and enhance the natural resources of Dyes Inlet and Liberty Bay.

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The Suquamish people, the “People of the Clear Salt Water,” are proud to continue practicing their traditional way of life while working with neighbors to maintain and improve water quality and habitat for all marine species.

Resources:

Photos of the event available upon request

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