I can recall the moment so vividly. Ribbits from a hidden frog, a green dragonfly, waders stuck to my skin. I had done–already a few dozen times–the mundane chore of returning the post-sampled juvenile Chinook Salmon back to the stream, but as I released the fish, the water became still. For a quiet moment, the small world under the cover of a peachleaf willow welcomed home their Salmon.

I counted fish that night.

In the Summer of 2021, I was selected as an Andrus Scholar for the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission (CRITFC), a non-profit organization comprised of four Indigenous Tribes (Nez Perce, Yakama, Warm Springs, and Umatilla) of the Pacific Northwest. My task was to research two things. The first was understanding how the condition of the estuary affected anadromous fish. The second was collecting data to pinpoint areas to prioritize for habitat restoration.

Candidly, I was nervous. I had never worked with Indigenous people and felt underqualified, even though there was nothing suggested to me that I was not capable. I researched “How to be respectful to Native Americans” and constantly wondered if I was “woke” enough…?

During the first few weeks of my internship, as I read literature and attended conferences, I began to recognize the relationship the Pacific Northwest Tribes had with salmon, which was completely opposite of mine. To me, salmon was the pink flesh I occasionally ate, or it was the weird pink-orange color people in middle school argued about. For these Tribes, salmon is their lifeblood. Salmon have greatly guided and impacted their cultures, religions, economies, intertribal interactions, and fishing technologies for thousands and thousands of years. The Tribes in return protect salmon and their habitats, maintaining a harmonic balance between human and salmon. However, as I have learned throughout the internship, that balance has been severely disrupted due to westward expansion, treaty violations, and modification/degradation to the landscape and ecosystem.

In the nineteenth century, many Pacific Northwest Tribes were forced into treaties “that would facilitate white settlement” (Indian Treaty Fishing Rights). In exchange for some 64 millions acres of land, the Tribes were promised their exclusive “right of taking fish at all usual and accustomed places” (Treaty, 1855). However, as industrialization of the Columbia River continued, the rights of the Indigenous peoples and the treaties were often neglected. Rapid agriculture and trade growth generated further difficulties for Native Americans to fish and access rivers, especially the construction of dams in prime tribal fishing spots contributed to the high salmon decline.

One story in particular that sticks with me is the damming of Wy-am or Celilo Falls. On March 10, 1957, a couple hundred people witnessed the water rise as The Dalles Dam, a 200-foot high dam constructed by the US Army Corps of Engineers, came to a finish. The Dalles Dam destroyed Celilo Falls. Native Americans wept, as a once flourishing site for their precious salmon fishing, vanished into a large, still pool of water. Two years later, at the ceremony of turning on the electric generators, Oregon Senator Richard Neuberger strangely announced, “Our Indian friends deserve from us a profound and heartfelt salute of appreciation...surrender[ing] the only way of life which some of them knew” (Kurlansky). I felt tears forming in my eyes when I read this story. How as a student studying civil engineering was I supposed to design and build equitable infrastructure?

I became increasingly more and more frustrated the more I learned about the complicated relations the Tribes had with the federal government, especially regarding infrastructure. In one of the meetings I had with another one of my advisors, Charles, he mentioned how I have a tendency to focus on the injustices. When we would discuss readings, I would point out how absurd it was that the Tribes were gypped out of this or that.

He explained to me that there is a risk of viewing things from this lens, that causes one to not prioritize the perspective of the people they are serving. We then discussed how the treaties were ignored for over a century, the Tribes fought with determination and courage to progressively establish their fishing rights, winning these through tremendous effort, and how they continue to protect the salmon in the Columbia River Basin. Yet, even with all of this, the Indigenous People are prevailing. He also challenged me to seek out the different perspectives and values of salmon. So I looked into the perspectives of energy-producing companies, shipping companies, fishers, government agencies, the general public, and others, leading me to see a greater picture.

This opened my perspective. Being a Korean immigrant in a place where there is no one else like me, I am in constant conflict with who I am and what others portray me to be. Sometimes it felt easier to only see the few cruel perspectives of those who have treated me the worst to determine my outlook on everyone else. While I thought that this protected me, assuming the worst, this view only made me feel powerless and small. But, throughout this experience, while on that river releasing fish, while slowly lowering the bucket in the cool water, gently taking off the lid, and letting the water rush in and the salmon rush out. I watched in quiet awe as the juvenile Chinook swam back into its home and quickly camouflaged within the rocks. I had the thought, “it’s as if they were specifically placed by the Creator to be there.” The Creator uniquely placed Salmon there in the rivers, just as he had placed me here.

I’ve always been one to dive deeper into topics that catch my interest, but Salmon was different. The great reverence for how the Pacific Northwest Indigenous tribes connect with Salmon captivated me unlike any other environmental issue. The vast intricate factors, including energy markets, agricultural needs, and local economies in the Pacific Northwest that are deeply intertwined with the existence or rather possible non-existence of salmon, often consumes my mind.

The challenge, though terrifyingly complicated, defines a sense of purpose within me. How can I offer my skills and resources to restore wild salmon populations and help uplift the Nez Perce, Yakama, Umatilla, and Warm Springs tribes? How can I utilize my civil engineering degree, with interests in sustainability and policy to create innovative solutions to serve our most underserved communities? My strong desire to aid those who have less than me defines the way I guide my education and relations with people. I plan to spend my entire life creating empowering spaces to uplift our most forgotten communities, building them the equitable infrastructure they deserve.