

Blaine Harden Interview

WPO: If you could be dropped onto the shores of the Columbia River in 1805, what would you see that you don't see today?

BH: An astonishing number of fish. Sixteen million salmon migrated up that river. It was the greatest salmon highway on earth. You would see fish in staggering abundance. People talked of being able to walk across the Columbia on the backs of these amazing migrations of fish.

There would also be massive numbers of Indians. In 1750, before the infections of small pox and measles and dysentery got to the Pacific Northwest, tens of thousands of Indians migrated to the shores of the river for the fish migrations. They used the dried fish to support a trading system involving Indians all the way to eastern Montana. It was one of the most vibrant, healthy, and relatively peaceful places for Native Americans in all of North America. These Indians ate an average of three pounds of salmon a day, so they were incredibly well nourished. The fish were important to their traditional migratory patterns, but also to their religions and belief systems. The relatively peaceful patterns of their lives were based on those fish.

The fish were there until overfishing started at the turn of the 20th century. This was followed by dam construction in the 1930's, which really changed everything for the fish.

WPO: As you stood by the river, would you be aware of the thousands of fish?

BH: You would see dead fish everywhere. They were spawning in every stream that came into the main stem of the Columbia. The river had a series of small falls. One of the biggest was the Dalles, big slabs of rock where the fish had to jump up twenty feet through a waterfall against an incredible volume of water coming down. The river was really wild and dangerous and cold. It was not a friendly river; it wasn't the kind of place you go to recreate. It was too powerful and too cold, with water mostly from the Canadian Rockies but also from the Cascades and the Rockies in Idaho. It was this incredible powerful stream.

Size is not the most important measure of the Columbia. It is long, 1200 miles, and nearly ten miles wide as it enters the sea, and it drains an area about the size of the eastern seaboard from Maine to Virginia. It's not a small river by any means, but what distinguishes it from any other river in North America is its power. In half the distance of the Mississippi, it falls twice as much. It has this almost nuclear energy capacity to turn turbines for electricity. It is said that every half-hour, the Columbia expends as much energy as was released by the Hiroshima bomb. It contains a third of all the hydro-electrical potential in all of the United States. That's what is amazing about it.

When Easterners saw it back in the era of dams, their first instinct was that we had to build dams on this river. Franklin Roosevelt came out and looked at the Columbia in 1920 when he was campaigning for the Vice-Presidency. "As we were coming down the river today," he said, "I could not help but think of all that water running unchecked down to the sea. Those great stretches of physical territory now practically unused must be developed by the nation."

That's the story of the river that I know, having grown up in the Columbia Basin. The construction of Grand Coulee Dam started in the mid-thirties and was finished in 1942. At the time it was the biggest concrete structure in North America, and it's still the biggest concrete structure in North America. By itself it produces a third of all the electricity in the entire Pacific Northwest. It is the key to the prosperity that Seattle and Portland have seen in the eighty years since the dam went it. It was finished as World War II came along. All of a sudden we had these massive amounts of unused electricity potential that could be taken over the mountains to Boeing to build bombers

and to Portland to fabricate ships. At the same time, the U.S. Government was trying to figure out how to hurriedly and secretly build atomic bombs. They grabbed a hunk of empty desert land south of Grand Coulee Dam at a place called Hanford near what is now the Tri-Cities, and they secretly built a plutonium factory using massive amounts of power from Grand Coulee Dam. It worked, and Nagasaki was blown up. 100,000 people were killed, all from the electricity produced by the Columbia River.

That unused potential also led to the construction of a lot of aluminum plants, and then Boeing took off, the University of Washington took off, and with irrigation from Grand Coulee Dam, agriculture took off. It didn't really give birth to Bill Gates, but it gave birth to the University of Washington's wealth and nurturing for a lot of the engineers that have helped turn Seattle into the home of the most money of any big city in America. Gates's money, Amazon, Starbucks, Nordstrom, Costco. It's not all because of Grand Coulee dam, but it really did help.

To get back to the fish, this was an enormous resource for the Native Americans up and down the river. Grand Coulee Dam was built without fish ladders. This meant that all the salmon that spawned and whose genes wanted to take them upstream to northeast Washington and on up into British Columbia were dead at the dam. They swam to the dam and died, and that gene pool was lost. These were the biggest, most amazing salmon. Some weighed between 80 and 100 pounds. They called them June Hogs, these big Chinook salmon. They disappeared.

The Native American civilizations in the United States and British Columbia who depended on those fish for everything from their spiritual beliefs to their food supply to what they did with themselves daily all new year long were wiped out. It was a genocide through the killing of salmon. Earlier this year I went up to British Columbia and talked to the First Nation people up there, three generations now since the death of all these fish. There were poets and artists and engineers and townspeople, and they were so angry that it was almost impossible to have an objective conversation with them about the dam. Grand Coulee was an incredible success as America defines success, but they really do see it as genocide, which is understandable.

WPO: Could we have built a fish ladder? It would have been costly, which was one of the concerns, but could we have done it?

BH: Yes. Dams cost a lot of money. This was the biggest project on earth at the time. Certainly they could have built a fish ladder. The first dam on the main stem of the Columbia was Bonneville, built a few years before Grand Coulee. Its original design contained no fish ladders. Bonneville is just up the stream from Portland. If that dam had been built with no fish ladders, all of the salmon in the Snake and Columbia system for Idaho, much of Oregon, all of Washington and British Columbia, the entire salmon ecosystem, would have been wiped out. It only changed because of a stubborn and clever biologist at the University of Washington who saw the plans and pointed this out and suggested that it really wasn't that difficult to build a fish ladder. The engineers looked at it, and they built a perfectly fine fish ladder.

The problem with fish in dams is not going upstream. They can jump up waterfalls that are twenty feet high. They can go up a fish ladder like nobody's business. The problem is coming down, finding safe ways for them to go through a dam without being compressed and then dying from it. Over time they figured out those problems too. It's just that now there are so many dams that create so much slack or still water between the dams that the migration times have increased, the water has gotten warmer, and mortality has gone up. But the thing is that if you're a good enough engineer to build a dam, you're a good enough engineer to figure out how to get salmon up and down a river if you want to.

WPO: If we had the will and put in the effort, could we create fish ladders all the way up the Snake and all the way up the Columbia and restore some significant part of that fish flow?

BH: Probably. There are two main-stem dams now with no fish passage, Chief Joseph and Grand Coulee. The cost of putting in fish ladders at this point, the way they are being engineered, would be high. It would be a very complicated process.

The other part of this has been done at great cost, and with great political infighting. The tribes and environmentalists working with engineers at the Bonneville Power Administration, reluctantly for the engineers and the power side, have figured a way to use this river that has dramatically improved fish survival when the weather cooperates. That has been the good news story of the past twenty years. Science has figured out how it works, and the engineers can solve the problems if they are forced to, if the political will exists. And it does now.

WPO: You could say now that having harnessed the Columbia to create the most profitable foundation for a Northwest civilization imaginable, we could use a portion of that extraordinary wealth to do the right thing, to go back in and reengineer the river to make it a more welcoming place for salmon. If that narrative played itself out, wouldn't it be a great success story?

BH: Yes. I think in quiet ways this has partially been done for part of the river. But I have never really heard the environmentalists or the tribal leadership talk about getting these changes made for the two big dams that don't have fish passage because they don't see it as politically realistic. I frankly have not asked that question in a determined way. But it is a good question.

WPO: In reading your book, one gets the sense at the end that maybe you thought we couldn't do it even if we engineered it. It seemed that you were suggesting that it may be too late, that the gene pool has shrunk too much, that habits have changed, and that it may not be possible to restore the fisheries.

BH: The salmon are very vibrant. And when you finish a book, that doesn't mean you understand everything.

WPO: The books ended a little pessimistically on that score.

BH: Well, yes. The salmon are very vibrant. They've knocked out dams around here lately, like the Elwha River, and the fish have come back like gangbusters. The Klamath River is going to have all of its dams removed, and there is no doubt that that river is going to become a vibrant salmon resource again. Nobody is going to remove Grand Coulee, and I don't know if anyone can figure out a way financially to build the fish ladders there.

WPO: At this point, in 2019, I think I hear you saying if we did it, the robustness and the vibrancy of the salmon means there would probably be significant return.

BH: Yes. But there are also four or five monstrous dams in British Columbia. Because Grand Coulee obviated the need for fish passage, there are no fish ladders there either. So that is also an issue.

Right now everyone is focused on trying to maximize flows in the river where the dams have fish passages. That's a lot of territory, all the way to the Snake. You know about the deaths of the orcas in Puget Sound and their need for Chinook salmon, so there is a desire to remove the four main-stem dams on the Snake to increase the flow of that river and improve fish passage. That is a political nightmare to solve because the politicians on the east side of Oregon and Washington will go to the mat on that one. It doesn't look like it will happen. But all the money and all the political power are for it. It's just the political representatives of eastern Washington and Oregon that see this as impossible.

WPO: Lewis and Clark met more than fifty Indian tribes, mostly on the Columbia Basin. They were not particularly fond of what they saw. They thought these were higglers and that they had been debased by contact. There was peace because of the sheer abundance. It was not a zero-sum game for protein, so there could be peace? What accounts for the peacefulness of that bioregion?

BH: That is part of it, the amount of nutritional wealth available in that river, in conjunction with other resources. They could go buffalo hunting at certain times, and then come back and trade their fish for all the things that other tribes had. Some of the biggest markets in the Native American world were near the Columbia River because the fish flows were regular. They could count on it, and they would have this pemmican, this dried salmon, to trade. They traded with everybody.

Part of it had to do with the dominant tribe in the Columbia Plateau, the Nez Perce. They were a well-managed political entity, politically and physically safe from invaders. They had a calming presence on the rest of the region. Smaller tribes used the Nez Perce language, which took over as other tribes were marginalized. Their leadership, which was localized – they didn't have one big Platonic leader – used their resources well. They were peaceful. They greeted Lewis and Clark with real interest. They knew that traders were around. They had gotten horses in the 17th century. They had seen some technology come up the river. They saw Lewis and Clark as useful adjuncts to make their lives more comfortable and perhaps even to increase their spiritual powers. They were constantly trying to supplement their powers. They had a rich spiritual life, and they saw that the whites had one too. They wanted a piece of it, not because they wanted to believe the whole thing, but because they wanted what might be useful to them.

Once people like Marcus Whitman and Henry Spalding and the Catholic priests brought in their religion, most of the Nez Perce and most of the other tribes thought it was a little too much. They were not going to do all that. They didn't want to change their lives and become white people, though they were happy to hear about it. That was basically their attitude.

WPO: Lewis and Clark were not proselytizers, but it's true that the Nez Perce sent people down to St. Louis to find black robes and to find out what the medicine source was of this new group.

BH: They were interested in it. It was useful to them in a way similar to when we hear about a new phone. We want to go check it out to see if it's better than the phone we already have. That's a good analogy. Soon they realized that a lot of liabilities came with this new phone.

With that religion you also had Manifest Destiny, the belief that white people had the right to the land, to your values, to everything. It just steamrolled everything. The river itself is a great metaphor for Manifest Destiny. It happened relatively late in the American Western experience, in the 20th century, during my father's lifetime. My father came there during the Great Depression because he went broke in Montana. His father told him to go to Wenatchee, a town on the Columbia River, to see if he could find a job. His father had no money to feed him, so he would go hungry if he stayed home.

So my father came out. There were no dams except for Bonneville. There were lots of salmon in the river. He remembers going down to the river once and noticing the fish getting active and spawning. It scared the hell out of him. He had never seen a salmon before, and he didn't understand what these huge fish were doing in the river. He was from somewhere else, an economic migrant. The people who built the dams, the engineers, the people who designed the dams, were all from the Midwest. They all went to school in Denver. They designed their dams in Denver, without an anthropological understanding of what they were dealing with.

WPO: Or any ecological understanding.

BH: They didn't even understand the biology of the fish. They knew what dams were made of. You need rock, you need a good foundation, you need rebar, and you need people and money. That's all they cared about. One of the early notes from the engineers during the construction of Grand Coulee listed some of the social problems related to the construction of the dam. Two that they listed were feral dogs and angry Indians.

WPO: On the Missouri, when Garrison Dam went in, it had a devastating effect on the Mandan and Hidatsa and Arikira, an appalling, genocidal effect. The people who did this were semi-aware, but they didn't consider it a voice worth hearing. It didn't carry weight worth putting into this equation. There was a sense that this was progress. Do you feel the same way about the Columbia?

BH: Yes. In fact I think they were even less concerned because, in the case of Grand Coulee, they knew they were building the biggest dam ever. There was a great pride and arrogance. In the actual physical layout of Grand Coulee construction, they had a little town for the engineers called Coulee Dam. It had grid streets and sprinklers and little lawns and nice little houses. The wives were there, the kids were there, the lawn mowers, the stitching of sprinklers in the summer – it was a utopian town at the construction site.

Then over the ridge was where the roughnecks were, including my father. Some of them lived in the boxes that dancehall pianos came in. It was wild. It was men without women, and women who came to town to make money off of men without women. My father recalls shootings and knifings. He quit working at the dam because it was so dangerous. He saw people getting killed, more than twenty while building the dam. So he started delivering milk. He saw so many wild things when he delivered milk to people's houses. Naked women often came to the front door and asked him in. My father was 19 or 20 years old and he said he was sorely tempted but he knew he would ruin his milk route. At least that's what he told me.

WPO: You quote FDR earlier. Who was the first President of the United States who would be more subtle, who would recognize that rivers have an inherent right to exist, that they are complicated ecosystems, and that we need to be thinking about

endangered species? How far do you have to go forward until there is Presidential leadership that would be a little embarrassed by what FDR said?

BH: In the case of the Columbia, there has never been such a President. That includes Clinton and Obama and Carter.

WPO: We've never gotten to that point?

BH: Part of it is the geographical problem. This is a river that is way out in the northwest corner, but it is also not a problem. This is the deluxe, the Cadillac irrigation and electrical system and transportation system in the country. It works like a clock. It is fantastically good for other industries and for agriculture. If you are growing wheat in Idaho, you can put it on the subsidized river system and a barge and take it to the ocean for a penny or two less than if you put it on a train. People in Brooklyn, in Philadelphia, in Denver, pay for the cost of that system.

The politicians of the Pacific Northwest love this system. It has been completely paid for with other people's money, allowing them to get richer. I think the most important metaphor that comes out of the Columbia – there are so many that they are all mixed and crazy – is that it is this place where other people have given their money to create your God-given right to their money in perpetuity. Subsidized dams, subsidized irrigation, cheap electricity, these are all things that God gave to me as a resident of eastern Washington, because this is my right as an American. Nobody even understands where the money came from. Donald Worster, this great revisionist historian of the American West, describes this amnesia that exists in irrigation country where you don't understand how it's possible for you to have water there. You forget about it, because if you actually thought about it, you would have to acknowledge that big government makes your life possible, but you hate big government. You sort of inhabit this contradiction that DeVoto talked about: get out of town and give me more money.

Yes. I grew up in the very heart of that. My father went from being the son of a failed farmer and the grandson of a failed farmer and the great-grandson of a failed farmer to a middleclass guy who worked his whole life on government financed dams, at Hanford, and then the dams again. And all the while he hated the Federal Government and talked constantly about taking the politicians out and shooting them. Except for one: Franklin Roosevelt.

WPO: Dropped onto the banks of the river in 1805, you saw salmon and Native Americans in abundance and this peaceful culture of almost overwhelming abundance. There was a stable system, a hegemon with the Nez Perce in that transition zone between the plateau and the Columbia. That's a beautiful picture. Now do it the other way. If Jefferson and Lewis and Clark drop into the Columbia Basin today, what is their response?

BH: Jefferson believed in the yeoman farmer. When he thought about the West, that was his plan. Use the capacity of the Federal Government to put people on plots of land where they could farm, raise families, and have democratic values.

That's not the way it worked. Consider the Columbia Basin irrigation project. There were all these plans for the subsidized farms to be given to small Jeffersonian yeomen farmers, but they couldn't make enough money so they sold out. A relatively small number of families now own all the farms in the Columbia Basin, or most of them. Most of these families are white and rich and

making really good money off a completely subsidized system that delivers basically free water, pumped with electricity that is also more or less free.

WPO: Do you think Jefferson would be okay with the industrialization of the river? Would he be thrilled, or would he be worried? How would Lewis and Clark and Jefferson respond to the deep industrialization of the Basin?

BH: I think the industrialization is the American way. If you see a system that can be mechanized for the benefit of the majority, particularly without much environmental danger other than fish and a few thousand Native Americans, you go for it. That has certainly been the attitude of even progressive politicians in the Pacific Northwest.

There were two Senators from the state of Washington, both pretty good Democrats: Scoop Jackson and Warren Magnuson. They were the great rainmakers who brought eastern Washington more money for water development per capita than any place in America, and they did it for three or four decades. They were incredible rainmakers. They really believed in the system, and I think if you could sit and talk with them during their prime, they would agree that there were costs, but they would also say that they were doing what politicians are supposed to do, bringing the maximum prosperity to the maximum number of people with the minimum of costs.

That's probably my judgment at this vantage point in my life and based on what I have seen of the system. It's there, and it really continues to deliver. In an era where carbon is destroying the planet, the Pacific Northwest is really doing its part not to help destroy the world. In the end it turned out to be a pretty good deal. But Native Americans are never going to say that. They can't say it, because the dams destroyed their civilizations.

WPO: Jefferson thought of rivers as highways. He sent Lewis and Clark out to find the interchange between the Missouri system and the Snake and Columbia system. They were trying to find out if there was an Interstate Highway of a river across the continent. Lewis said of the Missouri system that there was no other river like this, so far from its source with navigable water and only one impediment, the Great Falls. He realized that it wasn't going to be that way on the other side. But don't you think Jefferson might say they'd done it? Lewiston is a port; this is a highway.

BH: It is. The Columbia itself, once you get past McNary Dam, really isn't navigable. It's the Snake that is. But that system from Lewiston to the sea works. It depends on the dams. If they removed the four main-stem dams on the Snake, transport would go. But there are railroad tracks on both sides of the rivers, so it's going to make it cost a little bit more. It doesn't have an effect on the regional economy in terms of shipping. And the power of agriculture has diminished, even in Idaho, because of tech growth.

WPO: When you think of Lewis and Clark, it's not going down the Columbia, which must have been challenging, but coming back up in March and April of 1806. That can't have been fun, taking those canoes against that current and that volume coming out of the Canadian Rockies.

BH: Really hard work. The river is so big and powerful and cruel. It's not a place for a canoe. It is a place for a barge and a huge tugboat. That's the kind of navigation that the Columbia can tolerate, but even then it is dangerous because of the wind.

WPO: We have a romance of rivers. There's a romance of the Mississippi, there's a romance of the Shenandoah, there's the romance of the Missouri. Is there still a romance of the Columbia? You're painting a picture of an inevitable industrialization that has on the whole been an extraordinary success. There's not a lot of room for romance in that paradigm.

BH: The romance of the Columbia occurs once it turns and starts to go through the gorge. Over all these millions of years it cut this fabulous gorge through the Cascade Mountains. It is extraordinarily beautiful. The river is pretty hipped and swift and deep at that point. The landscape, as you go from desert to Ponderosa Pine to Douglas Fur, is spectacular. That's a really beautiful drive. It's a great introduction to the Pacific Northwest.

You can see the beauty of it compared to the brown desert of eastern Washington where I am from. When I was a kid and coming to Seattle for the World's Fair, I remember asking, "Why didn't we live over there where it's beautiful and green?" The Columbia as it goes through the brown, sagebrush territory, is sort of anomalous. You're going across sagebrush and some rolling hills and it's hot with sand bugs and flies. Then you see this river that is so big. You wonder what the hell this river is doing here. It doesn't seem to square with this landscape. Then when the river makes that turn to the west and starts to hit the mountains, it coheres. It makes sense. And it's really beautiful. There's a poetry to it. Lots of tourists go on boat rides through the gorge, and they're spectacular.

WPO: We hear you saying that if we really wanted to we could restore the salmon runs to a certain degree. In some ways we have already done this. But we are also hearing you say that there is no fix for the Native American issue. That story is now over. Is there no amelioration that could help rebuild those cultures as river-based cultures?

BH: Right. You can't, because they are modern people now. They have a sense of their traditions. It depends on who you talk to. The degree of the destruction was so great and so ignored, really from around 1850 until about 1980. Those cultures were steamrolled and people didn't care.

I remember talking to an engineer from Grand Coulee Dam who helped design it. He spent his whole life there. I asked him about the Indians. This was when he was an old man, and he was a nice man too. He said that Indians don't like to work. They like to come down and steal stuff from the dam. His attitude was that they were like stray dogs.

I grew up in that culture. I remember when I was working on the Columbia River book. I went out to the Colville Reservation and spent a lot of time, finding people who would talk to me. There was the anger, the sense of death. One guy told me that his son-in-law blew his head off with a shotgun. There were car wrecks, house fires, alcoholism, suicide, and leaving the reservation. I talked to a prosecutor who dealt with murder and death on the reservation, and he said he couldn't get over how much death and misery there was out there.

The Colville Reservation once had Kettle Falls, where the June Hogs were caught. It was a prime fishing area, and the whole culture was based on it. It disappeared in a week, and they didn't know what to do. Even when I got there 45 or 50 years after, they were still confused about what they were supposed to do with their lives. It was really cruel. There are University of Washington anthropologists who watched it unfold and wrote about it. Anthropologists are scientists and don't

normally get too emotional, but I remember reading their books. They were so angry. All the people they'd studied and got to know and loved had their lives destroyed, slowly and in a very cruelly destructive way.

WPO: Which is not over yet?

BH: I think a lot of the tribes have moved on. Young people have gone off to colleges and taken advantage of what is available to them. I know the Umatilla Tribe – it was the Umatilla and the Walla Walla and the Cayuse – were river people. A good part of their diet was salmon. Now they are using gambling and tax advantages from not having to pay state and federal income taxes to fund other developments, things such as road building and office development. They've become modern, well-managed, entrepreneurial Americans. They've addressed some of their social problems in an intelligent and effective way. They haven't solved them, but they've addressed them. They're in a good place.

I've just in the past couple of years been spending time with them for my current book. I really feel that they are in a different place from the Indians in the Colville Reservation that I talked to 25 years ago. They've moved along this passage into becoming more modern Americans. For me it's a good news story. They're still really angry, but they are no longer destitute or hopeless or without plans for the future.

WPO: If you add up the wealth that has come through casinos along with a fair amount of federal infusion and the educational aspirations that are beginning to be met in Native American cultures, along with a professional class of lawyers and doctors and businessmen and MBA's and politicians with infinitely greater sophistication than existed in 1950, or even 1980, there is good news. That doesn't take the rage away. There were some Native Peoples from the lower Columbia who spoke at the recent LCTHF Annual Meeting in Astoria. They were extraordinarily decent, thoughtful, generous people, but with this half-concealed rage. Their strategy was to determine how much rage they could express to these white people and still keep their attention? How much rage could they let out and get away with from a rhetorical, strategic point of view, knowing that if you go too far with rage, it just breaks down.

BH: I have exactly the same perception from talking to the Cayuse, who are in this good position relative to their past. I talk to people in their thirties, fifties, sixties, and seventies. They all have the exact same reaction. It was just so cruel, so needlessly cruel for so long, and they were seen as subhuman. They were not worth factoring in for such a long time. Only with money and political power does that change. Those Indians that have it are in a much better position than they've really ever been since Lewis and Clark showed up.

WPO: When you look at Lewis and Clark, do you see harbingers of doom? Or do you see well-meaning people who didn't really know what they were blundering into? How do you place Lewis and Clark in the larger context of the history of this region?

BH: I think it's a little bit after Lewis and Clark. They were military men and they were scholars, and they were on a very specific assignment, to make a map and to figure out what things

looked like and what the potential was. They weren't people who had come to live. They came and they left.

The early settlers in the Willamette Valley and the missionaries came to take land. At best, they wanted to teach the Indians how to survive the coming onslaught. That was the very best of them. The very worst of them simply wanted the Indians to back away and take a licking, which is what happened, and they were powerless to do anything about it. What is strange about the missionaries, who were there before almost anyone else except for the trappers, is that they basically turned into land developers. That's why Marcus Whitman was killed. He became a land developer, and the Indians wanted him to leave. When he wouldn't leave they killed them.

WPO: That is what they say about the missionaries in Hawaii. They came to do good, and they would up doing well. They came to possess and dispossess. They came to dictate the terms under which Native Peoples would be able to coexist.

BH: Yes, that's right, and with this incredible lack of curiosity about the people they were living among. You are inferior, and I am possessed of not only the right God but the right culture. Unless you change everything that you do, everything that you are, you don't have a chance.

WPO: But if we been born then, we would have been of the same spirit. We have no right to feel that we would have been more enlightened than that.

BH: No. There's no reason to think that. In fact, even in my lifetime – I'm 66 – when I was a boy all the way up to when I was in my forties, I thought that way. That was my culture. Only when I went away for a long time and went to the East Coast and became a newspaper reporter and learned how to ask questions and get distance from any culture did I figure out or even perceive the cruelty of what was going on.

When they built the dams and this enormous structure of electricity and cheap water, they didn't give any of it to the Indians. The Colville Reservation didn't get any water at all from the system for irrigation, in part because it was uphill and it was hard to move water uphill. They didn't get any electricity either, not for decades.

WPO: That was then. Let's say that we come onto the river today, and it's untapped. We couldn't do now what we did then. We're more sophisticated about ecology and the environmental consequences of engineering, we're infinitely more sensitive to Native Peoples, and our Federal laws would make sure Native Peoples were at the table. This happened then, but it couldn't happen now. Is that a fair statement?

BH: It couldn't happen now. I don't think they could build these dams now. And if they did, they would certainly have to have fish ladders. All of them would. However, because it's one-third of the hydroelectric potential of the United States, it would be pretty hard not to, given the temper of our times, which is this thirst for low carbon energy. Grand Coulee's electricity has an actual effect on the global carbon load. It's measurable. It's really important. All the dams combined reduce the footprint in a scientifically important way for the future of the globe. That's what science would say at this point. That was not known then, but it is certainly a fact now.

WPO: The hydropower of the Pacific Northwest becomes more valuable by day because of what we now understand about carbon?

BH: That's right. So you can say that we're really lucky that we did it. The Indians paid the price for it, but at this point they too are worried about climate change. I was in eastern Washington last summer and it was 111 degrees for a week, with smoke from the forest fires from Oregon to British Columbia. Climate is changing much faster in eastern Washington than it is on this side of the mountains, so they are very worried.

WPO: Thoreau said in *Walden* that if he saw a person who was coming to do him good he would turn and run the other way. I'm sure lots of Native Peoples feel that way about white philanthropists or white people who want to come and somehow help them. First of all, what can be done to help Native Peoples towards graduating out of the path of the deep problems of poverty? Secondly, is there anything we can do that would allow any sort of niche river culture? Salmon, some access to the river? Are there ways to ameliorate this condition other than writing checks and hoping that they can get on and join the club of the 21st century?

BH: My first answer is that I'm not knowledgeable enough to answer that question well. I need to do more reporting. But based on what I've done, there is a pretty good legal structure for the tribes of the Pacific Northwest to use their tax advantages and their advantages under Federal law to make money and to build their cultures and to use their land in a way that would perpetuate a better life for their families going forward.

To make that happen most efficiently and most quickly is to dramatically improve education, first at the preschool level and then at elementary and secondary schools, so that fewer kids are lost. Quite a few have succeeded and gone on to get the kinds of degrees and the management skills and environmental understanding that allow them to take advantage of the law, which is now on their side in many cases.

They need better education, so that 80% of the kids rather than 15% of the kids have those advantages. My daughter goes to a school where 100% of the kids go to college. I'm really happy that she is at that school, but that isn't the case on the reservations or at the schools that are close to where these people live. That is something that is doable. Give the leadership of these tribes more resources and more focus. Increase the percentage of those who make it into a position to take advantage of the laws that are on the books.

It's really interesting. Most of the laws that really make a good life possible for these Indians were passed under Richard Nixon. Some of the fundamental building blocks in the law for a powerful tribal government came from that era, and they're still there. Some tribes have used them better than others.

The termination era ended under Nixon. That was a horrible thing. The tribes that I spent time reporting on were the lucky ones that weren't terminated. They took advantage of a pretty good network of laws. If they can run a good business and are competing against white people who are paying taxes, they can win almost every time.

WPO: There is a lot of anger. A psychologist or a sociologist might say that this cannot go on. You can't create a vibrant successful culture where there is an anger issue at the very center of it. What is the better answer to this? Should we say that that was then and this is now, that we feel sorry and wouldn't do it that way today? We'll do whatever we can to be useful, but you're going to have to get over this because there is nothing to be done. Or should we take the approach that there is

something that we have to do, some cultural acknowledgement? Something has to happen before this anger can begin to dissipate. Where are you in this story?

BH: In talking to the Indians that I've talked to in the last year, they're angry but they're not going to push Amazon out of town simply so they can continue to be angry. They're going to make a deal. It's in their best interests. I think they are quite willing to prosper. They want to prosper, but what would make it a lot better would be to increase awareness. That is what I'm trying to do now. I'm writing a book about people who survived 150 years in the doghouse, whose ancestors killed some missionaries and who are punished unto the sixth generation because of it, but who are now pulling themselves out. They're angry, and they're never not going to be angry, but they're also living a lot better, and their kids are living a lot better.

WPO: You're basically saying that we don't need to be offering advice to Native Peoples. They're handling it.

BH: Yes. What we need to do is to give them a legal structure that allows them to prosper. I think we have, and I think they would say that too. They do say that, they've told me that, except for those tribes that were terminated and those people who have been dispersed. That culture has been exterminated.

White culture needs to understand what it did in a visceral way that is part of the educational structure, particularly in the West. Patty Limerick and all of these people talk about conquest as the basic cultural principle that drove everything. Conquest at the expense of all the people who got in the way. If you go to school in the West, you should start drinking that milk, learning why your culture is possible from the very beginning. That's not happening. I started learning about these issues when I was in my forties.

If you grew up in the South, you're taught to think about the Civil War. You're still taught to think about the Civil War in a different way than what a cold, analytical look at the history would tell you. The same is true in the West. We don't understand that this place was built on destruction of other people. It has turned out well for us, but you need to understand that. The revisionist historians who were so dominant in the 80's and 90's – I think the wind has gone out of their sails and people have moved on to other issues. But it's still important to understand those issues. The mainstream media, of which I was a part of for almost my entire life, completely ignored those issues, with the exception of *The Los Angeles Times* in its heyday.

WPO: Maybe that's the better use of the Amazon & Gates trillions. Maybe we should be putting pressure on our curricula so that at least we have to wrestle with this, at least we have to acknowledge it. We can't pretend any longer that this is all progress and there were no losers.

BH: The American public is really interested in this issue. David Grann's book about the Osage Indians, which was such an amazing bestseller, tapped into a great desire of white Americans to understand this issue and to understand themselves in relation to conquest. That book really was an incredible shock to the publishing industry. They didn't know that appetite was out there. There should be a lot more done by people like me, and by other, younger journalists. There is an appetite for it. There are so many stories.

WPO: If you were the Columbia water czar and given a blank check to do what you want, what are the steps you would take with that check in the Columbia Basin now?

BH: I would fire everyone who works at the Bonneville Power Administration, and replace them with engineers whose loyalties are to the ecosystem and not to the power structure. It would diminish the amount of electricity produced by the dams. I would invest a lot more in hardware, connecting solar and wind to the hydro-system so that it could be much more responsive to fish. You could get rid of those dams on the Snake immediately. I'd breach those dams. They're marginal producers of electricity and major killers of fish, and have been since they were built. The transport system is redundant. It's cheaper, but it's redundant. You could do that in five years, and probably produce more electricity that is more responsive with less carbon.

WPO: Do you think this is doable? Do you think the mood of the region or the mood of the country can stomach that sort of pulling away from the high water mark of industrialization?

BH: I think that when I finished all of that, I would be elected Senator from either Oregon or Washington. And I might be a candidate for President. It's doable, and it would be immensely popular where the people and the money are.

WPO: Then the obvious question is why isn't this happening?

BH: It's because the people who live where I live in Seattle love free-flowing rivers and wolves and salmon, but they do it as dilettantes. They're busy working, writing software, developing some new app. Whereas the people who are opposing it are fighting for their life. They perceive it as a life or death struggle. Either we keep these dams or we all die in the dark. That is how they see it. Politically and organizationally, they bring a lot more intensity to this issue. They've been able to slow change or stop it, even though their numbers are diminished and their relative wealth falls every day. They still have ability to stop change.

Having said that, there has been a lot of change in the way the rivers operate. They spill huge amounts of water for fish now that they never did before. It has produced some results. Some of it is global climate change. The snowpack is diminishing, and the seasonal rhythms of the river are changing irrespective of the existence of the dams because a lot of the moisture comes from rain rather than snow. The horse is out of the barn for environmental degradation.

WPO: You have a complex and nuanced view of this. It seems that maybe the taking out of the dams on the Snake would be a kind of personal loss to you because you know what those things meant, you know what problems they were solving, and you know what era they represented. You know the kind of people, like your own father, who were made whole by these projects. But that is not your view at this point?

BH: My view is evidence-based. I think this should be the view of most Americans regarding our overwhelming problem, which is climate change. What is going to give us the best possible world for ourselves and our children and grandchildren? What does the evidence suggest? It suggests that you have renewable energy and you do the absolute minimum damage to big ecosystems like the Columbia/Snake River system. And you can improve it with very marginal

costs. The costs wouldn't even be noticed except for ten or fifteen thousand people who have been living on subsidies for three generations. These people will jump out of their skins. But who cares about them?

WPO: Some might regard your book as a left-leaning book. Readers feel passion in many of its passages. But in talking with you, you seem way less angry that you once were about all of this. Perhaps it's global climate change that has created this shift?

BH: I do have a different view. Climate change is a catastrophe of a kind and a size that I've never seen in my life. It has to color every bit of understanding of the world. When I think about politics now, it seems to me that national leadership and the national media have to focus on this issue to an extent that it defines how our economy works going forward. Otherwise we are not even going to have a chance. This is based on evidence, on what I read from the scientific mainstream opinion.

WPO: We've gotten this far without mentioning Donald Trump. Is Trump the last gasp of the denial mode of American history that says we're the best country in the world and that we do nothing wrong? Is this so virulent because it's the end, or is that streak going to continue all the way through?

BH: It's not going to go away. If he does not get re-elected, the people who support him are not all going to cut their throats. They are going to die, but their children are going to have similar views. Maybe they'll evolve.

It's a country where people's opportunities are so restricted by where they live and what their education has been and what they did for a living and how they have been misinformed. They're in a box. You have to deal with those people.

What's great about a democracy is that they can continue to exist but not dictate policy. The majority will do that. Part of the problem in this constitutional system is that they have disproportionate power, which paralyzes change and response to real emergencies. We've lost the past two or three years, and Obama did not move fast enough on this. That doesn't have much to do with rivers, but in any democratic system right now, there is going to be real change in response to this most important problem.

I'm so surprised that we waste so much time on issues that really don't matter. This is the main meal of the future.

WPO: The Lewis and Clark people want to know where they camped, what they ate, what kinds of relations they had with Native Peoples, whether they swamped their boats, and so on. We want to know *stuff* about this journey. You're taking a very different approach to this. You're taking the Columbia as this resource that has been tapped beautifully, with historical consequences: Nagasaki, Alamogordo, the aluminum industry, winning the war, setting up Seattle as one of the great cities in this country, maybe the most creative city in America today. What should Lewis and Clark people be thinking? With respect to rivers, do we need to get out from under the story? The Columbia is not in any way the Columbia that Lewis and Clark encountered in 1805 and 1806.

BH: I think you do. It has been turned into a phenomenal machine river that has done a lot of good for a huge number of people. They built these server farms using the cheap electricity from the Columbia. This conversation is being mediated by power from the Columbia River through a server and the electricity that flows through it. Everybody is a stakeholder now in this machine river in a way that wasn't true before the Internet era. It's because of the cheap power.

Having said that, there are things that could be done, such as making it more friendly for fish. Some of it has happened, but a lot more could happen without affecting prosperity at all except for people who have been subsidized for too long. I think that is the way we should think about it. It really did change. Franklin Roosevelt changed it when he brought billions of dollars of other people's money and poured concrete in the river. That is when the story changed. It's a different river.

WPO: When you are on the Columbia now, do you feel any sense of loss, or do you simply feel that there it is?

BH: I understand the history of it now, and I'm awestruck by the power of this river to change everything. Everything in my life. The reason that we went from being poor people to being middle class so that I could go to college and spend my life reading books was because of this river. That's one thing. And my kids are getting great educations. Everything came from that.

The other thing is that it has transformed the Pacific Northwest and made it into a different place. There's a majesty to what it is, this big ribbon of water going through the desert and then through the mountains. I often stop and look at it. And I think about my father a lot. My father fell into the river, he worked on the dams. He didn't understand it at all, but he really loved going to the dams and feeling that vibration of the water going through the penstocks. We went to Grand Coulee Dam together when they were spilling water – there was so much water coming from British Columbia that they had to spill it - and he loved it. The whole thing scared me, but he just loved the feel of it because it was really the texture of his life, this American success story. All that I feel when I go to the river.