



WYPW  
North America

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23

# YOUTH VISION FOR THE COLUMBIA RIVER

Report on the Youth Call for  
Action in the Basin

# Acknowledgements

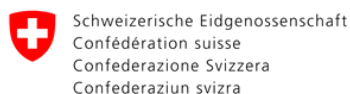
This report documents the outcomes of a transboundary, international group of youth who participated in the NAYPW Youth Forums for the Columbia River. NAYPW thanks these individuals for their contribution and raising their voices for the River. Statements in this report do not reflect the opinions or positions of any funding or supporting organizations.

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Organizations like the University of British Columbia-Okanagan campus, Hydrophiles at Oregon State University, and Wildsight provided much-appreciated non-financial support for this project.



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## Executive Summary

The modernized Columbia River Treaty is a tool to prepare for the needs of current and future generations in the Columbia River Basin. The Columbia River Basin is a transboundary basin managed between the United States and Canada, with Indigenous communities and sovereign nations typically excluded by those federal governments. The treaty governing the basin, the Columbia River Treaty, is currently under renegotiation. To elevate youth voices for the future of the Columbia River Basin, the North American Youth Parliament for Water gathered young people from the Basin through the Youth Forums for the Columbia River.

This report, “Youth Vision for the Columbia River,” collects youth concerns, insights, and demands as future caretakers and residents of the Basin.

As the living generation with the longest future to be lived in the Columbia River Basin, youth present these united demands for our future to be protected through the modernized Columbia River Treaty and additional management measures for the Basin beyond the Treaty itself. Above all, we have a strong desire to recognize the responsibility we have to stand in solidarity, as allies, with Indigenous voices.

**As the youth constituency of the Columbia River Treaty negotiation, we demand representation and accountability in the Treaty renegotiation and future Basin management processes.**

In particular, the youth constituency to the Treaty demands the immediate breaching of the four lower Snake River dams as well as the breaching of John Day dam no later than 2030. This process must be just and community-inclusive to ensure the replacement of critical services previously provided by the dams.

Youth view the current modernization efforts of the Columbia River Treaty as a tool to begin a broader discussion about improving the management of the Basin as a whole to better prepare for our future in the basin, and that of future generations. The CRT is one management forum among many to support our youth vision for our future in the Basin. By 2025, youth of the Basin propose the initiation of a Columbia International River Basin Organization as an evolution in policy making that emphasizes transparency in decision making processes and supports the needs of the communities the policies serve. As current leaders plan for a clean energy-based, climate-mitigating future for the Columbia Basin, the removal of certain dams is necessary both to decarbonize and protect ecosystems from the effects of climate change.



# Table of Contents

Introduction	_____	<b>05</b>
Regional Youth Voices	_____	<b>07</b>
Part of a Larger Whole	_____	<b>09</b>
United Youth Perspective	_____	<b>11</b>
Conclusion	_____	<b>14</b>
References	_____	<b>16</b>

# Introduction

**Our voices must be heard today to help lay the groundwork for effective and sustainable management for the future of the Basin.**

## *Background*

The youth of the Columbia River Basin (“Basin”) are the future water leaders and inhabitants of the Basin. The Columbia River Treaty (“Treaty”) of 1964 is the main governing document of the water resources in the Basin. The bilaterally-negotiated 1964 Treaty focused almost entirely on infrastructure, hydropower development, and flood risk management. The terms from 1964 are currently in an optional renegotiation stage between the Canadian and American governments. In an effort to elevate youth voices for the future management of the Basin, the North American Youth Parliament for Water (NAYPW) gathered youth from across the Basin through the Youth Forums for the Columbia River.

This report documents the outcomes of gathering youth through the NAYPW Youth Forums for the Columbia River. The Forums event on February 11th, 2023, was an effort to bring awareness to the youth voices of the Basin in this closing window of opportunity to be heard by Treaty negotiators. Sixty-three individuals participated in the NAYPW Youth Forums for the Columbia River. The final demands in this report were developed based on the regional breakout discussions among Canadian and American participants, and then a Basin-wide regional discussion where youth participants shared their common concerns and requests for action for the region. Additional input from Golden Secondary School (British Columbia) students is incorporated into this report to represent young people under 18 years old and their perspectives from living in the Columbia River Basin. Any feedback from readers and participants is welcome upon reading this report.

Youth continue to function as an external interest group in decision-making spaces in the Basin in both Canada and the USA, rather than as fully-recognized and independent actors with needs related to the natural resources within the Basin. It is also critical to avoid the pitfalls of tokenism by treating the youth perspective as a monolith—our intersectionality is a crucial part of our perspective, and of our value. The NAYPW Youth Forums gathered youth and young professionals to inform this report on key ways that current Basin decision-makers can meaningfully plan for our future during this time.

# *Rationale for Youth Forums*

Cooperative management of the Basin includes the participation of youth and the communities they represent: Indigenous communities, rural areas, cities in floodplains and high deserts, and others. However, as in other areas, youth are an under-represented interest group in the Basin management spaces. The 1964 Treaty is currently in a closing renegotiation window that has excluded youth perspectives on our future in the Basin.

This report documents the outcomes of gathering youth through the NAYPW Youth Forums for the Columbia River. The Forums on February 11th, 2023, was an effort to bring awareness to the youth voices of the Basin in this closing window of opportunity to be heard by Treaty negotiators.

Our collective “Youth Vision for the Columbia River” lays out youth concerns, insights, and demands as the future interest groups of the Basin. The vision of youth for the Basin directly relates regional, transboundary water management needs to the global Sustainable Development Goal 6 “Water for Health and Sanitation” indicators for transboundary cooperation and interest group engagement.

**ABOVE ALL: Youth demand that the managers of the Columbia River learn from the mistakes of the past and manage for a future defined by climate change resiliency, ecological recovery, and community inclusion in decision-making.**

## *Who are the youth?*

The “youth” identified in this report are those who participated in the regional forums on February 11, 2023. In addition to the youth who participated in our 11 February, 2023 forums, NAYPW gathered feedback in advance of the Forums from students (ages 14-15) at Golden Secondary School in British Columbia, Canada, who provided answers to similar questions asked in the forums to supplement this report. Their concerns and vision are included in the content of this document.

# Regional Youth Voices

On 11 February, 2023, NAYPW gathered youth from across the Basin to elevate their voices for their future in the Basin. Young people (ages 16-35 years old) from the Columbia River's headwaters, tributaries, and downstream communities joined the gathering. Our discussions first addressed regional topics from the Canadian and American youth perspectives. We then brought our voices together over concerns we hold in common, and actions our transboundary community views as critical for Treaty negotiations, and broader management of the Basin. In addition to the youth who participated in the Forum, NAYPW gathered separate feedback from students ages 13-15 in British Columbia, Canada, who provided their insights to be included in this report.

## *Canadian Youth Forum:*

### **Decentralization to empower and include local managers of the future**

Participants from Canada included researchers, students, residents, working professionals, and outdoor enthusiasts. Canadian youth highlighted the importance of localized structures, having more voices at the decision-making table, and improving community engagement through education for their future vision for the Basin.

**Youth call for accessible, transparent management in the Basin that allows for local engagement of more diverse interest groups than have historically been included in the Basin management process.**

Regarding both long-term Basin management and the Treaty negotiation process, Canadian youth emphasized the need for participation pathways for Basin residents and Indigenous peoples. Youth expressed a desire to have an international committee that would oversee the management of the Basin as one pathway to increase participation options. This committee would facilitate a more robust dialogue across the Canadian-American border and engage with Basin residents. Basin residents need to be involved in the management of the Basin as they are directly impacted by the decisions made.

Youth believe Indigenous Nations should be able to take part in governing the Basin in a Nation-to-Nation basis (Indigenous Nations to federal and/or provincial government), rather than in a stakeholder, consultation-type basis, which has historically occurred. In summary, the youth call for accessible, transparent management in the Basin that allows for local engagement of more diverse interest groups than have historically been included in the Basin management process.

More meaningful Basin-community engagement is rooted in education. Canadian youth would like to see more funding for educational programs about the history of the Basin and its current management. These programs will promote stewardship and a greater sense of responsibility for the health of local ecosystems.

Youth as young as 14 years old reported concerns for the climate change impacts on the basin, including inconsistent river levels. Youth observe both droughts and floods occurring in their local environment, negatively impacting people and wildlife. The impacts of poorly planned or maintain infrastructure in the Basin is a significant concern, including the negative effect of dams on fish populations and poorly maintained bridges impacting river flows and increasing flood risk in their communities.

## ***American Youth Forum:*** **Ensuring future youth and local representation**

Participants in the United States discussion included researchers, residents and recreators. American youth want to ensure Indigenous voices are not only heard, but prioritized and sustained as meaningful participants in the Basin's management and governing process. The involvement of Tribal governments in the Treaty negotiation process is required to achieve equitable outcomes. The American negotiating team for the Treaty only intermittently engages with Tribes in accordance with the Tribal Consultation Policy and Plan Concerning Tribal Consultations of the U.S. Department of State. Youth view this approach as insufficient when measured against youth values of community inclusion, and a replication of past management and community consultation mistakes in the Basin's history.

**American youth want to ensure Indigenous voices are not only heard, but prioritized and sustained as meaningful participants in the Basin's management and governing process. The involvement of Tribal governments in the Treaty negotiation process is required to achieve equitable outcomes.**

The participants also discussed the roles of community and youth engagement in Basin-wide issues. It is vital to emphasize the engagement of groups beyond those that use and interact with the waterways directly. Many of the interest groups in the Basin are left out of the conversation because they are upslope and out-of-sight of the river. Engaging youth from an early age on the cultural history and natural history of the region will facilitate community comprehension and foster the development of future leaders in, and advocates for, the Basin from its broad range of communities.

Ensuring a thriving ecosystem starts with local stewardship and community engagement. Successful community and youth engagement results in diverse groups being educated and interested in Basin-wide issues. This is imperative for ensuring the health of the Basin as it continues to face an increasing number of threats driven by climate change and the impacts of decades of flood control-focused management without consideration for ecosystem functionality. Beyond community engagement, the co-creation of knowledge and knowledge-sharing will create more equitable decision-making in the Basin.



# Columbia River Basin: Part of a Larger Whole

The Treaty renegotiation efforts can strengthen the Basin's water management structures in the context of the larger global conversations on climate change and progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. In the face of changing precipitation patterns in the Basin, updating the Treaty to contain a flexible climate adaptation strategy is critical for the Basin's long-term resilience to climate change. The Treaty also holds the potential to improve sanitation and ecosystem recovery from decades of degradation due to the Basin's hydropower infrastructure. Youth view these steps as critical to securing our future in the Basin.

## *Anticipating climate changes*

Climate change disproportionately impacts youth, who will feel the impacts the longest of all current Basin members. It could not be more clear that uplifting youth voices is central to the fight against climate change both worldwide and in the Columbia River Basin. As Canadian and American governments approach the Treaty negotiations to address the current problems facing the Basin, both decarbonization and climate change mitigation must be of high priority.

Climate change-driven warming in the Basin has resulted in lower summer flows in Basin channels, earlier peak stream flows, and broad changes in precipitation patterns across the region, among other changes. These changes exacerbate the impact of dams, habitat loss, and colonization on ecosystems and human communities in the Basin. The flood control and hydropower infrastructure system in the Basin governed by the Treaty needs a new set of management guidance and reservoir storage thresholds to make the system more resilient to the new reality of climate change.

**Leaders must think comprehensively about the use of hydroelectric dams to achieve the energy needs of the region considering the trade-offs of their impacts on biodiversity and greenhouse gas emissions.**

Though hydropower has helped accelerate the Basin’s transition to clean electricity and cleaner transportation, dams are the leading cause of warming water and declining biodiversity in the river system. Furthermore, dams contribute methane emissions from organic matter decomposition in their reservoirs.

Youth of the Basin call for the U.S. and Canadian governments to address the disproportionate impacts of climate change on marginalized communities and follow through on their established commitments to a just energy transition. Indigenous communities are seeing the first and foremost impacts of climate change on their cultures and communities. Indigenous communities are also leaders for climate action. Tribes like the Nez Perce have led the effort to replace the energy capacity of the four lower Snake River dams through Nimiipuu Energy and the largest virtual power plant based on solar energy in the U.S.

## *Sustainable Develop Goal 6 for the Basin*

**It is imperative to include young people in the discussion because the issues being addressed by Treaty renegotiations and SDG 6 directly affect the future health of the Basin, which in turn impacts the well-being of those young people who will remain in the Basin for decades to come.**

Including youth voices at the negotiation table is an effective way to make progress towards Sustainable Development Goal 6, “Clean Water and Sanitation for All” in the Basin by 2030. Young people are empathetic and forward thinking—two important attributes that are needed to solve problems parties on both sides of the border will need to overcome. Youth are also deeply connected with their communities, and when engaged can act as unifiers between government management efforts and the target communities in need of support. Steps to include youth as valuable community connectors would directly advance SDG 6 targets toward an increase in the inclusion of local communities in management decisions (6.B).

The changes that result from modernizing the Treaty can also make progress towards SDG 6 targets for ecosystem functionality (6.6). The Treaty’s core objectives of flood risk management, power supply, and irrigation can be maintained while also pursuing the needs of other interest groups within the Basin; these include in-stream flows and restored water temperatures for protection of salmonid fish species.

# United youth perspective for the Columbia River Basin

Youth unite in three cross-cutting areas regarding our future in the Basin and our vision for that future. Past Basin management created core issues for Indigenous communities, the limited scope of the Treaty itself, and the broader management structure for the Basin, that the modernized Treaty can redress to build a future that aligns with our Youth Vision. Beyond the Treaty, youth propose several pathways to improve the management of the Basin beyond the confines of the Treaty negotiations.

## *Indigenous Solidarity*

Involvement of youth-led support for Indigenous solidarity is a critical component of our Youth Vision for the Basin and in the UN Water Agenda 2030, particularly for protecting and preserving freshwater resources. The [Youth Salmon Warriors](#) of the [Columbia River Salmon Reintroduction Initiative \(CRSRI\)](#) are viewed by the authors of this report as an example of youth-led Indigenous action.

The Youth Salmon Warriors movement highlights Indigenous youth in the Basin who are reconnecting with the land and using Traditional Indigenous knowledge to bring home salmon to the headwaters of the Columbia River. The participants of the Youth Forums want to amplify the critical work of youth-focused Indigenous groups such as the Youth Salmon Warriors.

**Through working towards restoring Basin salmon populations in other capacities, we can support the Youth Salmon Warrior movement, and contribute to the restoration and preservation of cultural and spiritual connections to the land, which will further protect the health of the entire Basin ecosystem.**

Youth Forums' participants from across the Basin commit to standing in solidarity with the Youth Salmon Warriors by amplifying their work. We commit to supporting their work through spreading the word on programs such as theirs through various platforms, seeking funding to facilitate partnership on youth initiatives, and pushing for more inclusive policy making which will help restore salmon to the headwaters of the Basin. An equitable and sustainable water future for all can only be created if the traditions and practices of Indigenous communities who have lived in the Basin since time immemorial are recognized, supported, and honored.

# *Last chance for a sustainable Treaty*

Greater transparency, communication, and youth representation is needed throughout the current and future Treaty renegotiation process. We recognize the advanced stage of the current rounds of negotiations limits the immediate addition of a youth participant or observer. However, youth perspectives, concerns, and vision for the Basin must be heard and acted upon in the current renegotiations. Future negotiations in the Basin need to ensure that youth concerns are addressed from the beginning of the process and that our voices can still be included through more robust participation opportunities from the Canadian and American negotiating teams.

To ensure that decision-making around the current and future Treaties in the Basin protects the Basin for future generations, youth propose to current negotiators and managers to establish either a designated youth representative or a youth organization for any future Treaty discussions and consultations that occur past 2024. The designated youth representative would enhance the transparency and representation of young generations at the Treaty table, and can report back on our community interests.

Indigenous nations, local governments, and other organizations within the Basin often have their own governance systems and models which can include youth representation. These can become the first points of contact in which youth are able to raise their concerns, but these concerns must still be able to reach the negotiation table. The model of YOUNGO as the dedicated youth constituency for the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change is an admirable example of youth inclusion in decision-making in the global conversation around climate change.

As leaders imagine a clean energy future for the Basin, removal of certain dams is necessary both to decarbonize and protect ecosystems from the effects of climate change. The participants of the Youth Forums demand the breaching of the four lower Snake River dams as well as the breaching of John Day dam no later than 2030. These steps would restore historic salmonid spawning grounds, habitat, and populations. We also demand that the water level in The Dalles reservoir is lowered sufficiently to fully uncover Oregon's Celilo Falls. The water level established in the modernized Treaty must also reflect the reality that our generation of Basin residents will be impacted by climate change-driven changes in precipitation. Dam removal must be accompanied with full replacement of hydroelectric capacity and other services provided by the dams, with clean energy such as solar, wind and geothermal.

For too long, the Treaty negotiation process has upheld systems of oppression, gatekeeping from marginalized communities, Indigenous tribes, and youth. **As the youth constituency to the Columbia River Treaty negotiation, we demand representation and accountability in this process. Canadian and American delegations must include youth and young professionals throughout this negotiation process and must enshrine the participation of youth delegates in future negotiations. At least some of the people managing the Basin should be alive to witness its full effects.**

## *More than a Treaty*

There are considerable challenges in the Basin that need to be addressed beyond the scope of the Treaty and its negotiations.

It is necessary for the future of the Basin that an evolution in policymaking occurs to emphasize transparency, inclusive policy processes, and reflects the communities the policies serve. Youth of the Basin propose the formation of an international working group or International River Basin Organization (IRBO) towards this end. IRBOs support outcomes including more harmonious transboundary policy frameworks and improved participation from under-represented voices in decision-making processes. Our end goal is to provide a bridge to youth involvement in governmental decision-making at a broad range of scales.

Approaching 2030, the youth of the Basin demand that a focus is placed on investment in sustainable practices and increasing the natural resilience of the Basin in the face of climate change-driven alterations to the Basin's hydrology and ecosystems. This includes testing theoretical models of energy production that will support long-term restoration goals by reducing residents' reliance on the current, ecologically damaging methods of energy production. A "polluter pays" model of financial responsibility should be developed to achieve a carbon-neutral Basin.

**The youth vision for 2050 centers on a comprehensive solution for restoring the salmon and steelhead populations to their historic reaches. Restorative justice needs to occur by replacing all current services provided by the dams in the Basin which negatively impact salmon and steelhead populations with sustainable alternatives.**

It is time for national governments to serve justice to tribal communities, protect tribal lands, breach dams in violation of tribal treaties and inherent Indigenous rights, and invest in clean energy solutions that create well-paying jobs in Indigenous communities. Language concerning the prioritization of a just transition from fossil fuels must be included in a new model of governance for the Basin. The future youth vision for the Basin is just and equitable. These are broad changes that need to begin immediately to bring that future to bear.



# Conclusions

## Moving forward, the youth would like to see a shift in priorities regarding the management of the Basin.

Moving forward, the youth participants of the Youth Forums for the Columbia River would like to see a shift in priorities regarding the management of the Basin. Firstly, youth expressed a desire to find a new balance between using the river as a source of energy and mitigating the negative environmental and socio-economic effects that dams have on communities. Youth are concerned about environmental degradation and climate change in the Basin; climate change poses a great threat not only to the hydro-electric operations themselves, but also to the Basin's aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems and the people in local communities. The youth believe restoring ecosystem function to the Basin is critical in managing the drastic effects of climate change, including those that threaten local communities. Participants stressed the importance of maintaining healthy, functioning ecosystems throughout the Basin because many communities have developed a tourism economy. To that end, preventing further ecological destruction and restoring already damaged ecosystems is necessary if Basin residents are to receive the many ecosystem services that this Basin naturally provides.

For these reasons, youth demand the following to be included in the future of the Columbia River Basin's management system, including the Columbia River Treaty:

- 01 \_\_\_\_\_ Creation of a designated youth constituency organization, representative, or observer in Columbia River Treaty negotiations and other Basin-wide decision-making spaces.
- 02 \_\_\_\_\_ Implementation of measures to breach the four lower Snake River dams.

03

Implementation of measures to increase spill at The Dalles dam to fully uncover Celilo Falls that are based on a science-informed, flexible standard in response to the impacts of climate change on the hydrology of the Basin.

04

Plan to breach the John Day dam no later than 2030

05

Phase down of 50% of coal, oil, and natural gas use no later than 2030 and 100% of coal, oil, and natural gas use no later than 2050.

06

Investments in education, healthcare, and transportation infrastructure in majority BIPOC communities across the region.

07

Protection of all Tribal lands from mining, development, and damming without Tribal consent.

## Youth stressed that the Basin is a shared, public resource.

To that end, youth want to see hydroelectric companies held accountable for the environmental and socioeconomic impacts they have had on the Basin. Increased transparency into their dam operations and decision-making is needed. Moreover, policy changes are needed to reflect modern issues and opinions on how local people want the Basin to be managed. Finally, increased enforcement and transparent monitoring of all impacts related to dam construction and operation are needed.

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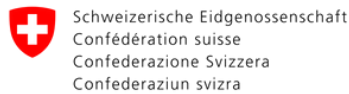
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