

Salmon Speaks Visits the Grand Coulee Dam

What does an enormous dam in the state of Washington have to do with a preschool in a small town in the Kootenays? Natalie Lucas describes an incredible field trip of discovery.

BY NATALIE LUCAS

The Grand Coulee Dam is the largest concrete structure ever built (www.nwcouncil.org/history/grandcouleehistory.asp), with a base that is almost four times larger than the great pyramids in Egypt (www.grandcouleedam.com/aboutdam.html). Over 12 million cubic yards (9 million cubic metres) of concrete were used. With this amount of concrete you could build a highway from Seattle, Washington, to Miami, Florida. (www.usbr.gov/pn/grandcoulee/pubs/factsheet.pdf).

The Grand Coulee Dam was where our Salmon Speaks, a project at the Valhalla Centre in South Slokan, BC, hoped to go.

Ever since that first conversation the children and I had at Valhalla Centre, when we talked about how the salmon were missing from our river, the Grand Coulee loomed in the children's thoughts and over our Salmon Speaks project. I had drawn a map and explained how salmon travelled up the Columbia River system. Then I had drawn in the Grand Coulee Dam to show how

it blocked the salmon's journey to our river.

To give some background, the Grand Coulee Dam was completed in 1942. After its construction, the Grand Coulee raised the level of the Columbia River back 151 miles (243 km) right up to the Canadian border. It flooded 82,000 acres (3.32 square metres) of farmland, towns, and an entire Aboriginal way of life (Bragg, 1995). The dam has also blocked the migration of salmon and other fish upstream to spawn. It "wiped out spawning up 645



A group shot to mark our field trip to the Grand Coulee Dam.



Keshet and Aoroa testing their cameras.



Soma's documentation "salmon wait at the dam."

river miles (1,038 km) and twice as much tributary miles equaling 1,100 miles (1,770 km) permanently destroyed." (www.nwcouncil.org/history/grandcouleeimpactsonfish.asp).

The children didn't need to know all those statistics to feel the injustice. They knew we needed to bring the salmon back home. From that moment the children of Valhalla Centre and Wee Ones moved forward with the Salmon Speaks project by learning about the spawning process of salmon and sturgeon. The children shared their concerns with other children and adults in their communities, helped make up a song, "Great Wild Salmon," and illustrated a story about a salmon named Sammy.

At their request, we wrote a letter to the CEO of BC Hydro. He responded with a letter that told us we should look up the different programs that BC Hydro supports for children in regards to fish habitat and environmental concerns. Sadly, those programs were for school-age children and young adults, and we could not participate.

So we decided that we would go directly to the dam itself, a field trip to Grand Coulee Dam! What better

way to get a hands-on and multi-sensory learning experience?

I had already been to Grand Coulee Dam and shared the Salmon Speaks project with people I met there, including museum employees, store merchants, Colville tribal members, and the motel owner, so I was familiar with the area. However, it was a daunting undertaking. For starters, the project needed funds. Sounds easy?

The Columbia Basin Trust (established to support Basin residents) seemed the wisest place to start for possible funding. Columbia Basin Trust's focus is "to foster quality of life and address issues in the Basin, improve community engagement, and determine the feasibility of returning the salmon to Columbia River (www.cbt.org/initiatives/water). We were very confident that our grant application for a field trip to the Grand Coulee Dam would be successful. You can imagine how disheartening it was to get a phone call saying we were refused because they thought our children were too young to benefit from this project, "that a dam closer to home would suffice" and by letter they informed us that Columbia Basin Trust funds were not to be spent outside the country.

We did not get their funds but they got an earful about the intellectual capacity of preschool children, their sense of social justice, and their understanding of the catastrophic event that took the salmon away from their home area.

After reassessing our situation, we decided to continue our search for funds. We researched environmental grants, school project grants, provincial and national programs, and even contacted the David Suzuki Foundation. The answer was the same: "funds must be spent in Canada" or "funds are only for school-age children." We reassessed again and decided to raise funds ourselves with our cookie-rama and family carnival.

Our fundraisers were a lot of work, but they gave us many opportunities to talk to people about the Salmon Speaks project, the wisdom of children, environmental issues, and the importance of having our salmon come back.

It turned out to be almost a whole year of struggles, but we did it! We raised the money and five families packed for the trip to Grand Coulee Dam. At our gathering place, every child received a camera for their own documenting of the trip and

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then we were off, follow-the-leader style, all the way to Grand Coulee Dam.

People in Washington welcomed us with interest and enthusiasm. The children, too, were very excited. Keshet's smile spread from ear to ear as she sat in her cot and stared at the TV set in the motel room. It wasn't on.

Her father asked her, "Are you hungry?"

"No, I want to go to bed." She answered from her cot. She took a picture of the TV set and began to giggle.

"I'm happy!" she proclaimed. We all agreed she certainly looked it.

The next day we began with the tour of the Grand Coulee Dam. Before getting on the bus, we had to go through an involved security check: pockets emptied, shoes off, beep, buzz, walk through, go this way, that way. Finally we were all on the bus that took us onto the dam with only our cameras and car keys. When we got off the bus, we walked by a soldier with a rifle standing close to the elevator entrance. As we walked past, Jordan said, "He has a really BIG gun!" We definitely don't see that every day in Canada. We were told Grand Coulee Dam played a big role in winning the Second World War. Apparently it could still be a target for sabotage?

Our elevator ride took us into the dam to see the 12 enormous turbines. Then the bus took us up on top of the dam. It was very windy! It was very high! Dare we look over? It was a rush for the senses!

Finally at the end of the tour, one of the children asked, "Where are the fish? We want to see the salmon."

The tour guide responded, "It is too dangerous for them to go over this dam, they would die."

The children asked: "But what about making it safe?"

"There are no future plans to focus on the salmon," was her reply.

But we know plans can change.

After the tour, when we visited the Colville Tribal Museum in the area, two wonderful ladies from the tribe greeted us: "You came! Welcome everyone!" The museum showed what the Grand Coulee Dam tour did not: the Aboriginal way of life that had disappeared with the salmon as the Columbia water rose. Their voices weren't heard, their humanity was dismissed as insignificant. But not to us. We share their goal and we'll share their story.

"The salmon will come." Henry Stensgar informed us with confidence after hearing our story. I remember his name from his picture in the museum. He refers to himself as a Sinixt, he lives along the San Poil River, which empties into the Columbia. To this day he drives down to the Chief Joseph Dam to fish for salmon. As is the custom, his first fish is given away. The next fish he keeps to share with his family. All that's left over, he returns to the river. He picks up two rocks, with singing and praying, he hits two rocks together at the waters edge, and calls the salmon home.

Henry said, "You tell your children, let them call to the salmon, let them hit the rocks together like this. The more children calling, the louder the song, the salmon will hear, and one day the dams will fall and the salmon will come."

I assured him that I would.



The children inside the dam looking out at the turbines.

Was it worth it? You bet! Our future plans? We have been invited to the Salmon Festival in Lumby to share our story.

To see the full journey the children participated in, see www.salmon-speaks.ca.

References

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