RESTORING THE
EKlutna River
“No, it wasn’t always this nice. Most always, yeah, but for a little while the water didn’t flow.” He shook his antlers and went back to browsing.

The dam is gone but still the water does not flow. For 90 years now the salmon have been denied their river and the Eklutna people have been denied their salmon. Do we tell them to wait a perfect century before the water is turned back on?

It’s not a complicated plumbing problem; the Eklutna River could run free tomorrow. What’s complicated is our history with salmon and Native people. Dams, highways, railroads, quarries, stolen land, and stolen water form the wave of shock and awe that washed over Eklutna.

But still the Eklutna Dena’ina hang on, still the Eklutna salmon hang on. A path has been cleared to wash away our mistakes. May the rivers run free forevermore.
“The Eklutna River has been broken for 88 years. Native people and salmon have been neglected. It’s time to fix this river.”
— BRAD MEIKLEJOHN

INTRODUCTION

For nearly a century, a giant, 70-foot wide, 100-foot tall wedge of cement blockaded the flow of the Eklutna River. This concrete behemoth had been installed by humans seeking increased electric power for Anchorage. No doubt the dam was promoted in the name of growth, progress, convenience and comfort for the growing urban center. But at what cost? With the loss of the salmon, a cascade of impacts eventually trickled downstream. Bears lost the option to fish in this unique canyon-enclosed river. A host of critters were robbed of a corridor they could traverse from Eklutna Lake to Cook Inlet. Even before the dam appeared, the Eklutna people must have been feeling the encroachment of people into their lands. Workers had begun to lay tracks for a new railroad from Seward to Fairbanks, which would cut across Eklutna territory in 1923. Once erected in 1929, the dam would rob the Eklutna people of a traditional salmon run, and with it a source of food, pride, beauty and sustenance from their own land.
THE RIVER BEFORE THE DAM

Established approximately 800 years ago, Eklutna is the oldest settlement in the Anchorage area and is the oldest continuously inhabited Dena’ina Athabascan Indian settlement in the region.

Throughout the Chugach, the Dena’ina people named the mountains, rivers, ponds, lookouts and camp sites. These place names were learned from experience and passed between generations for hundreds, if not thousands of years – all by oral tradition. Place names were rarely named after people. Eklutna, or Eydlughet, means “by the plural objects.” Lee Stephan surmised that the “plural objects” were two knobs near the river.

Not only a source of nutrition and sustenance, the Eklutna River had to have been a source of security, and even joy.

“In my youth, the fish were so thick you could walk across them.”

• LEE STEPHAN

“Children would race out of their house… the Eklutna was a raging river, and they were fed…”

• CURTIS MCQUEEN
SHOCK AND AWE

By the turn of the 20th Century, Alaska’s mineral resources had been “discovered.” Craving for wealth – gold, timber, coal and wildlife – spurred the movement of non-Native people into the Eklutna Dena’ina region. Reaching these resources and transporting them out of Alaska was impossible without infrastructure. Thus, by 1903 the newly-created Alaska Central Railway Company was laying track from Seward north. Anchorage became a tent city as thousands of workers flooded the area.

A wave of shock and awe began to wash over the Eklutna Dena’ina. Children were separated from families and sent to Indian schools. Land was bartered away for liquor and lives were bartered away for a bottle. Disease, money, deeds and broken promises frayed the fabric of Eklutna; dams, highways, powerlines, quarries and railroads sliced across the face of Eklutna.

“People forget that Anchorage is in Eklutna, not the other way around.”

* MARIA COLEMAN, NATIVE VILLAGE OF EKLUTNA
CONSTRUCTING THE DAM

The Eklutna dam was a family affair. Tapping the Eklutna River for hydropower was the brainchild of Frank Ivan Reed, who had sailed from Seattle to Nome in 1900. At first enticed by the gold rush, he proved himself to be an able entrepreneur in not only gold dredging, but timber and hotel construction, too. Then from 1922-1928 Reed followed his dream to build the dam and power plant, and formed the Anchorage Light and Power company. His son Frank Metcalf Reed served as a dam operator in Eklutna and later became Vice President of the utility. In March 1942, Frank M. joined the Navy, taking him away from Alaska for the next four years. Meanwhile, his father decided to sell Anchorage Light and Power to the city, depriving his son the opportunity to become owner of the company.

“It is important for Anchorage Power and Light to be on friendly terms with the Indians around Eklutna Lake. The uneducated Indian has only the mind of a 12-year old child.”

* J.L. DOBBINS, ANCHORAGE POWER AND LIGHT SUPERINTENDENT, 1941

“Alaska’s fish and wildlife shouldn’t have to wait a century for a dam day of reckoning.”

* RICK SINNOTT
Salmon could once be found in rivers across Europe and North America. Even in the 11th Century, although salmon biology was not well studied, the basics of its conservation were understood. Simply put, “to keep a river full of salmon, enough adult salmon had to reach their spawning grounds, and enough juvenile salmon had to reach the sea.”

*DAVID MONTGOMERY, THE KING OF FISH*

“It’s surprisingly complex but I think it’s all solvable. If I didn’t believe it were solvable, we wouldn’t be paying $7.5 million to take out a stupid piece of concrete.”

*BRAD MEIKLEJOHN / AK BUSINESS MONTHLY / SEPT 2017*
The Conservation Fund identifies partners, hires consultants, makes a plan with Eklutna Corporation in 1991.

A new federal agreement requires mitigation by operators of their impacts to fish and other wildlife no later than 2022.

Eklutna Dam is decommissioned in 1995.

A new upper dam is rebuilt in 1966 in its present location, downstream from the lake's outlet.

Eklutna Dam is built in 1929.

The Conservation Fund and identity partners, hires consultants, makes a plan with Eklutna Corporation.

Permits secured, dam removal begins.

2018 Dam removal completed.

If it’s life you’re after — real life, the history of life, the ebb of life, the flow of life — the river is the place.”

ROBERT THORSON

1964 Good Friday Alaska Earthquake destroys upper dam.

2014 The Conservation Fund starts dam removal project.

2016 Permits secured, dam removal begins.

2018 Dam removal completed.

2015 The Conservation Fund identifies partners, hires consultants, makes a plan with Eklutna Corporation.

1970s With passage of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, Eklutna Corp. becomes the owner of the dam and surrounding lands.

1966 New upper dam is rebuilt in 1966 in its present location, downstream from the lake’s outlet.

1929 Eklutna Dam is built.

1955 Dam is decommissioned.

1964 Good Friday Alaska Earthquake destroys upper dam.

2018 Dam removal completed.
REMOVING THE DAM

A dry river bed in an inaccessible canyon. A massive crane flying D-8’s like model airplanes. Mudslides that bury entire bulldozers. Landslides that crumble and crush a custom-built aluminum staircase. Utilities dragging their feet. Spineless politicians. Control-freak donors. Scientists who study where to put their feet before getting out of bed. Mix it all together and you have a recipe for gridlock.

Damn the torpedoes, here come the Eklutna Dena’ina, led by a visionary CEO and elders who remember the salmon. Mix in a former ADFG biologist-turned muckraker; the entire Anchorage Assembly; an army of conservation allies; a creative commercial fisherman-film maker; many talented engineers and heavy equipment operators; a few key donors who really get it, and BAM – that dam doesn’t stand a chance!
Foot tall crane that took 40 tractor-trailer trucks to put it in place

500
Step staircase constructed for workers to descend to the project site

30 jobs created

300,000 cubic yards of silt, sand, and gravel
“Seen from the outside, it’s not too much of a stretch to call this project a miracle of bureaucratic efficiency.”

• JESSICA ROHLOFF, ALASKA BUSINESS MONTHLY, SEP 2017
CELEBRATION

On September 22, 2018, a crystalline fall Alaska day, nearly 200 people gathered to celebrate the removal of the Eklutna dam in a symbolic bucket brigade.

“Today, people from the Native Village of Eklutna, The Conservation Fund, Trout Unlimited, and The Alaska Center, along with almost 100 Alaskans, came together in community to support a positive vision: to restore the Eklutna River, once full of salmon that sustained an important way of life. It was so beautiful to see individuals uniting, standing shoulder to shoulder, hand to hand, to demonstrate the importance of this benchmark and the work that still must be done to truly bring this river back to life.

Alaska has many challenges before it, as it grapples with its salmon identity and what that means for the future. But today—today I felt my faith restored in our humanity, in my sense of community, and in the beautiful vision of bringing the salmon back; and I have faith that the people, if guided with good intentions, will prevail.”

* Polly Carr
### Anchorage Daily News

**Death to a Deadbeat Dam on the Eklutna River**

BY RICK SINTOTT / AUG 2015

**Site Work Begins Ahead of Eklutna Dam Demolition**

BY MIKE ROSS & DAN CARPENTER / AUG 2016

**Let’s Find a Way to Restore the Eklutna River and Its Salmon Runs**

BY RICK SINTOTT / JUN 2016

**Work Begins Tearing Down 1920s-era Eklutna River Dam**

BY NAOMI KLOUDA / JUN 2017

**‘This River is Broken, Been Broken for a While’ A Dam Comes Down Piece by Piece**

BY REBECCA PALSHA / JUL 2017

**Old Eklutna Dam Is Almost Down**

BY LAUREN MAXWELL / SEP 2017

**For 89 Years, a Dam Blocked Salmon on the Eklutna River. It’s Finally Gone.**

BY MATT TUNSETH / AUG 2018

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**IN THE MEDIA**

**Deadbeat’ Eklutna Dam Due for Demolition, Group Says**

BY ELLEN LOCKYER / DEC 2015

**Death to a Deadbeat Dam on the Eklutna River**

BY RICK SINTOTT / AUG 2015

**First Phase of Eklutna Dam Removal Project Completed**

BY FRANK BAKER / NOV 2016

**This River is Broken, Been Broken for a While’ A Dam Comes Down Piece by Piece**

BY REBECCA PALSHA / JUL 2017
“I look at a redwood and don’t see board feet.
I look at a river and don’t see kilowatt hours.
I look at a meadow and don’t see real estate.
I look at a lake and don’t see an aquaduct.
I look at a gorge and don’t see a damsire.”

* TERRY AND RENNY RUSSELL
All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full; unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again.

*Ecclesiastes*