wildsight

# TEACH THE COLUMBIA

## History of Development on the Columbia River

## Guiding questions

What did the Columbia River Basin look like before Europeans arrived? Which Indigenous peoples are in the basin? How has the basin changed over time? How has the Columbia River been changed specifically through dam construction?

## Learning goals

Students will:

Develop a better understanding of events that have shaped the Columbia River Basin over time and influenced the way things are today.

Be able to visualize an approximate timeline of events and recognize overlaps and interconnections.

## Materials

- Starter Major Event List (attached in appendix)
- Whiteboards or drawing paper and pens to make historical timelines as a class, in pairs or small groups

## Preparation

Have the Major Events Slideshow ready for presentation in Step 1 of the instructions.

Print out a copy of the Starter Major Events List for each student.

## Instructions

Time: 60-80 minutes

1. Present the Major Events Slideshow overviewing a selection of just twelve of many significant historical events (including some that are ongoing). Consult the Starter Major Events List in the appendix for suggested speaker notes and feel free to add your own. 10-15 mins
2. Get students to start drawing out a historical timeline, beginning with the events from the Starter Major Event List in the appendix. Feel free to do this as a class, as partners, or in groups. 10-15 mins
3. Encourage students to look for connections between the events provided in the “starter list”, and use available research tools (internet and any print resources you have) to identify up to five other relevant events/processes that could also fit onto the timeline. Get students to add a short description for each of the events they find. 20-30 mins
4. If the activity was not done as a whole class, go over the timeline together and discuss what extra events each group/partnership found, and read out their short descriptions. Encourage students to add to their own timelines and make changes as they listen to what other groups have done. 10 mins
5. Facilitate a brief discussion around the following question: Which event(s) do you think were the most influential in the basin? Compare the reasons presented for different answers. 10 minutes

## Extensions

Learn about local Indigenous histories of the Columbia River Basin, through reading or hearing stories, talking to Indigenous education staff at your school, and inviting knowledge keepers into your classroom. Some online story resources to start with might include:

- The Ktunaxa Creation Story as shared online by the Ktunaxa Nation Council
- Stories from the book Not Extinct: Keeping the Sinixt Way by Marilyn James & Taress Alexis
- The Heart of a River storybook by Eileen Delehanty Pearkes and Nichola Lytle

Explore the Basin Climate Source platform to consider how the climate in the Canadian portion of the Columbia Basin has changed, how it is expected to change in the future, what impacts this may cause, and what actions people are taking in response.

## Curriculum links

Science 9

Social studies 10

Social studies 11

Earth Science 11

Environmental Science 11

Human Geography 12

Physical Geography 12

## Appendix

**"Starter List" of Major Events"**

**Ongoing Indigenous presence:** Indigenous inhabitation and stewardship prevailed for 10,000+ years before settlers arrived. Celilo Falls, near the present day location of The Dalles, Oregon, was one of the most popular fishing and trading areas for regional Indigenous peoples, and is one of the oldest inhabited communities in North America. Upstream in what is now northeast Washington, Kettle Falls was a similarly significant location for the upper portion of the watershed. The portion of the Columbia River

Basin located in what is now Canada is the traditional and unceded territory of the Ktunaxa, Secwépemc, Sinixt, Syilx Okanagan, and Lheidli T'enneh Nations. In the portion of the Basin located in what is now the U.S., there are fifteen tribes with treaty rights and/or management authorities. Learn more at:

- First Humans in the Basin
- Celilo Falls
- Kettle Falls
- Columbia Basin Map

**Arrival of Settlers:** Europeans started arriving as early as the 1800's (e.g. David Thompson in 1807, Lewis & Clark in 1805) and began exploring, capitalizing, and colonizing. David Thompson, an English explorer, mapped most of western Canada by canoe and on foot and led the first European party into the upper watershed. As other explorers and settlers arrived, the use of rivers began to change from traditional use by Indigenous peoples, such as travel and hunting, to more industrial use. Learn more at: www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/ article/ david-thompson

**1846: Treaty of Oregon:** The U.S. and Great Britain drew an international border on the 49th parallel via the Treaty of Oregon. This border split up Indigenous communities and lands and created a border that is artificial to rivers like the Columbia and other features of the natural world like wildlife. Learn more at: www.nwcouncil.org/reports/columbia-river- history/ treatyoforegon

**1883: Peak of salmon canning on the Lower Columbia River:** The Columbia River Basin was once among the world's greatest salmon watersheds, with as many as sixteen million fish returning every year to spawn in their natal streams. For millennia, some of these fish swam all the way up to Columbia Lake at the river's headwaters in southeastern B.C. - a journey of 1,243 miles. Unfortunately, salmon populations were greatly depleted by overfishing in the early decades of settlement. At its peak, the salmon canning industry on the lower Columbia River reached a peak of 1,700 commercial fishing boats and 39 canneries, which harvested and processed over 30 million pounds of salmon in 1883 alone. Learn more at: www.nwcouncil.org/reports/columbia-river-history/canneries/ and www.canneryworker.org/ early-salmon-processing/

**1930-1933: Construction of Rock Island Dam:** Just downstream of Wenatchee, Washington, Rock Island Dam became the first dam built across the Columbia River. Although local people were interested in damming the Columbia to create access to water for irrigated agriculture, the dam was ultimately built only to generate electricity. The dam was built with three fish ladders to allow for salmon migration up and downstream. In contrast, the much larger Grand Coulee Dam built upstream would later create a water supply for irrigation and, unlike Rock Island, was not equipped with fish ladders. Learn more at: www. historylink.org/File/21173

**1933-1942: Grand Coulee Dam construction:** Flood control (to facilitate development in flood plains), irrigation, and hydropower became very important for settlers. They started to heavily develop rivers like the Columbia with dams and other structures. These actions escalated to support the growing settler populations of both Canada and the U.S. Built between 1933 and 1942, Grand Coulee Dam was the third of fourteen dams built on the main stem of the Columbia. When completed, it blocked salmon from returning to the upper watershed. Although overfishing had already shrunk salmon populations, there were still over 50,000 salmon arriving downstream of the dam site in 1933. Learn more at: www.nwcouncil.org/reports/columbia-river- history/grandcouleehistory

**1948: The 1948 or "Vanport" Flood:** In late May and early June of 1948, rain and melting snow combined to swell the Columbia River to three times its average flow. At this time, the only large storage dam on the river was Grand Coulee as the large storage dams in Canada had not yet been built. Near Portland, Oregon, the town of Vanport had recently been built to house industrial workers and their families. As the Columbia River rose, authorities told residents that the dikes separating the town from the river were safe and they would be given advance notice if an evacuation was necessary. That same afternoon, the dikes broke, killing 15 people and leaving nearly 20,000 homeless. The flood also caused damage in other areas including Trail and Castlegar in Canada. Learn more at:

www.oregonhistoryproject.org/articles/essays/the-vanport-flood/
www.nwcouncil.org/reports/columbia-river-history/floods/

**1964: Columbia River Treaty Ratification:** Although discussions between the U.S. and Canada started earlier, the Treaty was negotiated in wake of the 1948 flood which overwhelmed inadequate flood dikes to destroy Vanport, Oregon with additional flooding in upstream communities. It was ultimately signed in 1961 and ratified in 1964. Four treaty dams eventually result from this, three of which are in Canada. Learn more at:

https://engage.gov.bc.ca/columbiarivertreaty/about/

https://www.nwcouncil.org/ reports/columbia-river-history/columbiarivertreaty

**1973: Completion of the final Columbia River Treaty dam:** Construction of the Mica Dam was completed in 1973, following two other Canadian treaty dams (Hugh-Keenleyside and Duncan) as well as the Libby Dam in the U.S., which was authorized by the treaty but is operated separately. Many rural communities and ecosystems were displaced or destroyed to make way for the reservoirs created by these dams. Learn more at: www.engage.gov.bc.ca/columbiarivertreaty/the-treaty/

**1995: Creation of the Columbia Basin Trust:** Following the ratification of the Columbia River Treaty dams, the Province of B.C. agreed to sell the first thirty years of extra electricity (the "downstream power benefits") created as a result of the treaty dams to a consortium of U.S. utilities for an upfront cash payment. Starting in 1994, the downstream benefits would be returned to British Columbia in the form of electricity (not cash), which the Province could use or sell on the open market, resulting in much higher revenues than before. Residents of the Canadian Columbia Basin were adamant that some of these new benefits should go to the region most negatively affected by the construction and operation of the treaty dams. After much dialog and negotiation, the Columbia Basin Trust was created in response to this demand. Learn more at: https://25years.ourtrust.org/chapter-2/

**2018: Start of negotiations to modernize the Columbia River Treaty:** In 2018, Canada and the U.S. began negotiations to modernize the now nearly 60 year old Columbia River Treaty. Both countries recognized that circumstances as well as societal values and priorities had changed since the Treaty's inception. Key interests for negotiations included finding a fair distribution of costs and benefits, maintaining mutually beneficial collaboration, and finding ways to incorporate environmental and social interests that were excluded from the original treaty. Learn more at: https://engage.gov.bc.ca/columbiarivertreaty/treaty-review/

**2019: Salmon Letter of Agreement:** The Syilx Okanagan, Ktunaxa, and Secwepemc Nations and the Governments of British Columbia and Canada

signed an agreement to work together in assessing the feasibility of reintroducing salmon to

the Canadian Columbia River Basin. This work builds on decades of effort in the U.S. led by the Upper Columbia United Tribes to return salmon above Chief Joseph and Grand Coulee Dams, which presently block their path from the uppermost portion of the Columbia in the U.S. and into Canada. Learn more at:

- https://columbiariversalmon.ca/
- https://ucut.org/fish/restoring-salmon-upper-columbia-river-basin/

**2024: Columbia River Treaty Agreement-In-Principle:** After six years of negotiations, Canada and the United States reached an agreement-in-principle (AIP) on a modernized Columbia River Treaty. The AIP provides a roadmap for the negotiation teams to move forward on drafting a final modernized Treaty and for B.C. to begin engaging with Columbia River Basin residents to seek feedback. Learn more at: https://engage.gov.bc.ca/columbiarivertreaty/agreement-in-principle/

**Ongoing climate change and climate action:** Ongoing climate change fueled by human activities is disrupting every facet of the natural world with many negative consequences for human and ecological communities. Notably, historic temperature and precipitation patterns can no longer be relied on. People are working hard to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and build resilience to safeguard the future. In the Columbia Basin, climate change is also forcing changes to the way that dams and reservoirs are operated. Learn more at: https://basinclimatesource.ca/