

Film Details

Title: Return of the River

Length: 70 minutes

Year of production: completed in winter 2014, filmed over four years

Format: HD

Language: English

Website: www.elwhafilm.com

Credits

Co-Directors: John Gussman & Jessica Plumb

Producer: Jessica Plumb

Executive Producer: Sarah Hart

Writer: Jessica Plumb

Director of Photography: John Gussman

Editors: Jessica Plumb & Earthen Watson

Original Music by: Jonathan Haidle

Historical Voiceover: Tom Skerritt

Narration: Debbe Hirata

Animation: Drew Christie

Logline

Return of the River tells the story of a remarkable campaign to set a river free, culminating in the largest dam removal in history.

Synopsis

Return of the River follows a group of strong-minded committed people as they attempt the impossible: to change the public opinion of a town and eventually the nation to bring a dam down. The community comes to a consensus, setting the Elwha River free and showing the way to more sustainable future. Amid grim environmental news, *Return of the River* is a film infused with hope.

Directors Statement

"Return of the River" offers a story of hope and possibility amid grim environmental news. It a film for our time: an invitation to consider crazy ideas that could transform the world for the better. It features an unlikely success story for environmental and cultural restoration.

Fundamentally, the Elwha River is a story about people and the land they inhabit. The film captures the tenacity of individuals who would not give up on a river, mirroring the tenacity of salmon headed upstream to spawn. It is a narrative with global ramifications, exploring the complex relationship between communities and the environment that sustains them.

The Elwha River is the ancestral home of the Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe, who witnessed firsthand the impact of two dams on the river and its legendary fish runs. The tribe led the campaign to take the dams down; a century later, with help from numerous environmental groups and a national park, they are watching their dream come true. The film addresses environmental justice issues that resonate far beyond the Pacific Northwest. As the Elwha Dams come down in Washington State, the future of the Amazon River is under debate, one of many river dilemmas unfolding across the globe.

More simply, this film is a labor of love, drawing on footage filmed over four years by cinematographer John Gussman and created by a team who share a deep connection to the land and the people at the heart of this story. Co-Directors Gussman and Plumb both live on the Olympic Peninsula. The film reflects their love of place, offering a spectacular and intimate view of a uniquely beautiful region, with respect for the diverse communities that call it home.

As the largest dam removal project in history begins, the camera soars over mountain headwaters, dives into schools of salmon waiting to return upstream, and captures turbines grinding to a halt. The film features people and perspectives on all sides of the Elwha debate, reflecting the many voices of the Elwha valley.

The power of the Elwha River's story is described on screen by former U.S. Senator Bill Bradley:

*"Here, in the success of our collective action on the Elwha, is a template for success on climate change, energy policy, ocean conservation... and hundreds of other issues.
= It will be the great gift of the Elwha: Hope."*

Early Reviews

"With its stunning photography, in-depth historical background, and deeply-imbued tribal perspective, "Return of the River" is the documentary film that lives up to the grandeur of the Elwha, its renewal, and its promise."

- Lynda V. Mapes, Seattle Times

"Return of the River vividly portrays the epic story of the freeing of Olympic National Park's mighty Elwha River from two salmon-blocking dams. The Elwha Klallam people, scientists, fishermen, politicians, enviros, and townsfolk all add their voices to a film that is visually dazzling, lyrically evocative, and fluid as mountain snowmelt."

- Tim McNulty, author

Story Overview

How does change happen? This question underlies “Return of the River”, a film about the largest dam removal in history. Early proponents of dam removal were told that the idea was “crazy”. The film follows the complex journey from “crazy idea” to celebrated success story.

The story’s primary conflict is a clash of values around a natural resource. To the Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe, the river is a source of life and abundant salmon, central to the tribe's culture and economy. New settlers see the river as a source of electric power, essential for industry. The film introduces an ensemble cast of characters, creating a nuanced portrait of a community and its dilemma regarding a shared resource.

Structurally, the story spans a century and moves chronologically after a teaser scene. Two historical figures with rich written accounts set the stage. Thomas Aldwell, builder of the dams, embodies manifest destiny. Aldwell’s autobiography, “Conquering the Last Frontier”, describes his secret plan for developing hydropower, bringing “peace, power and civilization” to the Olympic Peninsula. Aldwell's contemporary foil is Grant Humes, a nature lover who claims a nearby homestead. Brought to life by the voice of Tom Skeritt, Humes describes the region's beauty and abundance, and his ambivalence about rapid development.

The first dam, constructed in 1910, broke existing environmental laws requiring fish passage. It decimated a legendary salmon run and inundated land sacred to the tribe. Tribal members were the first to protest the dams; eventually they found common cause with the nascent environmental movement. Together they launched a debate at the local and federal level.

Key contemporary characters include Frances Charles, chairwoman of the Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe, and Ben Charles, a spiritual leader and relentless optimist. Ben Charles frames the fight for the river with a native legend about the “Sleeping Giants”, caretakers of land, temporarily lulled to sleep by tricksters.

In a deeply divided community, industrialist Orville Campbell is an intriguing character. A lifetime employee of the paper and hydro industry, Campbell’s views evolve markedly in the film. His reflections on the importance and arrogance of industry help reveal the transformation in the story. Ultimately the community reaches consensus; combined with an act of Congress, the world’s largest dam demolition begins.

Co-Directors Gussman and Plumb live on the Olympic Peninsula. The film reflects their connection to place, offering a spectacular and intimate view of a wild and remote region, with respect for the diverse communities that call it home. The film’s ensemble cast is tied together by a river; the river itself has a voice as narrator, weaving the story together with a wise, resilient and powerful presence.

This is a film about possibility, for people and the planet. In the words of Senator Bill Bradley onscreen: “Here, in the success of our collective action on the Elwha, is a template for success on climate change... and hundreds of other issues. It will be the great gift of the Elwha: Hope.”

Filmmaker Bios

John Gussman, Director and Cinematographer

John has been a professional photographer for over 40 yrs. After graduating from college with a degree in photography, he started as a photo journalist in California back in 1973. After moving to Washington State he has been successfully running his own business, Doubleclick Productions, since 1982. John has lived in Sequim for 35 years, and spends most of his time hiking, camping, fishing and photographing the beautiful Olympic Peninsula. He has long felt a spiritual connection to the Elwha Valley. When dam removal was scheduled, he saw the opportunity to document this once-in-a-lifetime event and decided to focus his creative skills on witnessing the healing of this place and the people who share this land. See www.dcproductions.com for more.

Jessica Plumb, Producer, Writer, Co-Director

Producer and writer Jessica Plumb is a filmmaker focused on the relationship between people and the places they call home. She moved to the Olympic Peninsula a decade ago, after starting her career in Boston and Beijing. Jessica directs a video production company and has produced numerous educational and promotional videos for clients. She has worked on documentary and narrative films screened at festivals in the role of editor, and behind the camera, and has created award-winning short films best described as video poetry. Her video art films have been screened in galleries throughout the United States. Jessica holds a B.A. from Yale University and an interdisciplinary MFA from Goddard College. She also studied documentary film at 911 Media in Seattle and the New School University in New York. See www.plumbproductions.com for more.