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Author

Gable, Cate

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Review: Messages from Frank's Landing; A Story of Salmon, Treaties, and the Indian Way
By Charles Wilkinson

Reviewed by [Cate Gable](#)
Berkeley, California, USA and Paris, France

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Messages from Frank's Landing; A Story of Salmon, Treaties, and the Indian Way. Charles Wilkinson. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000, hardback, 118 pages. 0-295-98011-7 US\$22.50 cloth

Charles Wilkinson and the University of Washington Press have produced an elegant little book that packs a punch. *Messages from Frank's Landin; A Story of Salmon, Treaties, and the Indian Way* captures, through the eyes of Nisqually tribal leader and activist Billy Frank Jr., the history of the tribe's efforts to save their culture, their river, and Pacific Northwest salmon runs. The tale is complex, as any environmental story is, but this one is made even more layered by the clash of cultures and the inevitable web of government policy makers stretching over many decades and regimes.

The white man's version of this story starts in the Pacific Northwest in the 1800s; the 1818 Treaty between England and the United States acknowledged a joint tenancy but allowed Americans territory primarily below the Columbia River. In 1846, Washington and Oregon were ceded to the United States, and the Donation Land Act of 1850, a precursor of the Homestead Act, ensured that a steady stream of settlers began entering the southern Puget Sound area.

I say "the white man's story. . ." because, of course, the Nisqually peoples had been living and thriving on and around the Nisqually River that threads it way south from the Puget Sound between Tacoma and Olympia in Washington State for hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years. Then as Bill Frank's father Willie Frank, born in 1879, put it, "The white man came over the hill with a Bible in one hand and a bottle of liquor in the other."

President Pierce appointed Isaac Stevens as governor of the territories in 1853 to negotiate with tribes in the region, and the inevitable power struggle began. The Indian people spoke Salish and knew virtually no English, and, more importantly, they had never thought of land as a commodity to be owned or sold. "Fishing rights" did not exist as a concept. It will be no surprise to any reader that after the "negotiations," Stevens' treaty, confirmed by the Senate, allowed that most of the Puget Sound - 2.5 million acres - belonged to the government, free and clear.

The Nisqually people, who were used to roaming freely between their fishing grounds and adjacent prairies, were moved to two square miles atop a wooded bluff.

It is a tale of retribution and heartbreak and, in many ways, this story could provide a primer for any environmental cause. It has all the elements of a thriller: personal drama, intrigue, characters -on all sides- who against the odds stand up for what they know is right. The issues raised in Wilkinson's history are even more relevant today. How do we balance water rights for agriculture, fisheries, and hydroelectric power? What value do we place on culture? Who makes the decisions for "the common good"? And what exactly is "the common good"?

One of the most arresting images in the book, which is filled with drawings, maps, and wonderfully expressive photos in just the right places, is a Billy Frank quote drafted into a political cartoon by Pulitzer prize winner David Horsey. The image is a light bulb hanging from the ceiling inside which is a salmon hanging tail down, as if on a filament or cord. Billy Frank's quote is:

They talk about cheap electricity. Hydropower. It's not cheap. It's been paid for by the salmon. When the lights come on, a salmon comes flying out.

As a Washingtonian born and raised, who, as a child, watched from our riverside cabin as Chinook salmon spawned in the Little Naches, I never thought about salmon flying out of my light bulbs every time I turned them on. But maybe that is what happened - because the salmon are gone now. And I agree, that's a high price to pay for power.

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Cate Gable <cgable@axioun.com> or <www.axioun.com> is a writer, poet and consultant specializing in sustainable business. Author of Strategic Action Planning NOW!, she has published widely and divides her time between Berkeley, California, and the Pacific Northwest, USA; and Paris, France.