Nisqually and Puyallup Native Americans win fishing rights through "fish-ins", 1964-1970

27 February
1964
to:
1970

Country: United States
Location City/State/Province: Olympia, Washington
Location Description: Frank’s Landing—a small settlement on the Nisqually River in Puget Sound

Goals:
Protestors aimed to protect their fishing rights and to publicize their refusal to culturally assimilate to the broader American society.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws • fish-ins

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws • fish-ins

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws  → fish-ins

Methods in 4th segment:

• 001. Public speeches
• 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
• 010. Newspapers and journals
• 011. Records, radio, and television
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws  → fish-ins

Methods in 5th segment:

• 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
• 010. Newspapers and journals
• 011. Records, radio, and television
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws  → fish-ins

Methods in 6th segment:

• 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
• 010. Newspapers and journals
• 011. Records, radio, and television
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws  → fish-ins

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

• 162. Sit-in
• 184. Defiance of blockades

Classifications

Classification: Defense
Cluster: Economic Justice
                Human Rights
Group characterization:

• Members of the Nisqually and Puyallup tribes in the Pacific Northwest
• partner civil rights activist groups

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
The campaign was led by the Survival of the American Indian Society (SAIA) and the National Indian Youth Council (NIYC).
Leaders of the SAIA included Al and Maiselle Bridges, Billy Frank Sr. and Billy Frank Jr., and Donald and Janet McCloud. Hank Adams, of the NIYC, also played an important leadership role.

**Partners:**
National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)

Jack Tanner—an attorney for the NAACP

**External allies:**
Marlon Brando

John Yaryan—Episcopal Minister from San Francisco

Episcopal Bishop of the Diocese of Olympia

American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)

Dick Gregory

Washington Peace and Freedom Party

Socialist Workers’ Party

Students for a Democratic Society (SDS)

American Friends Service Committee

**Involvement of social elites:**
Marlon Brando

John Yaryan—Episcopal Minister from San Francisco

Episcopal Bishop of the Diocese of Olympia

Dick Gregory

**Joining/exiting order of social groups**

**Groups in 1st Segment:**

- ACLU
- Episcopal Bishop of the Diocese of Olympia
- Jack Tanner
- John Yaryan
- Marlon Brando
- NAACP

**Groups in 2nd Segment:**

- American Friends Service Committee
- Dick Gregory

**Groups in 3rd Segment:**

**Groups in 4th Segment:**
Native Americans have long had to fight with the American government for recognition of their rights to land and to resources. Fishing rights were, however, one of the few rights Native Americans of Washington State thought they had secured. In 1853, Native American tribes of the Pacific Northwest were stripped of most of their land and resources and forced onto reservations. Because the Washington State Governor did not want to have to supply food for the Native American tribes, he agreed to include a clause in the land agreement treaties that guaranteed fishing rights to Native Americans on fish runs throughout the State. There was little dispute over this right over the next hundred years. However, in the 1940s and 50s, fish supplies began to dwindle due to commercial over-fishing. Despite their guaranteed fishing rights, Native American fishers were restricted to a repeatedly shrinking area of fish runs. Most court cases of that era sided with the government, resulting in the denial of Native American rights. Those who ignored the new laws were at risk of arrest and confiscation of their fishing materials. As the situation worsened and the livelihood of many Native Americans were put at risk, opposition to the new fishing laws began to form. Tribe members began organizing themselves to protest the denial of their rights and to re-secure their lawful ability to fish throughout Washington State.

Throughout the early 1960s, Native Americans organized a few unsuccessful protests and marches against the new fishing laws. Many used the courts to fight for their case, but judges almost never ruled in their favor. On January 24, 1964, one of these many cases resulted in a ruling that temporarily banned Nisqually Indians from engaging in any off-reservations fishing, even on
normally unrestricted areas. This harsh ruling spurred Nisqually Indians to action. Members of the Nisqually and Puyallup tribes formed the Survival of the American Indian Association (SAIA). The Association formed a partnership with the National Indian Youth Council (NIYC); together, they worked to publicize their cause and win back their rights through civil disobedience.

The campaign’s main form of protest was heavily influenced by the civil rights movement that was occurring in other parts of the United States. Nisqually and Puyallup protesters staged ‘fish-ins’—illegal fishing at Frank’s landing, a settlement in Puget Sound where fishing was restricted. The group, which was seen as radical, was disavowed by leaders of both the Nisqually and Puyallup tribes. Through the NIYC’s funds, the campaign was able to use the mass media to widely publicize their cause. February 27, 1964 marked the campaign’s first fish-in. The media, which described the new tactic as a rise of a ‘more sophisticated’ type of Native American protest, began to show some empathy for their cause. Also, Jack Tanner, a well-known attorney for the NAACP, agreed to defend protesters who were arrested during the campaign. His involvement with the campaign legitimized it by linking it to the civil rights movement.

On March 2, the campaign got its first big publicity boost when actor Marlon Brando and Episcopal Minister John Yaryan were arrested at a fish-in. To maximize exposure of the arrests, campaign leaders woke reporters at 2:00AM to ensure that they would not miss the arrests take place. Campaign leaders were well aware that the key to their success would be in gaining as much publicity as possible so as to sway public opinion. Gaining the support of a famous actor like Marlon Brando would ensure that media sources would cover the event, and that the general public would take notice.

The next day, 1000 Native Americans, accompanied by Brando, marched to the capital building in Olympia, Washington. The Governor agreed to meet with Brando and several leaders of the campaign, but no settlement was reached.

Over the course of the year, the campaign continued to stage fish-ins and to maintain a high level of publicity. In October of 1965, several tense fish-ins resulted in violent conflicts between police officers and protesters. Both sides engaged in violence and both sides accused the other of brutality. Despite the violence, support for the campaign continued to grow. In November, the Episcopal Bishop of the Diocese of Olympia voiced his support for the campaign and made a donation to SAIA. Other churches throughout Washington also made donations and pledges of support. The ACLU agreed to defend protesters charged during the fish-ins, and the American Friends Service Committee also voiced their support. Dick Gregory, an African-American comedian, traveled to Frank’s Landing to participate in the protests. His arrest at the fish-ins raised publicity once more.

During 1966 and 1967, the campaign continued to stage fish-ins, but protests slowed and publicity dwindled. In September of 1968, leaders of the campaign decided it was time for a big push that would bring the protests back to the public’s attention. Up until that point, fish-ins had mostly lasted for a single day. Leaders decided to stage a continual five-day fish-in, starting on September 4, 1968. The fish-in group included many non-Natives, such as members of the Washington Peace and Freedom Party, Students for a Democratic Society, and the Socialist Workers’ Party. Over the next few days, hundreds turned out to witness the arrests of several of the protesters. The fish-in grew in length from five days to several months. The trials and arrests of protesters created massive publicity, and public opinion seemed finally to be turning.

Publicity of the fish-ins remained high as tensions between police and protesters rose and clashes escalated. The leaders of the Nisqually and Puyallup tribes reversed their position and began supporting the campaign. They set up an armed ‘police force’ around the fish-ins as defense against police presence. A police raid of the fish-ins in September of 1970 resulted in the most violent clash between protesters and police to date. However, in a huge success for campaigners, all Native Americans who were arrested for interfering with the police were acquitted. Even more importantly, Attorney Stanley Pitkin, who had witnessed the violent police raid, later filed the court case U.S. v. Washington. This landmark case, which was eventually resolved in 1974, acknowledged the Native Americans’ equal share of the fisheries. The ruling granted Federal support for the Native Americans in maintaining their fishing rights, and guaranteed Native Americans the right to regulate their own fisheries.

Although the campaign’s success did not follow immediately from the protests, the fish-ins raised public awareness of the issue and caused the eventual court case that ruled in their favor. The campaigners’ incredible endurance and media savvy brought momentum and attention to the protests and enabled Nisqually and Puyallup tribe members to protect rights guaranteed to them
Research Notes

Influences:

The campaigners were strongly influenced by the tactics and the campaign of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement (1).

Sources:


Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:
Arielle Bernhardt, 05/03/2010

Links:
[1] https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/category/pcs-tags/mainly-or-initiated-indigenous-participants
[3] https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/category/pcs-tags/included-participation-more-one-social-class