



*Protection of natural habitat has been a priority at Seattle City Light for decades*

## Renewing Fish Runs, Habitats, and Energy Sources

In March 1999, the National Marine Fisheries Service listed chinook salmon runs in the Puget Sound basin as “threatened” under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The determination was anticipated but no less dramatic, for it constitutes the first application of ESA strictures to a metropolitan region and could have major consequences for future economic and physical development.

Fortunately, Seattle City Light already has decades of experience in balancing the needs of nature and society, and its primary hydroelectric resources on the Skagit and Pend Oreille rivers do not interfere with wild salmon migrations and spawning. At the same time, City Light recognized that ESA heightened its responsibilities as a major regional environmental steward and as a partner with jurisdictions and communities impacted by the ESA ruling.

City Light joined with Seattle Public Utilities and other stakeholders to prepare a comprehensive Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) for the Cedar River Watershed. This vast reserve southeast of Seattle has served as the metropolitan community’s primary source of drinking water for nearly a century. The Cedar River is also the site of City Light’s first hydroelectric dam, which can still generate 30 MW when needed. City Light is also collaborating with SPU and King County to restore spawning areas on the Tolt River, Seattle’s other main watershed.

Virtually all of City Light’s directly owned energy is generated by three dams on the Skagit River, set high in the Cascade Range, and by Boundary Dam in the far northeast corner of Washington. The Skagit is a major salmon habitat, and City Light conservation efforts have long exceeded license requirements and other environmental standards. The Skagit program was honored in 1999 as one of only five outstanding examples of river stewardship by the National Hydropower Association.

### **Focus:** Going With the Flow

*The regularity of salmon migration cycles is truly legendary, but even after decades of experience and study, fish can still surprise humans. Skagit naturalists were caught unawares in August 1999 by the premature return of spawning salmon. City Light reacted promptly by adjusting reservoir releases to aid returning fish and then to protect their nests, called “redds.” A cold spell the following spring delayed snow melt and compelled City Light to increase flows so that 6,000 redds would not be exposed to air that would dry and kill their fragile eggs. The citizen group American Rivers praised City Light’s actions as “a model for the kinds of cooperative efforts we must all take to recover salmon across the region.” (The pictured salmon conservation 3 cent postage stamp was sponsored by the Seattle Chamber of Commerce and salmon industry in 1956.)*





*Seattle City Light carefully manages water flows to safeguard fragile salmon nests below its dams*  
(photograph copyright Dave Pflug)

**Putting Fish First**

City Light's commitment to Skagit salmon is summed up in the name of its generation policy: "Fish First." The heart of this ongoing effort is careful monitoring of salmon runs and corresponding adjustments to river flows to help migrating salmon up and down stream and to protect their delicate shallow-water nests, or "redds."

**Focus: Saving the Urban Forest**



*One of the more tangible measures of human degradation of the environment is the dramatic loss of trees and woodlands in and around cities. Trees were once treated as nuisances by utilities, but City Light has adopted the more enlightened approach of planting "the right tree in the right place." Its staff work closely with other agencies and neighborhood groups to select and locate appropriate species so that trees and power lines can coexist safely. At the same time, City Light employees have adopted a new technique of "shrink-wrapping" the bases of wooden power poles in order to prolong their life, reduce pollution, and lower demand for new timber.*

Flow management and physical improvements have been guided since 1991 by a comprehensive agreement developed during the relicensing of the Skagit Dams through 2031. Working with the Skagit Tribal Cooperative, environmental and park agencies, and other communities dependent on the Skagit, City Light has committed millions to acquire more than 8,000 acres of habitat, to restore and protect river environments, to build bypass channels for migrating fish, to fund research, and to construct amenities for visitors. In 1999, the National Park Service completed a new Gorge Overlook Trail and Ross Lake Boat Launch, both funded by City Light.

Thanks to City Light efforts, spawning populations below its dams have more than quadrupled in recent years. The Skagit's wild chinook run is now the healthiest in Puget Sound waters, and other wildlife has rebounded as well — none more so than the hundreds of bald eagles that assemble annually below City Light dams to feast on adult chum salmon.

City Light's environmental management experience has value beyond Puget Sound. Its Regional Issues Steering Committee is deeply concerned with larger regional concerns, including the possible breaching of Snake River dams and other measures under consideration to restore salmon runs in the Columbia basin.



**Focus: Reducing Hazardous Wastes**

*Even an industry as clean as hydroelectricity entails hazardous materials and can produce dangerous wastes. City Light has implemented a series of initiatives to better manage its use and disposal of toxic substances such as oil products and PCBs, to clean and restore previously contaminated sites, and to reduce the production of waste and pollution. City Light is proud to have earned the King County Waste Information Network's 1999 Environmental Achievement Award for reducing its production of hazardous waste by four-fifths in just four years.*

