



Sharp declares war on "Big Oil."
Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission

FAWN SHARP

THE VOICE OF THE QUINAULTS

Fawn Sharp, fresh from a midday workout, seems remarkably calm for someone with so many plates spinning on broomsticks. As president of the Quinault Indian Nation, she oversees an array of enterprises, including timber management, seafood sales and a resort casino that just underwent a \$25 million expansion. With 1,100 employees, the tribe is the largest employer in Grays Harbor County. Sharp was the first female president of the Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians. By a landslide vote in the fall of 2019, she was elected president of the National Congress of American Indians. She's a single mom with four lively kids. One just texted that he has an urgent need for an after-school pizza.

She looks up from her phone with a bemused mom smile. Work-life balance dictates a break from her plans to sue the rods out of ExxonMobil for damaging “the planet our Creator gave us.” If only she could, she'd love to sue President Trump, too, for dismissing global warming as a “very expensive hoax.” Sharp believes there is “irrefutable” evidence climate change is very real and very expensive. “Incalculable” is the word she uses. Her people are fighting for their livelihoods, she says. Maybe their very lives.

“The glaciers that feed the rivers and support the salmon that are integral to the Quinault culture and economy are disappearing,” tribal scientists say. “Forests on tribal lands are changing, and invasive species threaten critical subsistence resources. Ocean acidification, hypoxia events, sea level rise, coastal erosion, tidal surge and



The Quinaults' ancestral village of Taholah is threatened by tsunamis and rising sea levels caused by global warming. *Quinault Indian Nation*



Sharp greets a canoe at Point Grenville near Taholah in 2013. More than 14,000 people came to watch 70 canoes from 60 tribes come ashore. *Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission*

increasing severity and intensity of storm events are now occurring with disturbing frequency.” The residents of Taholah, the tribal village where the Quinalt River flows into the Pacific, are perched atop a sliding tectonic plate that could trigger the mother of all tsunamis. The Tribal Council needs to move 700 people to higher ground. Meantime, “Broken Promises,” a 2018 report by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, concludes that “due at least in part to the failure of the federal government adequately to address the wellbeing of Native Americans over the last two centuries, Native Americans continue to rank near the bottom of all Americans in health, education and employment outcomes.” Sharp is tempted to say “Who’s telling who?” In America, health care for prison inmates is funded at a higher level than tribal members. “The report the Civil Rights Commission issued in

2003 was called ‘A Quiet Crisis.’ It was a raging crisis back then,” Sharp says, “and it’s gotten worse. I pushed hard for them to update the report. This time we need to do something about it.”

A FITNESS BUFF, she looks much younger than 49. Her eyes are a striking, almost golden blend of blue and brown. Her smile is disarmingly gentle for such a determined woman. She is now in her fifth term leading a nation thousands of years older than the United States of America. A few weeks after she was born, President Nixon delivered a landmark address rejecting congressional efforts to terminate the federal government’s relationship with more than a hundred recognized tribes. “That would be no more appropriate than to terminate the citizenship rights of any other American,” Nixon said, adding:

The first Americans—the Indians—are the most deprived and most isolated minority group in our nation. On virtually every scale of measurement—employment, income, education, health—the condition of the Indian people ranks at the bottom. ... From the time

of their first contact with European settlers, the American Indians have been oppressed and brutalized, deprived of their ancestral lands and denied the opportunity to control their own destiny. Even the Federal programs intended to meet their needs have frequently proved to be ineffective and demeaning. ...We must make it clear that Indians can become independent of federal control without being cut off from federal concern and federal support.

“I tell people I was born in the eleventh hour, in the fifty-ninth minute of the Termination Era,” Sharp says. “I truly think I was called by the Creator at this time.”

She grew up around legendary tribal leaders. Her mother, Ann Masten, was a recording secretary for the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission. “I traveled around with her when I was still in grade school,” Sharp remembers. “It was my job to push the ‘record’ and ‘play’ buttons on the old-fashioned tape recorder.” She met Billy Frank Jr., the charismatic Nisqually fishing-rights activist, when she was 4. “Other little girls treasured their Barbies. Billy was my hero.” They cursed him, clubbed him, tear-gassed him and threw him in jail. “But he never gave up,” Sharp says.

The Barbies, in any case, wouldn’t have looked like her.

Sharp graduated from Gonzaga University at 20, received a law degree from the University of Washington, studied international human rights law at Oxford and was elected president of the Quinault Nation at 35 in 2006. She once worked for the CIA, too. We’ll get to that later.

Sometimes when she looks at the photo she framed to commemorate her first meeting with President Obama she flashes back to being the “somewhat nerdy” bookworm who was elected class president in junior high—or the pint-size point guard “with fogged-up glasses,” racing for a lay-in after stealing the ball. She also set a long-jump record at her grade school. Where did all those years go? “I have no idea,” Sharp says with a shrug and a sigh. “Oftentimes I think about my journey and my responsibility to the 3,000 people



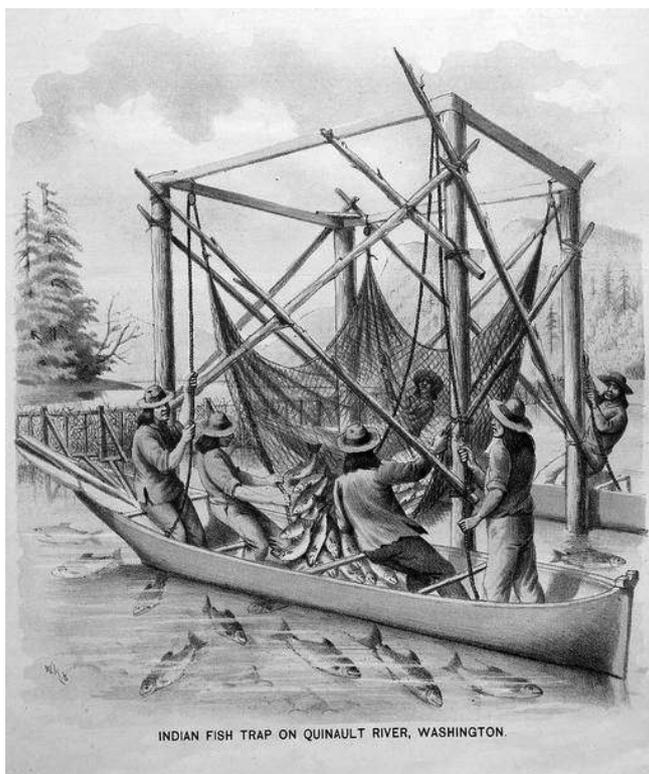
Sharp at The Billy Frank Jr. Pacific Salmon Summit in 2018. The summit, hosted by the Tulalip Tribes, is an effort to jump-start cooperation between the tribes and Washington state government to restore salmon populations. *Andy Bronson/The Herald*

of the Quinault Nation. And if the buck has to stop with me on every issue under the sun, so be it. Every single day I'm inspired by the idea that I'm the voice of the Quinaults—people who have existed since time began. I'm also the voice of Quinaults yet to be born and the voice of our ancestors. Holding public office means you have a sacred responsibility to honor the ones who spent their lifetimes and tremendous energy and resources to advance a nation.”

Sharp's deep Christian faith gives her a sense of purpose and place. To her, “The Land of the Quinault” is sacred ground.

LIVINGSTON FARRAND, an Ivy League anthropologist who visited the Quinault Reservation in the summer of 1898, transcribed a remarkable collection of tribal traditions about the sky, the sea and the prized blueback salmon—about “How Eagle and Raven arranged things in the Early Days.” Farrand wrote that the Quinaults reportedly had “a decidedly low degree of culture” until the whites established reservation schools and the natives took up “the so-called ‘Shaker’ religion.” Whatever its perceived “absurdities,” the blend of Christianity and shamanism promoted sobriety and dispelled indolence, Farrand wrote. He now detected “a marked advance in the cultural development of the group,” despite the fact that most members of the tribe seemed to have forgotten the old customs.

Becoming “civilized,” in other words, almost cost the Quinaults a decidedly rich culture of storytelling handed down for countless centuries around campfires as salmon sizzled on cedar planks. Smallpox, influenza, alcoholism and other diseases that arrived with the whites claimed many lives. The Quinaults almost lost their language, too.



INDIAN FISH TRAP ON QUINULT RIVER, WASHINGTON.

Quinault men hauling in fish at a fish trap on the Quinault River.
Engraving made in 1890. *University of Washington*

The terrible irony of all this somehow escaped the anthropologist. Farrand counted himself fortunate in finding one person among “the older unregenerates”—a gifted storyteller named Bob Pope—who could relate how Raven took a fish scale from his nose and threw it into the river, saying: “If there are to be salmon here, then jump, and do not be angry if people catch you.” The salmon jumped—“and ever since then Quinault salmon have been plentiful in the Quinault River.”

“Ever since” ended 120 years later when the Quinault Nation’s Department of Fisheries curtailed the 2018 commercial fishing season for the blueback, a unique population of sockeye salmon, after a total return of just 6,618 spawning fish. It was the third smallest return on record. The return was little better in 2019, so the commercial fishery was canceled once again. Annual runs once averaged nearly a quarter million fish. The blueback—one of the last largely undiluted wild salmon runs in the Northwest—are now a threatened, if not endangered, species. The decline, first noted in the 1950s, began accelerating 20 years ago. “The productivity of their prey, like plankton and krill, falls with ocean warming,” tribal fisheries experts say. “Marine conditions for blueback returning in 2019 have been, on average, among the poorest in the past two decades.”

Poaching is part of the problem, Sharp acknowledges. “That’s nothing, however, compared to the impact of fossil fuels on an irreplaceable resource. It’s time to hold oil companies accountable for their past record of denying climate change and their current obstruction of policies to reduce climate pollution. The devastation of our iconic blueback salmon has struck at the core of what it means to be Quinault. This incalculable loss jeopardizes the cultural identity of our people and our ability to support and nourish our families.”

A week later, she was in Washington, D.C., to outline the crisis for members of Congress. A recent helicopter reconnaissance flight revealed the enormity of the disaster, Sharp said. Her heart sank when she saw how the entire Quinault ecosystem, 325 square miles, is being impacted by global warming, from the jagged peaks and rainforest valleys of the Olympic Mountains to Taholah and Queets, the coastal tribal villages. Anderson Glacier, once the source of the Quinault River, is mostly a memory. A nearby glacier is “nearly gone as well and the few remaining have dramatically receded in the last eight years,” Sharp said, warning that the environmental and economic impacts “are going to become more frequent and more intense.”

TWO OF SHARP’S MENTORS, Joe DeLaCruz and Guy McMinds, confronted a crisis the year she was a toddler. They changed the course of Quinault Nation history.

On the morning of September 11, 1971, DeLaCruz parked a pickup truck in the middle of the Chow Chow Bridge, a timber trestle suspended 30 feet above the Quinault River. With his warrior eyes and mane of jet-black hair, the tribe’s 34-year-old business manager had a flair for the dramatic. Seattle TV crews captured

his outrage two years earlier as he pointed to sacred rocks defaced with graffiti, beaches strewn with litter and clam beds disturbed by cars. Twenty-three miles of reservation beaches were being posted off-limits to non-Indians. Now he knelt defiantly beneath a hand-painted sign that predicted the “Battle of Chow Chow Bridge” would be a new best seller. All roads leading to tribal timberlands had been closed. The Quinaults were fed up with the incompetent paternalism of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. It had allowed logging companies to pay below-market rates for Indian timber and cause severe ecological damage to tribal lands.



Joe DeLaCruz, one of the most influential Native American leaders in U.S. history. *Larry Workman*

The reservation was now virtually “one big stump farm,” DeLaCruz said. Gravel for logging roads had been scooped from salmon spawning grounds. Streams were clogged with silt and debris. Acre upon acre of “slash” residue from clearcutting created an extreme fire hazard and hampered reforestation—“all this, even though the BIA was responsible for enforcing the contracts it had made.” DeLaCruz told reporters the 190,000-acre reservation was the most savagely logged area in the state. “We have 1,012 Indians living on the reservation. If we don’t protect what we have, their own and their children’s futures are at stake.” The fundamental issue could be summed up with one word, DeLaCruz said: Sovereignty.

“For more than 50 years, our lands have been managed to meet the demand for short-term profit with no thought to the future,” the Tribal Council wrote after the standoff at the Chow Chow Bridge. “Loggers were allowed to harvest our forests to meet the needs of men alone, and our land has paid a terrible price.” The Quinaults set out to achieve “a degree of economic self-sufficiency and general well-being that is almost beyond imagination.”

DeLaCruz and McMinds, a fisheries biologist first elected to the Tribal Council as a teenager, were the most charismatic of the college-educated young turks recruited by tribal elders to advance the cause of self-determination. Council President James “Jug” Jackson, the great-grandson of Chief Taholah, also respected the tribe’s matriarchal tradition. Hannah Mason Saux Bovechop, Chief Taholah’s granddaughter, was a charter member of the Taholah School Board in the 1920s and an influential member of the tribal business committee during its early years, as well as a Quinault language linguist. Helen Mitchell, Alice Chenois James, and



Pearl Capoeman-Baller, the first female president of the Quinault Indian Nation, poses with Sharp in 1996 when she became the Quinault Nation's lead attorney. *Quinault Indian Nation*

Blanche Ann Reed were among the bright and resourceful women who emerged as Quinault tribal leaders in the 1970s. Before long, they were joined by Pauline Kalama Capoeman, who would become the tribe's director of natural resources, and Pearl Capoeman-Baller, who in 1994 succeeded DeLaCruz, becoming the first female president of the Quinault Nation. One of their sisters in arms was Janet Renecker McCloud, a former Taholah resident who helped organize the first "fish-ins" on the Nisqually and Puyallup rivers in the 1960s as the Indians asserted their treaty rights. McCloud, a descendant of Chief Seattle, cranked out the movement's newsletter, *Survival News*, on a second-hand mimeograph machine.

When Fawn Sharp succeeded Capoeman-Baller in 2006 she became the ninth elected leader of the Quinault Nation in the past hundred years. In many ways, her female forebears are the Native American equivalent of the suffragists.*

FAWN RENA SHARP, who relished every volume of her grandmother's set of encyclopedias, was identified early on as a future tribal leader. Born in Aberdeen on May 20, 1970, she is a quarter Quinault, part Northern California Yurok, part Montana Kootenai and part Idaho Nez Perce. "Apparently my family has lineage to Chief Tendoy, a Lemhi Shoshone who was a broker of peace between the tribes in Idaho. So I might have some leadership blood in my veins," Sharp says. She's also almost 20 percent English and a smattering of German and French, according to her Ancestry.com DNA analysis.

Sharp graduated from the Lighthouse Christian Academy at Taholah and briefly attended a community college in the Seattle area before returning home to help care for her ailing grandfather. She coached girls' basketball and worked as a waitress to pay for tuition at Grays Harbor College, never imagining that one day she would become one of its trustees.

After receiving a degree in Criminal Justice from Gonzaga University, the 20-year-old was recruited by the CIA. "They specifically and explicitly mentioned

* Though Washington women won the right to vote in 1910, a decade before national suffrage, it wasn't until the Snyder Act of 1924 that Congress granted full citizenship to Native Americans born in the U.S. Some states suppressed their ability to vote for decades more.

they were going to campuses to recruit Native Americans who grew up on reservations because that was a testament to resilience and the ability to overcome barriers and obstacles,” Sharp says. She remembers being simultaneously excited and apprehensive as she set out for Washington, D.C.

When I got to there, it was quite a shock. I’d never been on my own in an apartment. I went to the grocery store and tried to have conversation. People were very rude. I remember getting on the bus, and the driver said, “Put your dollar in the [fare] box, kid—and sit down!” I remember sitting on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial just feeling completely invisible. I saw families. I saw a troop of Boy Scouts. Everybody was having a great time on a warm summer afternoon. I was sad about losing my grandfather, who had just passed away. I was homesick. I was wondering if this was a mistake. Nobody was talking to me. Finally I walked to the Museum of Natural History and discovered there was an elder doing basket weaving. She was surrounded by a group of 20 to 30 people, maybe more. She looked up—right at me, made eye contact and just smiled. It was as if I went from being absolutely invisible to being recognized by this incredible, beautiful woman who reminded me a lot of my grandmother. She just *recognized* me. Life was suddenly good. “I’m going to be OK,” I said to myself. “I can do this.”

Sharp worked in the agency’s office of national security off and on for five years, conducting background investigations on potential CIA contractors. More than that she says she cannot say. “But I had firearms and fire safety training and I rappelled out of burning buildings, which was fun.”

Next stop was UW law school. She graduated in 1995, worked in the tribal attorney general’s office as the Quinault Nation’s lead attorney and emerged as a bright new face in the 2006 race for Tribal Council president. Before long she was on the national stage, representing a new generation of Native American leaders. After she was elected to a third three-year term in 2012, dissidents charged that she was spending so much time away from Taholah—working on regional and national Native American projects, getting her picture taken with Obama—that the administration of the Quinault Indian Nation was “unstable.” The recall attempt failed. She was re-elected president in 2015 and 2018.

In Indian country “tribal politics” has a whole different meaning. When Billy Frank Jr. and Joe DeLaCruz achieved international prominence in the 1970s, some early supporters charged that fame had gone to their heads. “I can relate to all that,” Sharp says with a philosophical smile. Sometimes she still needs a place to go to find solace. There’s a special tree along the South Shore of Lake Quinault. “The



Sharp, right, talks with President Obama at a meeting of tribal leaders in 2011. *White House*

root system is structured in a way that there's this seat that fits me just perfectly. Ever since I was a girl I could sit under that tree. Even on a rainy day, I'm protected by its branches. I return to my tree when I'm facing difficult challenges. It's been my life-long friend."

Sharp acknowledges that "internal tribal politics is highly charged—full of contention and long-standing, multi-generational family disputes—yet when it comes to actually making public policy, we adopt amazing policies that look seven generations out. I wouldn't even call this a job. For me it's truly a passion."

A voracious reader and internet surfer, Sharp is fascinated by the concept of Individual Development Accounts. IDAs are asset-building plans to help disadvantaged people save up to meet goals, such as attending college or vocational school, buying a car or first home. Boosted by matching funds from government agencies and nonprofits, IDAs are "compounding interest" that can change lives, Sharp says. Listen to her infectious enthusiasm:

What if we were to add \$5 an hour to our Youth Opportunity Program for every kid who works during the summer? One dollar would be dedicated to a retirement fund. And what if we were to create summer educational camp opportunities with the second dollar? Kids could go to Universal Studios to study filmmaking or spend time on a tall ship to learn about marine biology. They could go to Europe to learn about world history. One of the major barriers

to our students attending college, and *succeeding* in college, is the culture shock of leaving the reservation. We should have our kids going to regional camps when they're 10 or 12, to national camps at 13 to 15 and to international camps at 16 to 18. So by the time a Quinault kid graduates from high school they've had a world of new experiences. The third dollar would be for buying their first car. The fourth dollar might jump-start a small business. The Navajo Nation put together a youth business—a candy company—and won an SBA award. What a great idea! The kids at Quinault should learn about the private-sector economy as well as how their government works. We need to build business skill-sets. The fifth dollar would go toward a scholarship fund that would mature at 18 upon high school graduation. They could potentially save \$20,000 with both their savings and the match. That's how you change lives.

She's working hard to find those "matching" funds. At the same time, she and the Tribal Council are working to attract outside investment. "I believe a healthy tribal economy is not just tribally-owned businesses, which we've done. We need to attract companies to locate here."

Another of her passions is instilling "the awareness of what it means to be a Quinault." Between intermarriage and mortality, there are no more full-blooded Quinaults, according to tribal records. Sharp's own multi-tribal/Caucasian heritage is typical. But there is an ancient common tongue: the Quinault language. The last of the elderly fluent speakers died in the 1990s, but the language lives on, thanks to prescient elders like the late Hannah Bovechop and Horton Capoeman. In the 1960s, Mrs. Bovechop—also an accomplished weaver and singer—helped university-trained linguists devise a 39-character Quinault alphabet and compile a 386-page dictionary. Augmented by recordings of Mrs. Bovechop and other fluent Quinault language speakers, this work is priceless. The process of reviving the language is ongoing, with school children and adults taking classes. Sharp is an avid student of her ancestral language. The Taholah School District's website features an audio-playback pronunciation guide to words and phrases. "Our language is an important cultural link to who we are," Sharp says. "It's our ancestors speaking to us." Thanks to a tribal endowment fund for graduate students, a Quinault, Cosette Terry-itewaste, recently earned a doctorate in linguistics from the University of Arizona.

THE COAST SALISH culture is steeped in reverence for elders. Sharp says she feels their presence every day. Sometimes it's as if Joe DeLaCruz, Guy McMinds and Billy Frank Jr. are speaking to her. Likewise the indelible spirit of Emmett Oliver, who in 1989 inspired a "Paddle to Seattle" as part of Washington's Centennial celebration. Oliver lived to be 102 and saw the Canoe Journey become an annual event involving



Sharp with Billy Frank Jr. in 2013. *Quinault Indian Nation*

paddlers from as far away as British Columbia. A different Native American nation hosts the event each year. “Emmett’s legacy will last forever,” Sharp says. “We have been canoe people for thousands of years, but that culture was lost on many of our people, especially our youth. ...The physical and spiritual discipline required to participate in the Canoe Journey and the cultural sharing and traditional teachings that take place during the event have changed countless lives. ...”

“For me, our elders’ lessons are timeless. Joe’s charisma and vision elevated him to international prominence with the National Congress of American Indians and the World Council of Indigenous Peoples. Billy and Guy were founders of the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission. Guy especially always understood the bigger picture. When I was in eighth grade, he told our class that water would be worth more than gold and clean air worth more than oil.”

Chief Taholah wept bitter tears in 1855 when he signed the treaty that compelled the Quinault, Queets, Hoh and Quileute people to cede nearly a third of the Olympic Peninsula to the federal government. The Quinaults were luckier than many tribes across the continent, however, in that they retained 300 square miles of their ancestral lands and the right to fish in their “usual and accustomed” places, as they had done “at least since the close of the Pleistocene era, some 11,000 years ago.” Masterful canoe-carvers and fishermen, the Quinaults were once whalers, like the Makahs to the north. They sold valuable whale oil, as well as meat and blubber, to other tribes and the whites. Salmon were so plentiful, however, that by 1890 the Quinaults had a thriving fish-selling enterprise. The blueback were especially prized. A century later, the landmark Boldt Decision in 1974 upheld the tribes’ fishing rights, with lasting implications for every Washingtonian.

The oral histories collected by anthropologists—even the patronizing ones—leave no doubt that Fawn Sharp’s people have always felt a spiritual connection to their forested coastal home. That the land is endangered is irrefutable. A massive earthquake along the Cascadia Subduction Zone could devastate the Northwest Coast, from Puget Sound to the Pacific, from the Strait of Juan de Fuca to the Columbia. The magnitude-9 earthquake that jolted northeastern Japan in 2011 generated a towering tidal wave that devoured everything in its path, including

three-story buildings. At least 15,894 people died; more than 2,500 are still missing. Protective seawalls were breached by the first surge. Boats and vehicles were tossed about like Tonka toys; screaming people bobbed in the torrent. Taholah and Queets, already at sea level, would be wiped off the map in seconds. There's a legend among the Chimakum Indians along Hood Canal that they were a remnant of a Quileute band that fled the coast "because of a high tide that took four days to ebb." New scientific research authenticates the stories handed down for centuries by Olympic Peninsula tribes. Tsunamis swept away an ancient Klallam village near present-day Port Angeles every 200 to 500 years, according to a team of researchers from Portland State University, Western Washington University and the University of Rhode Island. The first of five occurred some 1,600 years ago. The waves could have been as high as 20 feet.

Scientists warn that the "Big One" is overdue, the last having occurred in 1700. Recorded by diarists in Japan, the Cascadia Subduction Zone mega-quake generated a mighty trans-Pacific tsunami. Evidence of what happened on the Northwest coast was first discovered by paleogeologist Brian Atwater in 1986. It's a "ghost forest" of dead cedars along the Copalis River some 20 miles south of Taholah. Jerry Thompson, who wrote *Cascadia's Fault*, a chilling book about the subduction zone, was amazed at what he saw when he accompanied Atwater to the site: "How could fully grown cedars several centuries old be standing in knee-deep salt water, their storm-battered trunks naked of bark, bleached gray by the sun and draped in moss and lichens, in the middle of a tidal marsh on Washington's west coast? Western red cedars don't grow in salt water."

The answer is that they *died* in salt water. The quake in 1700 abruptly lowered the land behind the beaches, turning a "forest meadow into a salt marsh." Atwater found the same evidence in other estuaries, all the way down to the Columbia. Each stream he studied "had the same signature of abrupt lowering of land and marshes and forests that had been at or above high-tide level" before the quake. He later learned that in the 1880s the Quinalts told white settlers there were once cedar groves along the mouth of the Hoquiam River. The river must have "eaten" them, the Indians said, because their bark was gone. "Hoquimts" was their word for "Hungry for wood."



Sharp with legendary tribal activist Ramona Bennett of the Puyallup Tribe in 2018. They helped launch a political action committee to advance public policies that protect the environment and human rights. *First American Project*

“EXXONMOBIL” amounts to Fawn Sharp’s word for “hungry for profits.” She cites *Scientific American’s* report that the industry giant was aware of climate change as far back as 1977, yet it obfuscated the risks. Sharp was hugely disappointed by the failure of a 2018 Washington state ballot measure to create the nation’s first state fee on carbon emissions. Initiative 1631 advocated a tax of \$15 per metric ton, beginning in 2020 and increasing by \$2 annually until greenhouse gas reduction goals were met. Revenues from the carbon fee, estimated at a billion dollars a year by 2023, would have funded clean air, clean water and clean energy projects, including forest ecosystem restoration.



Sharp and Tyson Johnston, Vice President of the Quinault Indian Nation, at an oil train protest on Grays Harbor. *The Daily World*

A similar carbon tax proposal having been resoundingly defeated in 2016, Sharp and other tribal leaders set out to win over the electorate. Sharp teamed with Ramona Bennett, the formidable former chairwoman of the Puyallup Tribe; Estela Ortega, executive director of Seattle’s El Centro de la Raza, and several other climate-change activists to launch the First American Project, a political action committee. The Inter-tribal and inter-racial group’s goal is to revive the energy of the Northwest civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Sharp and her cohorts—dubbed “the road warriors”—visited 28 tribes in 10 days to rally the Native American vote. It wasn’t enough. “Big Oil contributed most of the \$31 million that was spent to defeat the initiative,” Sharp says ruefully. “Frankly, I was depressed until my kids told me to keep fighting. That was all I needed to hear. I’m their voice and the voice of the children I hope they’ll have some day.” Billy Frank Jr. said it best, Sharp believes, when he observed that the challenge is colorblind: “We breathe the same air. We drink the same water. We are poisoned by the same pollution.”

Last spring, when President Trump issued a pair of executive orders to “help American energy companies avoid unnecessary red tape” by making it easier for firms to build oil and gas pipelines and harder for state agencies to intervene, Sharp grew more resolute. The University of Washington Law School graduate believes tribes have the sovereign authority and legal standing to sue the fossil fuel industry for the collapse of their fisheries. “We’re not getting the dollars to manage our fisheries; we’re not getting the dollars to combat climate change,” she told



Sharp's children on the beach near Taholah. *Fawn Sharp*

a meeting of the Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians earlier in the year—as if they needed reminding. The Boldt Decision and a follow-up ruling that mandated the removal of culverts injurious to salmon italicized the tribes' treaty rights. The fossil fuel industry's liability for damaging the fishery ecosystem is as clear as the state's, Sharp argues. "We will hold these large corporations accountable. ... My new mission is to make Big Oil wish Initiative 1631 would've passed. We're going to take Big Oil down."

No one who knows her doubts she means it.

John C. Hughes
Legacy Washington

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