

6 Tribal governments today

In 1989, Washington’s governor and representatives of many Indian tribes signed the Centennial Accord. (The state centennial was the 100th anniversary of Washington becoming a state.) The Centennial Accord said that state government would respect the *sovereignty* of the tribes – that is, it would respect Indian tribes’ right to govern themselves.

This simple statement meant a lot to tribes. It meant that the state and the tribes would have a “government-to-government” relationship – a relationship between equals. Instead of trying to impose its rules on Indians, the state promised to work more closely with tribal governments, to respect the terms of the treaties and tribal laws, and to educate state employees about tribes and their governments. Today, most state agencies have tribal liaisons who work to ensure that agencies respect tribal sovereignty, and work cooperatively with tribal governments.

Still, the tribes and the state government have a lot of work to do to make this new relationship smoother. Most



photo courtesy Debbie Preston, Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission

Federally recognized tribes

Chehalis Confederated Tribes	Puyallup Tribe
Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation	Quileute Tribe
Cowlitz Tribe	Quinault Nation
Hoh Tribe	Samish Nation
Jamestown S’Klallam Tribe	Sauk-Suiattle Tribe
Kalispel Tribe	Shoalwater Bay Tribe
Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe	Skokomish Tribe
Lummi Nation	Snoqualmie Tribe
Makah Tribe	Spokane Tribe
Muckleshoot Tribe	Squaxin Island Tribe
Nisqually Tribe	Stillaguamish Tribe
Nooksack Tribe	Suquamish Tribe
Port Gamble S’Klallam Tribe	Swinomish Tribe
	The Tulalip Tribes
	Upper Skagit Tribe
	Yakama Nation

Non-Federally recognized Indian tribes

Note: Washington state does not have state-recognized tribes, as some states do. The following tribes are landless, non-federally recognized. Some are categorized as non-profit corporations; some are waiting for federal recognition. All have requested inclusion on this list.

Chinook Tribe**
Duwamish Tribe**
Kikiallus Indian nation
Marietta Band of Nooksak Tribe
Snohomish Tribe
Snoqualmoo Tribe
Steilacoom Tribe

**Pending Federal Recognition

Non-Washington Federally recognized Indian tribes with ceded territories in Washington state

Coeur d’Alene Tribe
Nez Perce Tribe
Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation
Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs

people who work in state government still don’t know very much about the history or culture of Indian tribes, or about what’s in the treaties. So the Governor’s Office of Indian Affairs provides special training for state employees on these topics, and on what it means to have a government-to-government relationship.

Today, tribes are also working hard to improve their governments so that they can provide essential services to their members. Health clinics, services for the elderly and people with disabilities, child welfare services, law enforcement, and schools and colleges are being created. Tribal governments are working with other governments to protect and restore salmon runs and improve the health of rivers and streams. Tribes are also opening new museums and working to preserve their history and renew their cultural traditions.

photo courtesy Gordon Verrill



Squaxin Island Tribal Museum, Library and Resource Center

Tribal governments are not like state government, or like local governments. They are unique, because they are governments for nations within a nation. Originally, the idea of the treaties was that the federal government should protect these “domestic dependent nations” from state governments. (In the case of fishing rights, that’s what happened: the federal government sued the state to win recognition of the tribes’ right to harvest fish, which was spelled out in treaties.)

But there is one way in which tribal governments are like state governments. Like states, tribes can pass any law that doesn’t violate federal law. For instance, tribes can run casinos because there is no federal law that prohibits them. Casinos are legal in the state of Nevada, because the Nevada state government chose to make them legal. Similarly, many tribal governments have chosen to make casinos legal on their lands. The federal and state governments regulate tribal casinos, but it is the tribes’ right to operate them.

Many tribes are using money earned by tribal casinos to pay for government services to their members. Tribal casinos are a very important source of new jobs and income for tribes, and for nearby communities. Tribes also donate money from casinos to charities and community projects that help everyone.

Money from casinos is important because tribal governments have not had much of a tax base. Although some tribes have taxed tribal fishing and logging, most tribes didn’t really have much to tax. They had to rely on very limited amounts of money from the federal government. In the treaties, Indians were promised health and education services “in perpetuity” (which means forever), but they often didn’t get them. Many tribal councils met in church basements or school classrooms until the 1970s or 1980s because they didn’t have enough money to build a place to house their government.



Little Creek Casino, owned and operated by the Squaxin Island Tribe

photo courtesy Karen Verrill

The Boldt decision (see page 86) set the stage for a radical change in the relationship between state government and the tribes. That court decision did more than restore tribal fishing rights; it also declared that federal and state governments have to respect treaties.

The same state government that arrested Indians for fishing before the Boldt decision was now required to work with tribes as equal partners to restore and manage healthy and abundant runs of salmon.

This wasn’t an easy change to make. For years after the Boldt decision, tribes and the state struggled to get along. Most people in state government knew very little about tribal culture, history, and treaty law, and many resisted the changes that the Boldt decision called for to protect and restore Indian rights.

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

In late 1988, a group of four tribal leaders met with Bob Turner, a policy advisor to Governor Booth Gardner, to talk about how to improve relations between tribal and state governments. The leaders in that meeting were Joe Delacruz, President of the Quinault Nation, Mel Tonasket, Chair of the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation, Larry Kinley, Chair of the Lummi Nation, and W. Ron Allen, Chair of the Jamestown S’Klallam Tribe.

They agreed that a new understanding between state agencies and the tribes was urgently needed. The Governor and his staff understood that the state had to make a commitment to do a better job of respecting tribal sovereignty. But making such a commitment stick would be hard, because Washington’s state government includes nine separately elected state officials, over fifty state agencies, and hundreds of state boards and commissions. How could all of them be engaged in making this change?

No one remembers which of them came up with the idea, but someone suggested that there was a need for a new state/tribal treaty to clearly spell out that state agencies needed to respect tribal sovereignty and legal rights. But, they quickly realized, it wouldn’t



Centennial Accord meeting, Chehalis Tribal Center, 2005

photo courtesy GOIA

be a treaty, because treaties are agreements between nations. So what should they call it – a compact, a memorandum of understanding, a contract? Somewhere along the line, they came up with the term “accord.” And since the state centennial would be the following year, the idea evolved into the “Centennial Accord.”

Ron Allen was the only one in the room with a computer, so he took

notes, and he and Bob Turner wrote the first draft. They sent their draft around to the others, and to the Governor’s chief of staff. Everyone liked it. Then they sent it around to more tribal leaders. Along the way, various people made changes and improvements.

Clearly, this was an idea whose time had come. The Governor and the tribal leaders knew that signing the Accord could signal a new beginning in relations between tribes and state agencies. Equally important, the Accord called for annual meetings between state and tribal leaders that would make the Accord have lasting meaning, rather than being just a single splashy event.

The Centennial Accord also led to the creation of the Governor’s Office of Indian Affairs – a permanent state agency that provides education for state employees about the history, culture and legal status of tribes, and acts as a liaison between the tribes and the state. (Before the Centennial Accord, there was a single staff person who advised the Governor on “Indian Affairs.”)

Today, tribal and state leaders continue to meet once a year to review where they have made progress, where problems persist, and what to do next. No one thinks that the Centennial Accord has solved all the problems. But it has provided a forum for continuing to work on them, and helped educate state agency leaders about the special status of tribes, their governments and the issues they care about. The continuing dialogue created by the Accord has also shown how having positive, respectful relationships helps people come together and solve problems.

The Centennial Accord also inspired people in states such as Alaska, New Mexico, and Wisconsin to write their own versions.

All this started with a handful of people, sitting around talking about how to solve a problem. And it just might prove something anthropologist Margaret Mead once said: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

The Boldt decision

When Washington Indian nations signed treaties with the federal government, they gave up a lot of land, but they kept the right to hunt, fish and gather in all their “usual and accustomed places” – many of which were not on the reservations. At the time the treaties were signed, no one thought this would be a problem. But the population of settlers grew larger than anyone dreamed, and so did the number of white people who fished for a living. In fact, fishing became a major industry. Soon Indians were prevented from fishing in the places where they had fished for thousands of years. State agents arrested Indians caught fishing off their reservations, and took away their boats and fishing nets.

In the 1960s, Indian fishers began to protest this violation of their treaty rights. Many people (including some famous movie stars) came to support them, and news of these protests brought the issue to the attention of the public. Finally, the U. S. government acted to protect Indian

In 1968, African-American civil rights activist and comedian Dick Gregory, a supporter of Indian treaty rights, served time in the Thurston County jail for illegal net fishing on the Nisqually River.

rights by suing the State of Washington to allow Indians to fish.

In 1974, George Boldt, a federal judge, ruled that the Indians were right: the treaties said they had the right to fish “in common with”

everyone else. Judge Boldt looked at an 1828 dictionary to see what the phrase “in common with” would have meant to the people who signed the treaties, and concluded that it meant Indians should have half of the salmon. He also ruled that Indian tribes should be partners with the state in managing and protecting salmon.

The Boldt decision was a big victory for Indians – and in the long run, a big victory for salmon, too.

Today, tribal governments have a lot of people working to restore streams and rivers that have been polluted or damaged during the last century. Tribes have also helped educate the public about the connection between

healthy rivers, healthy salmon, and healthy people.

The Boldt decision is famous because it confirmed that the treaties have to be respected. It encouraged tribes all over the U. S. (and native people in other countries) to insist on their rights. It also led to a flowering of Indian culture in our state, because the salmon are a central part of Indian life. Many Indians who had moved away from their reservations came home again. The Boldt decision, more than any other event, made it clear to everyone that Indian culture, history, and identity are here to stay.



Salmon ceremony, Tulalip tribe

photo courtesy Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission

Most tribes that have casinos have used some of the money they earned to start other tribal enterprises. They are creating different kinds of businesses to provide a wider variety of jobs for tribal members, and a broader base of financial support for tribal government. Tribes now operate businesses ranging from shopping centers to tourist resorts, and these enterprises provide jobs for many non-Indians as well as tribal members. In fact, tribal enterprises have become an important source of economic vitality for many Washington communities.

Some tribes, however, have reservations that are too far away from population centers to support a casino, a shopping center, or other enterprises. So even though the

A leader who brings people together

BILLY FRANK GREW UP ON THE NISQUALLY RESERVATION near Olympia. His dad, who lived to be 104, told him many stories that he had heard from his parents about what happened during “treaty times,” when the reservation was created.

Billy was 14 when he was arrested for the first time by state game wardens for fishing. He became one of the leaders of the Indian fishing rights movement in the 1960s and early 1970s. He led “fish-ins” in the Nisqually River that attracted a lot of attention, and the support of many non-Indians. He was arrested many times.

Eventually, the fish-ins resulted in the court case that led to the Boldt decision – the court decision that said Indians have a right to half of the salmon that are caught each year, and that tribes and the state should share responsibility for taking care of salmon.



photo courtesy Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission

In 1975, Billy Frank helped create the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission. The Commission helps tribes develop fisheries management plans, and “speaks for the salmon” in dealings with state government. Since the Boldt decision, tribes have developed hatcheries, restored streams and rivers that had been polluted or damaged, and worked together with state government to plan for restoring runs of salmon that have been depleted.

It has been hard for the tribes and the state to change from being enemies to being partners in caring for salmon. Billy Frank’s leadership is a big part of what made that change possible, and what keeps it moving forward. He has received many awards and honors for doing this. Today, Billy Frank is still telling his son the stories his dad told to him.



When Hazel was young, much of her life was spent living apart from her parents. She was sent to boarding schools run by the federal government where students were not allowed to speak their native languages or practice their own spiritual traditions. In the 1920s, very few Native American children attended schools with white children.

After graduating from high school in 1932, Hazel enrolled in another boarding school in Santa Fe, New Mexico. This school represented a change in federal policy; it actually encouraged people to preserve at least some of their native cultures. Hazel was one of the first students to enroll in a special program for the study of Indian arts and crafts. As a child, she had watched her grandmothers carefully craft beautifully woven baskets of all shapes and sizes from materials they gathered on the reservation. Hazel became a master basket maker, and taught people from many tribes how to make them, too. Eventually, people from all over the United States and the world traveled to the Chehalis reservation to buy Hazel Pete's baskets.

Hazel Pete's greatest legacy was the role she played as a teacher. She taught arts and crafts in several boarding schools. She then returned to the Chehalis reservation, where she learned all she could about her tribe. For many years, she gave presentations in the local public schools. Wearing traditional clothing, she read Chehalis legends to students, sang songs to them, and tried to help them learn about Indian history and culture.

A leader who wove together the past and the future

Hazel Pete (1914-2003) was a member of the Chehalis Indian Tribe, which is located near Centralia. Although Hazel grew up during a time when American Indian people were not allowed to practice their native cultures, she devoted almost her entire adult life to learning, teaching, living, and celebrating the ways of her ancestors. She also came from a family that was very poor, but she never let that stop her from achieving the goals that she set for herself.

growth of tribal casinos and other businesses has helped some tribes, other tribes still struggle to find ways to fund their government and lift their members out of poverty.

Tribal governments are not all alike. Most tribes have a tribal constitution that defines the structure of the government, but some do not. Each tribe also sets the rules about who is considered a tribal member. Most tribes have an elected tribal council as their central leadership. Usually, the chair of the tribal council is the person who speaks for the tribe.

Tribal councils are advised by a lot of committees made up of tribal members. The committees study issues and give the tribal council advice. In some tribes, the committees have the power to make decisions on their own. Committees deal with tribal membership, housing, fisheries, elections, programs for children and elders, hunting, education, and culture.



photo courtesy Virginia Beavert

Virginia Beavert was born in 1921 in a bear cave in the Blue Mountains. Her parents had gone hunting, and got caught in an early snow storm.

She grew up on a cattle and horse ranch near Zillah. As a child, she learned the Yakama

An amazing beginning, a remarkable life

language from her family, and the traditional ways of using and preserving fish, native plants, roots, and berries.

She graduated from Toppenish High School, and has fond memories of a circle of friends that included Native American, Caucasian, Japanese-American and Mexican-American girls.

She served in the military during World War II, and then worked at Hanford, cared for her family, and

worked in a hospital.

In 1974, at the age of 53, she graduated from Central Washington University.

She became a member of the Yakama Tribal Council.

She was often critical of the Council's actions, and so she helped push for a Code of Ethics that spelled out proper behavior for Council members.

She often traveled to Washington, D. C. to represent the tribe.

She has taught at Heritage College in Toppenish, and

is working on creating a dictionary of the Yakama language, which is called Sahaptin. (Sahaptin was actually spoken by several tribes, and each tribe had its own version of it, called a dialect.) She is dedicated to preserving this language because it is such an important part of the Yakama culture and heritage. She is a beloved Elder of the Tribe, and an honorary member of the League of Women Voters.

Measuring water height for a flood study along the Nooksak River.



photo courtesy Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission

Tribal councils and committees do just what Indians did before settlers came: they spend a lot of time talking – and listening – to try to find solutions to problems that everyone can agree on. Even though the structure of many tribal governments is non-traditional, the cultural habit of seeking consensus is still very strong. This sometimes frustrates people from other governments, because they are used to meeting deadlines, no matter what. In many tribal governments, it is more important to take time to reach agreement than it is to meet a deadline. Tribes want to make sure that everyone is heard, and that everyone’s needs are met.

Today, tribal governments have more and more paid staff, because they are taking on more responsibility and creating more programs to help tribal members and their communities. In fact, tribes actually employ more fisheries biologists than the state does. Tribal government staff carry out the policies set by the tribal government committees and the tribal council.

Most tribes have their own police and courts. Tribal police and courts can deal with crimes committed by tribal members (or members of other tribes), but when non-Indian people commit crimes on reservations, other police agencies are sometimes



photo courtesy Debbie Preston, Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission

Quileute students looking for birds, La Push

photo courtesy North Kitsap School District



Suquamish tribal members paddle their canoe through the breakers.

Indian or Native American?

The original peoples of the Americas were called “Indians” by Columbus when he “discovered” America because he was really lost, and thought his ships had reached India. Somehow, the name “Indian” stuck.

Now people sometimes wonder whether it’s respectful to call Native Americans “Indians.” Over the years, Native people have thought about this a lot, and naturally, they don’t all have the same opinion.

But most are OK with either term – Indian or Native American. A lot of Native organizations, such as the National Congress of American Indians, use the word Indian in their names, and Native people commonly refer to “Indian country” when they talk about reservations or the national network of Indian communities.

What most Indians really prefer, however, is to be identified as members of their own tribe. For instance, they would like you to say “my friend Denny is Skokomish” rather than “My friend Denny is Indian.”

called in. This has been the source of a lot of confusion and conflict. In some places, tribal police and county sheriffs are working together to overcome these problems, and to share responsibility for keeping the whole community safe. They have “cross deputized” each other, so that tribal and non-tribal police can act on each others’ behalf. In 2008, the state legislature passed a new law that allows tribal police to be certified in the same way that other police officers are, and gives them more authority, but non-Indians who commit crimes on reservations still must be tried in local rather than tribal courts.

As tribal governments grow, many tribes need more employees, managers, and leaders, so tribal governments are investing more in scholarships to encourage young tribal members to go to college, and to learn the skills they will need to lead tribal governments and run tribal enterprises in the years to come.

Despite the many positive changes occurring in Indian country, Indian tribes and reservations still have many people in poverty, especially in rural areas. A full recovery from centuries of discrimination, suppression of Indian traditions, loss of resources, and broken promises will take more time, and more work by both tribal and non-tribal governments and all people of goodwill. It will also take more education of non-Indians about the history, culture and status of the tribes.



photo courtesy Darlene Madenwald

Herman Williams (left) and Dale Reiner. Herman, Chair of the Tulalip Tribes, gave a blanket to Dale to honor him and his farming family for their salmon restoration work on Haskell Slough, which runs through Dale’s property. Dale is a 5th generation farmer in the Skykomish Valley. He raises cattle and Christmas trees.