

# TRI-CITY HERALD

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## OPINION

### Lamprey's beauty runs more than slime-deep

Pity the poor lamprey.

Not only are its numbers dwindling, but this misunderstood, eel-like fish also suffers the indignity of being unfairly maligned as a junk fish.

It's true the non-native sea lamprey is causing problems in the Great Lakes, but the West Coast varieties shouldn't pay the price for a distant cousin's damage.

In all, about 50 species of lamprey exist, but the one that so plentifully populated the Columbia River and its tributaries is called the Pacific lamprey.

Millions of them lived in West Coast rivers and migrated to the sea. The Eel River in California earned its name for the great "wriggling masses of lampreys" pushing upstream for spawning season each year, according to the [Center for Biological Diversity](#).

But numbers alone never earned the Pacific lamprey the respect it deserves. Its reputation as a blood-sucking parasite probably hasn't helped. Neither has its appearance, which is something like a cross between a banana slug and a jungle leech with teeth.

But even blood-sucking parasites have their place in nature's plan. As more is known about the lamprey, it's clear this homely creature has a role that's far more complex than first impressions would indicate.

Or at least it did.

Not enough Pacific lampreys remain to adequately fill the species' niche. Counts of Pacific lamprey at Ice Harbor Dam dropped from 50,000 in the early 1960s to fewer than 1,000 during the 1990s. Counts on the North Umpqua River in Oregon had declined from about 47,000 in 1966 to fewer than 50 a year since 1995.

But when the species was plentiful, juvenile lampreys fed on bits of plant material in numbers sufficient to help keep rivers running clear. After spawning, the carcasses replenished nitrogen levels and other nutrients in freshwater streams.

It's true that in their oceangoing blood-sucker stage, Pacific lampreys attach themselves to salmon and other fish, which sometimes weaken and die as a result. But when the slow-moving lampreys numbered in the millions, they also provided a salmon substitute for sea lions and other predators, filling the bellies of these would-be salmon killers. The net effect was beneficial.

Traditionally, Mid-Columbia tribes harvested lamprey, using their dried meat for subsistence, ceremonial and medicinal purposes, but not enough of the fish remain. The Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation are working to restore the Pacific lamprey as a way of also preserving Indian culture.

Both are noble goals.