

Eric Spear

One of my favorite short hikes in Washington is the McLane Creek Nature Trail in Capitol Forest. A unique feature of this hike is the opportunity to watch Pacific Chum Salmon swim up stream to spawn in late fall. As long as I can remember, I have gone to McLane every November to observe part of this journey. Each time I see the fish fighting their way up stream to complete their life cycle, I am inspired by their tenacity and sense of purpose. When I returned to view the salmon this year, it struck me that the issue of salmon recovery is a perfect example of an important issue in Washington State that a liberal arts education can help to clarify, inform, and celebrate.

The effort to increase the number of endangered salmon in our state is a complex task. To begin with, decision-making bodies must study and debate existing research on how to best protect salmon. Critical thinking skills that are the heart of a liberal arts education such as the ability to analyze, infer, reason, interpret, and evaluate data equip those involved to use facts and figures to create the most effective solutions. In addition, the needs and goals of the various groups with vested interests in salmon recovery must be addressed. Literature, language, and social science classes all help develop and foster an appreciation and respect for multiple perspectives. Recreationalists, economists, business leaders, conservationists, commercial fishermen and tribal members have a better chance of finding common ground and reaching compromise if they are rooted in the liberal arts tradition of holding different cultures, traditions and points of view in high regard. Much of the salmon recovery effort involves educating the public about our role in safe guarding the salmon population. This requires professionals and

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volunteers with honed writing and speaking skills to disseminate information. A liberal arts education offers students the opportunity to write across the curriculum and develop expertise in various writing and speaking styles that can serve to enhance any educational outreach. Finally, specific skills and talents nurtured in fine arts classes can also contribute to the cause. Great artwork carries the message of care for salmon into our communities in creative and energizing ways. Paintings, sculptures, photographs, carvings and drawings of salmon all invite the people of Washington state to better understand and celebrate the beauty and importance of salmon. A liberal arts education emphasizes the skills, knowledge and attitudes that help shed light on complicated issues such as salmon recovery.