

BEING FRANK, LEAD STORY

Statue of Billy Frank Jr. reminds us to tell our story

January 23, 2024



[Above: A 4-foot model of a statue of Billy Frank Jr. after its Jan. 10 unveiling in the state Capitol building. Photo: Jack George—Nisqually Tribe Communications and Media Services.]

Family, friends, and tribal and state leaders recently witnessed the unveiling of a model of a [Billy Frank Jr. statue](#) in a ceremony at the state Capitol.

The 4-foot-tall model—depicting Billy sitting on the banks of the Nisqually River beside salmon and a fishing net—is now on display outside Lt. Gov. Denny Heck’s office.

It was an emotional moment for those of us who knew Billy, to see his likeness and spirit so beautifully captured in this sculpture of our longtime NWIFC chairman who always taught us, “Tell your story.”

Sculptor Haiying Wu—well known for the Fallen Firefighters Memorial in Seattle’s Pioneer Square neighborhood—has been working closely with the Nisqually Tribe and the Frank family. Once the model is approved by the Architect of the U.S. Capitol, Wu will complete the 9-foot-tall bronze statue destined for the National Statuary Hall in Washington, D.C., in 2025.

Our state Legislature passed a bill in 2021 selecting this statue as one of two representing our state in the nation’s capital, recognizing Billy’s lifelong dedication to fighting for the rights of Indigenous people.

Billy is on all of our minds as we approach the 50th anniversary Feb. 12 of Judge George Boldt's *U.S. v. Washington* decision, which reaffirmed tribal fishing rights and recognized the tribes as co-managers of the salmon resource. Billy was well-known as the "getting arrested guy" during the Fish Wars leading up to the case, so it is hard to think of one without the other.

The treaty tribes are marking this 50-year milestone by telling our stories during a two-day event hosted by the Muckleshoot Tribe. From treaty times through the Fish Wars and Boldt decision, to the past few decades of combatting habitat loss and the effects of climate change, our goals have been the same—exercise our treaty rights while taking care of the fish, shellfish and wildlife that have sustained our people for generations.

The Boldt decision led to the framework for treaty tribes to build our natural resources departments and tribal governments to partner with the state as environmental stewards. The decision has been upheld in the U.S. Supreme Court and affirmed in subproceedings and additional court cases. The Rafeedie decision solidified tribal shellfish rights. The culvert case confirmed that it is a violation of treaty rights for state roads and bridges to block fish passage. And *Hoh v. Baldrige* determined that fisheries should be managed river by river to protect tribal fisheries in terminal areas.

Another of Billy's lessons is that it's going to take all of us to recover salmon. Every year fisheries co-management gets more difficult because salmon runs continue to decline and growing human populations continue to degrade habitat.

The tribes have been saying for decades that reducing harvest alone will not restore salmon productivity and abundance. We need to work together to stop the ongoing destruction of habitat, contamination of our water, predation by seals and sea lions, and impacts of climate change. Natural resources managers must continue to follow the latest science to address these environmental threats.

As we reflect on the past 50 years, we are worried about the next 50 years. We are stewards of natural resources for the next seven generations, but we're on the trajectory to having a treaty right to harvest a fish that has gone extinct. As we move forward, we must follow Billy's example to set aside our differences and work together.

In marking the anniversary of the Boldt decision, tribes carry on the work to inform everyone about the role treaty rights continue to play in fisheries management and protecting our environment.

The statue of my mentor Billy Frank Jr. represents this commitment. It is an opportunity to educate people about where we came from while inspiring future generations of tribal leaders and reminding the entire country that we're still here.

Being Frank is a column by Chairman Ed Johnstone of the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission. As a statement from the NWIFC chairman, the column represents the natural resources management concerns of the treaty tribes in western Washington.