

Yurok biologist has whirlwind couple of weeks

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It's been a busy couple of weeks for Yurok tribal citizen and Senior Fisheries Biologist for the Yurok Tribe of California Keith Parker.

He sat in his living room talking with a New York Times reporter answering questions and addressing issues pertinent to Northern California and fish management on the Klamath River.

He spent time out on the river with the Times photographer as the team put together a presentation that will run not only in the New York City daily, but another piece entitled "The scientists watching their life's work disappear," will run in the New York Times Sunday Magazine with a circulation of 6 million readers.

Then on Oct. 19-21, at the 2023 American Indian Science Engineering Society National Conference (AISES) in Spokane, Wash., he and the largest audience in conference history (3,500) watched a five-minute video of his work.

AISES is a national nonprofit organization focused on increasing representation of Indigenous peoples of North America and the Pacific Islands in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) studies and careers.

Parker was recognized as the AISES 2023 Professional of the Year for Technical Excellence.

"It was a record turnout at Spokane, so that was special. It's been a lot of hard work," said Parker, a molecular biologist who helps monitor the Klamath River's fish stocks as part of the Klamath River Technical Team.

“The New York Times article came out. Then in a separate article that just came out digitally, they did another article talking about scientists that are hoping to help fix climate change for their Sunday magazine. So, it’s been a hell of a week.”

Growing up, Parker bore witness his grandfather leading protests of federal bans on tribal fishing rights, ironically, for water he is now responsible for, co-stewarding the Klamath River’s 44 miles through the Yurok reservation.

His research has been published in the science journal, *Molecular Ecology*. In 2018, he discovered two new previously undiscovered subspecies of Pacific lamprey — a jawless fish that looks like an eel — one that matures in the river and another that matures in the ocean.

“I used Yurok words to describe them because of the importance they are for our people. Kewsween means river, and the ocean maturing lamprey was named Tewol, which is the Yurok word for ocean,” he explained. “The lamprey has great cultural and historical value to Pacific Northwest tribes.”

He has also performed a great deal of genetics work on the Klamath salmon in collaboration with the University of California-Santa Cruz.

All that aside, having the New York Times reporter and photographer sitting in his living room while his son Beau shot some photos of the process is a memory they will share for a long, long time, he said.

“I was humbled and at the same times excited, because every time these things happen, it gets the word out to more people about the plight of our salmon and our fisheries here on the West Coast, specifically Del Norte County,” said Parker, who co-stewards harvest management on the lower 44-miles of the Klamath River eight-months of the year and conducts genetic analysis of returning Trinity River Hatchery salmon in collaboration with UC Santa Cruz the rest of the time

“We had a full salmon closure this year in the ocean and the river. They shut down the rock fishing season, so all the local fishermen can’t fish the shores. We have a lot of fishery issues because of degraded rivers and poor ocean conditions. So, if I can get in front of that many people (through the New York Times), then I can educate more people about these problems. Hopefully, more people are going to be thinking about solutions.”

Parker, who also has family in the Karuk, Hupa and Tolowa communities, is a regular guest speaker, discussing climate change and drought on salmon populations.

He has conducted numerous fisheries biology, hydrology, and river ecology research projects in Alaska, Washington, Idaho and California. He received a BS degree in Fisheries Biology (2015) and a MS degree in Natural Resources (2018) from Cal Poly-Humboldt, with a thesis on conservation genetics.