

# The Oregonian

INSIDE ENVIRONMENT

## Salmon Stewardship Summit brings together Russian, American teens

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by Abby Haight, *The Oregonian*



Abby Haight/The Oregonian

*Valentina Mezentseva, a middle school teacher from Sakhalin Island, Russia, holds a topography map today on Powell Butte while Noah Jenkins, an education and research associate with the Johnson Creek Watershed Council, explains to teenagers from Oregon and Russia how the rivers and streams near*

An elder from the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs will perform a traditional first foods ceremony today for a group of teenagers who want to save wild salmon runs in Oregon and Russia.

With the ceremony, the 24 youths ages 12 to 17 -- half from Sakhalin Island in the North Pacific Ocean, half from Oregon -- begin the first-of-its-kind Salmon Stewardship Summit, a week spent consuming an intense education about conservation and wild salmon.

The free camp is a pilot project of the Portland-based Wild Salmon Center, the Sakhalin Salmon Institute, the Freshwater Trust and the Siuslaw Institute. The camp is designed to build leadership skills, expand knowledge of salmon habitat and encourage youths toward careers in conservation and ecology.

It also is a bridge bringing together teens, educators and conservationists from two regions whose pasts and futures are entwined with salmon.

"We like to learn, of course," 15-year-old Olga Trifonova of Sakhalin Island said through interpreter Julie Kuchepatov, sustainable fisheries and market associate for the Wild Salmon Center. "More and deeper about salmon and rivers. And make new friends."

The teens hiked Saturday to the top of Powell Butte, before leaving this morning for Camp Arrah Wanna on the Salmon River. Noah Jenkins, education and research associate for the Johnson Creek Watershed Council, described the importance of watersheds for migrating fish, slipping in and out of English and Russian as he spoke.

American and Russian teens snapped pictures and pointed out landmarks against the hot, hazy sky. The youths -- most wearing bandanas that joined the U.S. and Russian flags -- struggled to communicate with words, but the barriers of language, nationality and culture were crumbling after only a few days.

Kuchepatov's daughter, 10-year-old Paulina, interpreted for the teens. "I've been helping people get to know each other," she said. "It's fun because I have my Russian friends and my American friends. I'm the link in the chain."

The first two days in Portland were packed with field trips -- to the World Forestry Center, Johnson Creek, OMSI and to a rock-climbing wall at REI.

"I think it's been fantastic -- a lot of questioning, a lot of information about watersheds and ecology," said 17-year-old Yasa Pogarchenko, a senior at Clackamas High School who was able to use some of the Russian learned from her parents. "Hopefully, there will be a lot of hands-on testing."

The teens will design and research projects. They'll study the cultural role of salmon and its importance to indigenous people in the Pacific Northwest and on Sakhalin Island who celebrate its annual migration with ceremonies.

The teens will take what they learn back to share with their communities.

"I don't know what to expect," said Wyatt Phillipi, 13, of Sisters. "But I know it will be fun."

Lightly populated Sakhalin Island, off the east coast of Russia and just north of Japan, is laced by hundreds of rivers and its wild salmon runs -- pink, chum, coho and masu -- are healthy. Its fishery is the second largest in Russia. Salmon hold a rich cultural history among the island's indigenous people.

But the island and its waters also hold valuable oil and natural gas reserves. The Sakhalin taimen, the world's largest salmonid, is near extinction.

Staff from the Wild Salmon Center helped start the Sakhalin Salmon Institute five years ago in partnership with Sakhalin Energy, which operates oil and liquefied gas development in the region. Using Oregon policy as its foundation and visits by government officials, conservationists and tribal leaders, the institute helped create a network of watershed councils, salmon-focused education programs and the watershed restoration projects in Russia.

Conservation is new to Sakhalin Island.

Irina Biryukova, a middle school teacher in the capital of Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk who was one of four adults traveling with the Russian teens, was optimistic that young people would embrace that challenge.

"We are very systems-oriented and we see how you show the children how they actually effect change," she said through an interpreter. "We are striving to show our young people that they can make a difference."

Organizers hope the next Salmon Stewardship Summit will be on Sakhalin Island.  
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