**[NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY NEWSROOM](https://blog.nationalgeographic.org/)**

A Small Tribe Thinks Big About Their Ocean Space

**By Shaunna McCovey**

The indigenous people living on the southern Oregon coast have always understood that the ocean and its creatures must be respected. According to the tribal lore of the [Confederated Tribes of the Coos, Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw](http://ctclusi.org/), Thunderbird was the chief of the ocean, and of all the ocean’s creatures, salmon was most beloved. When the people treated salmon carelessly, by dropping it on the ground or burning it, Thunderbird became angry and created powerful storms. The people burned tobacco in their fires and pleaded with Thunderbird to go north.

The lesson? The ocean can be perilous, but it also provides. Margaret Corvi, a tribal member and Environmental Specialist with the Confederated Tribes, knows this very well. “Resource management is embedded into tribal practices and stories,” she says, “and these traditional stories help guide our management-with-respect approach.”

Corvi is one of three tribal natural resource staff, and the only one actively working on ocean and coastal projects. Despite the limited capacity, she has been participating in meetings of the [West Coast Marine Planning Tribal Partnership](http://newswatch.nationalgeographic.com/2013/12/02/tribes-take-the-helm-in-west-coast-ocean-planning/)– a group of 10 tribes working to draft marine plans for their individual tribal territories. “This Partnership speaks to the Tribes interest in preserving the marine environment for future generations, and informing both federal and state ocean planning,” she says. “The Tribes understand that the planning process and the development of a marine plan is an important way to exercise tribal sovereignty.”

The tribal Partnership is an effort that is separate from National Ocean Policy implementation and West Coast Regional ocean planning, but Corvi, would like to see her tribe represented on any future federally organized Regional Planning Body for the West Coast. According to Corvi, tribal marine plans will inform regional ocean planning in ways that are proactive and beneficial to tribes. “The goal,” says Corvi, “is to bring [completed marine plans](http://pointnineseven.com/files/project_pdfs/Point_97_Tribal_Planning_240KB.pdf) to the future federal process.”

There are a lot of really good reasons for the Confederated Tribes to be involved in what goes on in their ocean space. A [proposed floating wind farm development](http://www.oregonlive.com/environment/index.ssf/2014/02/wind_energy_farm_near_coos_bay.html)is slated for offshore, and the [Jordon Cove LNG facility,](http://www.oregonlive.com/business/index.ssf/2014/03/feds_give_proposed_coos_bay_ln.html) which has won conditional approval, will be located on the north spit of lower Coos Bay.  The impact of these two projects on the tribal territory and resources is yet to be determined, but the Tribes want to be at the table. “Now more than ever,” says Corvi, “we need a tribal voice in the marine environment.”

Being involved in marine planning and management reflects the core values of the Tribes’ culture and being, especially in the case of what the people call First Foods. The ocean once provided salmon, lamprey, eulachon, crab, clams, mussels, seaweed and marine mammals in abundance. Today, these important species face threats that the Tribes would like to better understand.

“Our [marine planning](http://pointnineseven.com/files/project_pdfs/Point_97_Tribal_Planning_240KB.pdf) efforts will consider the impacts of climate change, economic development, commercial uses of tribal resources and debris and hazardous material on our territory and tribal members,” says Corvi. Staying true to the culture of the past, and through their marine planning work, the Tribes continue to honor the landscape, ocean, waters, and animals that have sustained their existence.

And offshore, on the distant horizon, Thunderbird watches and waits.

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