

Restoring the Wilderness Character of the Elwha River in the Olympic Wilderness

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The Olympic Power Company was formed in 1910 with financing from Chicago investors to lure a pulp mill to Port Angeles, Washington. The Elwha and Glines Canyon dams were built on the Elwha River, most of which runs through the Olympic Wilderness of Olympic National Park. Construction on Elwha Dam began in 1910, and it became operational in 1913. A second facility, Glines Canyon Dam, was built from 1925 to 1927. Power generated by the dams helped fuel the local economy, but the failure to build fish ladders left the Elwha River with a mere 5 miles of available habitat for returning anadromous fish. The dams had a number of other serious impacts including blockage of sediment behind the dams, inundation of important riverine and wildlife habitat, and large adverse effects on the Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe that relied on the native, migrating fish populations for sustenance. The removal of both dams began in mid-September 2011. Today, they are gone and the Elwha River flows freely from its headwaters in the Olympic Mountains to the Strait of Juan de Fuca helping to restore the character of this wilderness. Sediment once trapped behind the dams is rebuilding critical river and near shore habitats, vegetation is being restored in the once barren landscapes of the drained reservoirs, and anadromous salmon and trout are naturally migrating past the former dam sites for the first time in over 100 years. Photo courtesy of National Park Service, Olympic National Park.

