



JASON ATKINSON
AND LOLA PEARL
GO FOR A FLOAT.

A River Between Us, the Movie

After 14 years as an Oregon state senator, including a run for governor, Jason Atkinson turns to film

INTERVIEW BY MIA SHEPPARD

Tell me a bit about your family's history on the Klamath.

We've been on the river for five generations. We have a logbook dating back to the '20s that tells the flies we used, what water temperatures were, and how and where we caught fish. My grandfather used to drag me all over the valley, meeting the local tribal chiefs. And my great grandfather was an early flyfisherman. He used an EC Powell rod with braided silk line. I spent summer and fall on the river, and learned to tie flies from the local barber, Mac. All I wanted to do was catch a steelhead, but this was the '70s, the last dam had been put in—Iron Gate—and hatcheries were starting to show up. The '70s were the death of steelhead fishing. I used to have a shirt that said, "Seiad Valley: Steelhead Capital of the World." They don't make that shirt anymore.

Will "A River Between Us" help the salmon?

Four dams were put in—three in California and one in Oregon. The dams are privately owned by PacifiCorp and have nothing to do with irrigation. This film is not just about the fish; this is the longest, most bitter water war in the United States, even more so than the Colorado.

What does conservation mean to you?

The movement needs a paradigm shift that takes the partisanship and fear out of conservation. We are stuck in Conservation 3.0, and we need to move to Conservation 4.0. Urban environmentalists are concentrated on species more than communities. I want to see the country get away from the endangered-species lawsuit model, toward endangered habitat, in which communities are part of habitat. It's become so partisan that you can't be for the environment and be a Republican.

How can we get conservation right on the Klamath?

The only thing PacifiCorp wants is liability protection. Farmers just

want a guarantee of water they can have, and they don't want to be sued for an ESA taking. There are three tribes, and they want the four dams removed and the salmon to return, and they don't want to sue anymore. The only thing the people have in common on the Klamath is their hatred and mistrust of the federal government. The effort among tribes, anglers, irrigators, agencies, conservation groups, and PacifiCorp has produced the most comprehensive river-basin restoration project in history, which includes the removal of four dams. We have the chance for our generation to get it right.

What will it take to restore the Klamath River?

The President needs to sign an executive order to have the dams removed. This would give the community what it wants. Only the President can ink the deal.

What will victory for the Klamath community look like?

As soon as the White House inks the deal, it's a victory. Also, California has to get in the game. California has been a 100-percent failure on the Klamath River.

Is it the state's reliance on energy?

No, it's a lack of will, mostly political will. The river has been totally abandoned by California. People don't even know this is California. Underneath the last dam is the longest Wild and Scenic River in the state, and people in Siskiyou County have been forgotten. The largest conservation project is in between the state of Oregon and the state of California, and the state of California doesn't even know it exists. The Klamath represents who we are. If we do nothing, then that's who we are. If we stay divided, then that's who we are. If we restore one of the greatest rivers in America, then that's who we are. 🐟