

SHORT SYNOPSIS:

This powerful film odyssey across America explores the sea change in our national attitude from pride in big dams as engineering wonders to the growing awareness that our own future is bound to the life and health of our rivers. Dam removal has moved beyond the fictional Monkey Wrench Gang to go mainstream. Where obsolete dams come down, rivers bound back to life, giving salmon and other wild fish the right of return to primeval spawning grounds, after decades without access. *DamNation's* majestic cinematography and unexpected discoveries move through rivers and landscapes altered by dams, but also through a metamorphosis in values, from conquest of the natural world to knowing ourselves as part of nature.

LONG SYNOPSIS:

THE STORY

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DamNation opens big, on a birth, with the stirring words of Franklin D. Roosevelt at the dedication of Hoover Dam, and on a death, as the engineer at Elwha Dam powers down the turbine on its last day. *DamNation* stints neither the history nor the science of dams, and above all conveys experiences known so far to only a few, including the awe of watching a 30-pound salmon hurtling 20 feet into the air in a vain attempt to reach the spawning grounds that lie barricaded upriver. We witness the seismic power of a dam breaking apart and, once the river breaks free, the elation in watching wild salmon – after a century of denied access – swimming their way home.

THE PEOPLE

DamNation's filmmakers have done their documentary homework. Rediscovered archival footage and pristine vintage photography reveals the young archaeological “salvage” team working against time to recover priceless Anasazi artifacts before the flooding of Glen Canyon in 1958. We meet singer Katie Lee, who was among the last to experience the canyon and, at the age of 94, still recalls the vivid beauty of its walls. Her nemesis, Floyd Dominy, the long-time Bureau of Reclamation czar who dammed Glen Canyon, exudes pride in his power to alter a landscape. We also hear from dam defender Congressman Tom McClintock and dam critic, ex-Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt. Most of the voices in *DamNation* ring far from the lobbied halls of our capitols, and closer to the heart of a river. We hear the smoldering outrage of a Nez Perce elder recalling from his youth the flooding of his people's sacred falls and fishing ground along the Columbia, and the quiet testimony of a river keeper who has manned his post 12 hours a day for 13 years to count, observe and protect a Rogue River steelhead run. And *DamNation* is not without its action heroes, including the activist/artist who two decades ago painted under moonlight a giant crack down the face of Hetch Hetchy's dam.

THE SHIFT

DamNation shows how far things have moved and how quickly, from the assumption 50 years ago that dams were always a power for good, to the first successful attempt to remove a marginal dam 20 years ago on the Kennebec River. The film highlights other dam removal stories, including the Elwha

and White Salmon Rivers in Washington, the Rogue River in Oregon, and the Penobscot River in Maine.

Diverse interests across the country are coming together to remove obsolete dams and find more cost-effective options to meet power, shipping, irrigation and other needs, while helping to restore rivers, preserve tribal customs, recover fish stocks, revitalize waterfronts, improve recreational opportunities and render watersheds more resilient to climate change.

Dam owners, impacted communities, and politicians are now reevaluating the usefulness of certain dams and often advocating for decommissioning and removal. Some call it a movement, others call it a generational shift in values. *DamNation* documents both – and the undeniable momentum behind river restoration that has begun to take hold in our country.

ORIGINS

When, as a young man, *DamNation* producer Matt Stoecker witnessed migrating steelhead jump at, and bounce off, Stanford University's Searsville Dam, he recognized the destructive power of a single dam on an entire watershed and beyond. Matt is now a fish biologist, who has since spearheaded the removal of more than a dozen such barriers to migration and is actively involved in efforts to dismantle several others. He and Patagonia founder/owner Yvon Chouinard, a long-time "dam buster" who for years has supported groups working to tear down dams, share the desire to free our rivers. Together they decided to capture such efforts, and their healing effects, on film and share them with the world. Teaming up with Felt Soul Media's Ben Knight and Travis Rummel, *DamNation* was born.