

## **The salmon of knowledge: Richard Dawkins and the spiritual value of nature**

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In Irish legend, the salmon of knowledge—*an bradan feasa*—from whom the hero Finn McCool gained his wisdom; signifies the exchange of knowledge between the ocean, humans, rivers and the land. The same transfer is shown in Pacific Northwest coast Aboriginal art, where people, animals and spiritual beings transform into each other and back into the landscape. While it is foolhardy to question the Irish claim to civilization, the extent of Aboriginal modification of landscape and species in the Pacific Northwest before European contact is still, at best an ‘inconvenient truth’. I summarize research showing that Pacific salmon are just one of many marine and terrestrial species managed and enhanced to sustain high population levels and some of the richest indigenous cultures on the planet. Aboriginal cultures also perceived salmon and other species as powerful spiritual beings able to punish greed, waste and disrespect. The coming of European-style commercial fisheries ‘transformed’ salmon and other species into commodities on the world market. Debates spawned by the subsequent depletion of fish populations ricochet between conservation arguments based on infinite value or very large ‘no-take’ zones and fishing cutbacks, vehemently opposed by the fishing sector. I address arguments against inclusion of spiritual values by Richard Dawkins and others and conclude that the spiritual value of nature presents an opportunity to bridge between the intrinsic value recognized by the ‘personhood’ of salmon and instrumental value.