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SAHAPTIN FISH CLASSIFICATION

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ABSTRACT

The value of fish for the pre-contact subsistence economy of Sahaptin-speaking peoples of the middle Columbia River is reflected in their fish nomenclature and classification. Nomenclatural recognition is extended to nearly every native species known from the region. Twenty-one basic level folk taxa subsume 26 of 32 native species as well as two extralimital forms known through trade. Thus Sahaptin fish classification provides a clear example of the empirical adequacy of native natural history in describing a local fauna. However, the existence of a general term inclusive of all fish is questionable. A general class of anadromous fish is found in all dialects. This contrasts in many dialects with a "residual small fish" category. Collectively this pair of taxa subsumes all but two extraordinary fish, the lamprey and the sturgeon. In the Umatilla and John Day dialects the contrast between "anadromous fish," typified by the Chinook salmon, and "residual small fish," typified by the suckers (*Catostomus* spp.), is shown to reflect the key economic roles of these two kinds of fish in the traditional subsistence economy of that section of the Columbia Plateau.

Introduction

Unusual nomenclatural elaboration is often cited as evidence of the variability of cultural perspectives on the phenomenal world. Such elaboration is also taken as indicative of areas of particular cultural significance. In one frequently cited example, Eskimos are said to see not "snow" but rather "falling snow" or "drifting snow" or "melting snow," etc. The fact that Eskimos hyperdifferentiate what to us is a unitary phenomenon is explained by the ubiquity of "snow" in their lives, its importance for cultural persistence in the arctic. However, such examples remain merely suggestive in the absence of any more explicit method for evaluating degrees of nomenclatural elaboration or of cultural significance. Why not simply count the number of distinct terminologically recognized categories which pertain to a realm of experience as an index of the cultural significance of that realm? The Eskimo group with the largest number of terms for snow would be judged the most snow-conscious. Alternatively, if the Eskimo recognized eleven kinds of snow but only six of wind, we might judge wind of lesser cultural significance. Clearly it is not so simple. A key fault is the lack of a comparative standard. Is snow inherently more diverse than wind? Do certain Eskimo experience an absolutely

TABLE 1

Native Fish of the Sahaptin Life Range

Scientific/English Names	Sahaptin Name/s	Cultural Role
PETROMYZONTIDAE/lampreys		
<i>Lampetra richardsoni</i> <i>Entosphenus tridentatus</i>	asúm [NW, rc], asm [tt] k'súyas [CR]	avored food; myth character
ACIPENSERIDAE/sturgeon		
<i>Acipenser transmontanus</i>	wílaps [NW, CR] xílaᵗ [NE], xíleᵗ [pl], qílaᵗ [ww]	usually avoided; called "swallow- ing monster's pet;" myth char- acter
SALMONIDAE		
<i>Oncorhynchus gorbuscha</i> /pink salmon	λ'k ^w áy [uc] mac'ya [kl], wac'ya [kl]	eaten; little known, range re- stricted to west- ern fringe of area
<i>O. keta</i> /chum salmon	mít'úla [NW, CR], áyᵗ [NE] č'ilí [pl]	eaten; /mít'úla/ also refers to spawned-out salmon generally
<i>O. kisutch</i> /coho salmon	sínuᵗ [NW, CR], sín ^w ᵗ [NW], sínu ^w ᵗ [ws], sín ^w ᵗ [NW], súnᵗ [CR], sún ^w ᵗ [ce], súnuᵗ [ws]	eaten; myth character
<i>O. nerka</i> /sockeye salmon	káluᵗ [NW, CR], kál ^w ᵗ [ce, rc]	eaten; myth char- acter; jacks may be known as /kaluᵗkáluᵗ/ [tt]

TABLE 1 continued

Scientific/English Names	Sahaptin Name/s	Cultural Role
OSMERIDAE/smelt		
<i>Thaleichthys pacificus</i> / eulachon	wiłx̣fna [NW]	eaten, extralim- ital, obtained from the west by trade
CATOSTOMIDAE/suckers		
<i>Catostomus columbianus</i> / bridge-lip sucker	yáyk [NW, CR]	eaten, available in late winter; myth character;
<i>C. macrocheilus</i> /large-scale sucker	x̣ún [NW, CR], x̣ún [Ws] x̣ ^w ñ [yk], x̣ ^w ún [NW, CR]	first foods rit- ual (both species)
<i>C. platyrhynchus</i> /mountain sucker	none recorded	present but un- recognized
<i>C. luxatus</i> /Lost River sucker	č'wám [Ws], c'wám [kl?]	eatern, extra- limital, obtained from Klamath Basin by trade
CYPRINIDAE		
<i>Ptychocheilus oregonensis</i> / northern squawfish	luq ^w 'áya [NW], luq'á [yk], luq ^w 'á [CR]	eaten, available in winter
<i>Achrocheilus aleuticus</i> / chiselmouth	lálapti [CR]	eaten
<i>Mylocheilus caurinus</i> / peamouth	čúkṣ [jd]	eaten; little known; name means "obsidian"
<i>Richardsonius balteatus</i> red-sided shiner	[t' p,]a[^l s]a[^l n]í [NW, CR], pałaní [um]	eaten
<i>Rhinichthys cataractae</i>	none recorded	present, appar- ently unrecognized

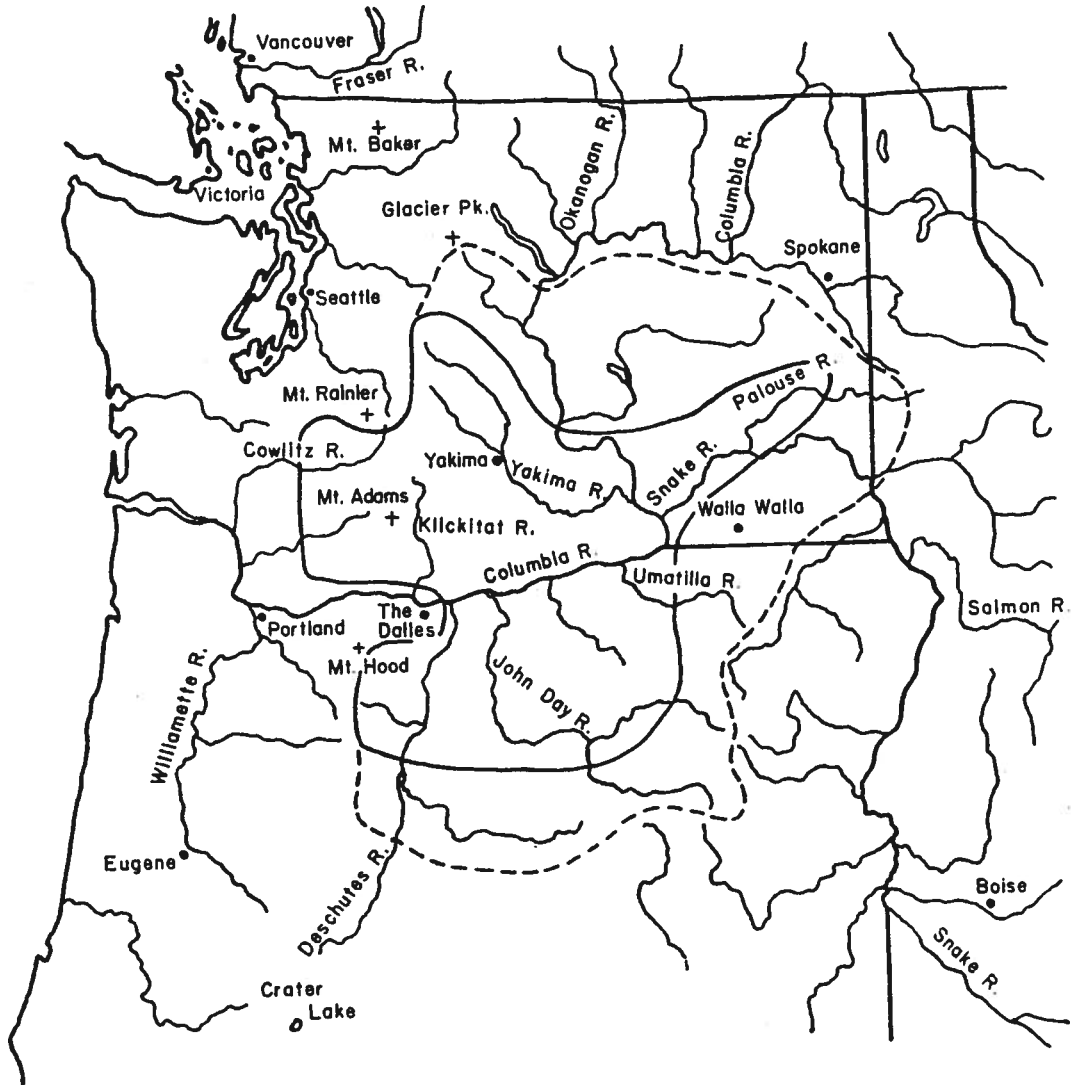


Fig. 1. Map of the Pacific Northwest showing territory utilized by Sahaptin speaking peoples. The central area indicates territory used primarily by Sahaptin speaking peoples and under their control. The peripheral area indicates territory used annually by Sahaptin speaking peoples but in common with neighboring groups of other linguistic affiliations. Both areas are approximate.

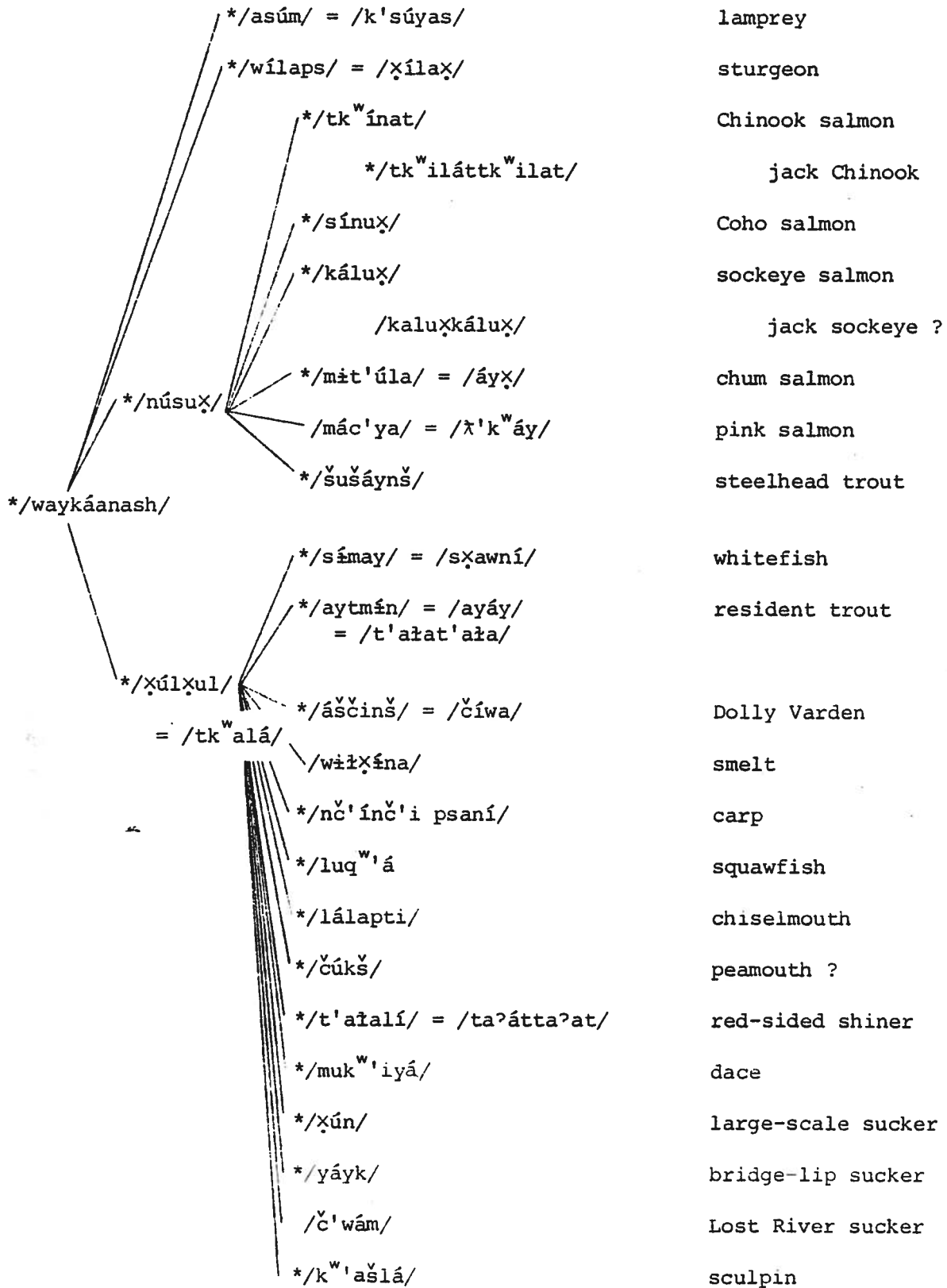


Fig. 2. Sahaptin fishes: taxonomic structure. Terms in the repertoire of James Selam are marked *. Dialect variant equivalent terms are indicated by =. Minor phonological variants treated in Table 1 are not cited here. A question mark indicates that the term or its gloss is inadequately established. For further discussion of Sahaptin resident trout terminology see note 2.

of species among salmon cannot be taken for granted. Nevertheless, contemporary Sahaptin speakers extend nomenclatural recognition to each and every species, ignoring in the process whether the fish run in spring or fall, whether male or female, whether fresh from the sea or torn and twisted by the rigors of spawning, whether "jack" or full adult. Though special terms for male and female and for post-spawning males may be used, they are applied within the genus irrespective of species. Subspecific distinctions are formally recognized in only one instance; jack salmon may be distinguished by diminutive reduplication of the appropriate species name. For example, Chinook salmon are /tk^wínat/, their jacks are /tk^wiláttk^wilat/, literally "little Chinooks." Other sub-specific distinctions may be informally noted. For example, one octogenarian Yakima informant claimed that Chinook salmon of the Tieton River were darker than those of the Naches-American drainage. In fact, just such subtle but consistent differences between local populations first suggested the "home stream theory" of salmon migration to fisheries biologists (Rich 1948). This Yakima elder attributed the difference between Tieton and Naches river salmon to contrasting gravel color in each stream, an observation lacking only a notion of natural selection to be Darwinian. Thus knowledge of fish may go beyond distinctions formally named.

The inclusion of sea-run trout as "salmon" is, of course, in contradiction to Linnaean principles. Curiously, American English speakers likewise refer to steelhead as salmon, even in at least one authoritative guide to North American fishes (Schrenkeisen 1938). The concept "salmon" in both English and Sahaptin is clearly defined in part with regard to the value of these fish as food--which is a function of their common anadromous behavioral adaptation--and as such is not strictly equivalent to the scientific taxon labeled *Oncorhynchus*.

Turning now to /xúlɣul/ "residual small fish," we find 12 folk generic taxa are so classified by my John Day and Umatilla consultants. As with salmon, this category is not comparable with any scientific taxon. However, as with salmon, the folk generic taxa it includes faithfully reflect individual species distinctions with but a few exceptions. Ten of the 12 kinds of /xúlɣul/ map in a one-to-one fashion to scientific species. Two involve "lumping" or the ignoring of species distinctions within a genus. For example, my consultants call all species of resident trout either /ayáy/ or /aytmfn/ depending on dialect.²

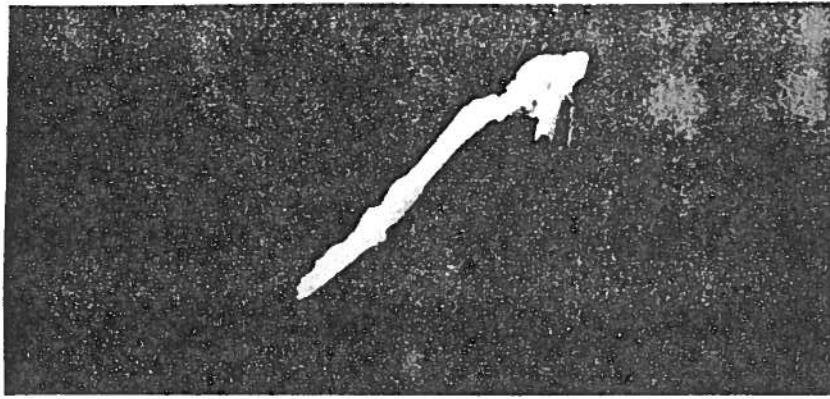
Our second case of "lumping" involves the sculpins, the so-called "Indian doctor fish." Though Sahaptin speakers might have encountered as many as seven species of sculpins (*Cottus* spp.), at least two of which are rather abundant, the category is perceived as homogeneous. All sculpins are alike in their grotesque bulging eyes, squat profile, leathery skin, and pouting lips (Fig. 3). And all are alike from the Sahptin perspective in their special power. As "doctor fish" (/twáti/, literally "shaman") they are one of a curious set of animals treated with special care and respect, not harmed and never eaten. Sculpins, horned lizards, rattlesnakes, ravens, and owls are among those so respected and feared for their influence over the weather or for their powers of foresight.

In sum, Sahaptin fish classification corresponds rather closely to the independently developed scientific scheme, most notably at the level of basic folk taxa. Though not identical, the two perspectives are sufficiently in accord that they must be seen as products of a common logic operating on a common reality. Thus culture here faithfully reflects empirical reality.

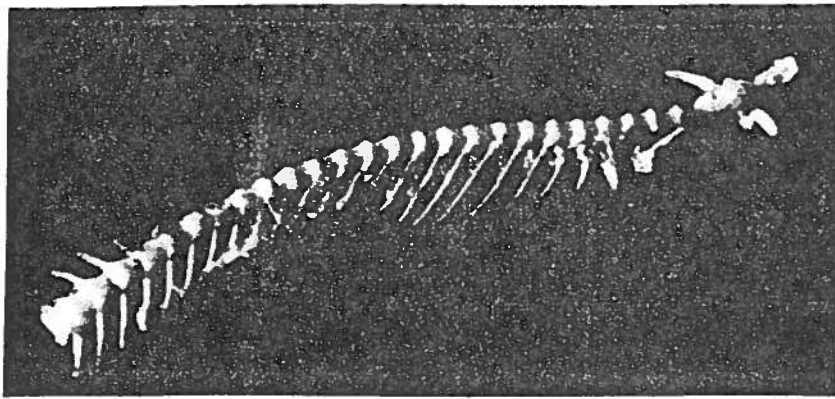
The Reflection of Cultural Significance in Sahaptin Folk Classification

I began by suggesting that the elaboration of Sahaptin fish nomenclature reflected the peculiar cultural utility of fish for aboriginal Sahaptin-speaking peoples. Yet I have just concluded that this folk ichthyology rather closely reflects an order given by nature. Is this not paradoxical? In fact, the roles played by nature and culture in Sahaptin folk classification are complementary; there is no opposition. Fish in general are important to these people for their livelihood, thus close attention is directed to that aspect of nature resulting in a classification closely modeled on empirical reality. However, certain fish are of outstanding cultural importance. Salmon were paramount, with the Chinook salmon "king," both the largest, the most abundant, and offering runs in spring, summer, and fall. So the Chinook salmon is singled out on three nomenclatural levels. It is /núsuχ/ "salmon" epitomized and is not infrequently so called. It is /tk^wínat/ or /tk^wínat núsuχ/ (using binomial nomenclature) in contrast to its congeners. Finally jacks are /tk^wiláttk^wilat/, "little Chinook salmon." Nomenclatural elaboration is reinforced in myth and ritual. The gift of salmon is explained in myth (Jacobs 1934:86-91, 106-107, 195-197; Johnson-O'Malley 1974:34-35), and thanks are ritually offered to the first spring Chinook by the whole community (Thwaites 1904-05 4:302).

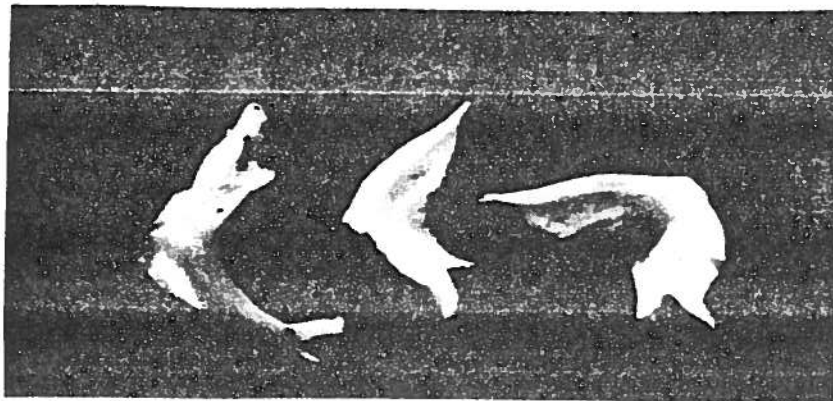
Yet salmon is not alone in this honor. As suggested above, two poles may be seen to define the basic structure of this fish life-form; with salmon and suckers as coordinates. Only two Linnaean genera are split according to species lines in Sahaptin. Those genera are salmon and suckers. There are myths of origin for both salmon and suckers, and the two kinds of fish honored at first food feasts are, once again, salmon and suckers. The traditional value of salmon was clearly ultimately economic. But what proves the parallel value of suckers? I believe it is equally economic. The first spring-run Chinook salmon arrived at Celilo Falls shortly after mid-April (varying to early May), and their arrival occasioned ritual and feasting, a tradition still honored at Columbia River longhouses. Today a combined spring salmon and root feast held in mid-April marks the ritual high point of the Indian religious calendar. However, some longhouse congregations also hold a feast in February to honor the first "Indian celeries" (*Lomatium grayi* Coult. & Rose) and the spawning runs of suckers. These fish crowd into the small streams adjacent to winter villages such as those at Rock Creek and Alderdale in Klickitat County, Washington, at a critical phase of the seasonal cycle, when winter stores may be nearing exhaustion with the spring salmon still six to eight weeks away. The timely arrival of suckers may have meant the difference between life and death if the previous year's harvest had been meager or the winter especially severe.



a



b



c

Fig. 4. Sucker's bones and their mythical identities. a, soft-basket woman monster; b, snake; c, raven's feet. Identification by Sara Quaempts and Elsie Selam; Umatilla dialect. Bones are of a bridge-lip sucker (*Castostomus calumbianus*) from Rock Creek, Washington.

the Northwest dialect area suggests that the salmon-sucker contrast was not central in the cultures of that portion of the Sahaptin range. For Tenino and Tygh dialect speakers of the Warm Springs Reservation /xúlχul/ means simply "small trout" (David French:personal communication). In both regions trout may prove to be more important than suckers due to the proximity of the Cascade Mountain streams.

²One Yakima informant has suggested that /ayáy/ and /aytmín/ are distinct kinds of trout, the former a larger, widespread type, the latter a smaller "mountain trout." It is tempting to speculate that the so-called "mountain trout" is the uncommon and local cutthroat (*Salmo clarkii*) in contrast to the ubiquitous rainbow (*S. gairdneri*). Two trout species are also reported for the Umatilla dialect, /píckatyı/, "any sort of trout," and /híšlam/, "a black trout," and the Palus dialect, /wawáiam/, "rainbow trout," and /híšlam/, "a little bigger trout than /wawáiam/" (Rigsby n.d.a). Tenino and Tygh speakers of the Warm Springs Reservation call all resident trout, including the introduced brook and brown trout, /xúlχul/. Larger resident rainbows are set apart as /t'aát'áa/ (David French:personal communication).

³The native fish species known to occur in the region but which are apparently not named in Sahaptin are the mountain sucker (*Catostomus platyrhynchus*), two species of dace (*Rhinichthys cataractae*, *R. falcatus*) the burbot (*Lota lota*), Columbia River trout-perch (*Percopsis transmontanus*), and the three-spined stickleback (*Gasterosteus aculeatus*).

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