In the early 1800s the Klallam were approximately 10,000 strong. Their many villages dotted the Strait of Juan de Fuca along the northern coast of present-day Washington, neighboring the Makah in the west and the Skokomish of Puget Sound in the east. Like other Coast Salish of the Olympic Peninsula, the Klallam—whose name in their native language means “Strong People”—lived up to their nickname “Fish-Eaters” by skillfully securing life-sustaining catches of salmon, herring, trout, sturgeon, and other fish. Unlike the southern tribes along the Pacific Northwest Coast, the Klallam did not hunt whales, but were content to obtain valuable meat, bones, and oil from whales stranded in shallows or beached by storms (Indians of the Northwest, Petra Press, Michael Friedman Publishing Group, 1997, p. 15, 19).

In the 1840s, the Klallam were decimated by epidemics of smallpox, flu, and tuberculosis. Today, they occupy three reservations with a total tribal enrollment of about 1,700 people—some 640 are Elwha Klallam. The 572-acre Lower Elwha reservation is six miles west of Port Angeles at the mouth of the Elwha River, about midpoint along the northern shoreline of the Olympic Peninsula [see Jamestown S’Klallam].

The Lower Elwha flag was created in 1995 by 25-year-old Alfred Charles, who responded to an invitation for tribal members to design a flag, starting from elements already present on the tribal seal such as the thunderbird and killer whales. Mr. Charles simplified and sharpened these elements, maintaining their traditional artistic style and placing them on a white background.
The circular seal is bordered by a heavy black ring inside which curves across the top “ELWHA KLALLAM TRIBE” in black; beneath them appears, in black and spelled in international phonetics, the translation into the Klallam language. In the center is a thunderbird—its body is black with white highlights; its neck and upper tail are white with black borders and accents, the lower four feathers of its tail are black with white highlights while the lowest two feathers are red, bordered in black. The wings of the bird are red, bordered in black, showing black and white elements. Crossed lightning bolts behind the thunderbird are yellow with black borders. Two killer whales face each other below the thunderbird. Their heads are black with white teeth and eyes, the upper bodies are red with black highlights. The whales’ lower bodies each have a yellow “Y” shape with its open ends directed toward the head and enclosing a white dot. The tails are black, with a red disk and six white accents. The upper fins are yellow, bordered in black, and contain three black dots; the lower fins are solid black.

The entire symbolism of the flag reflects the Elwha Klallam’s ancient fishing tradition—from the light blue background evoking water, to the thunderbird by whose spirit the earth is watered and the harvest from sea and field is gathered, to the respectful regard for the whale as protector rather than prey:

“The thunderbird represents the protection of our people. The lightning bolts it is throwing come from a story about the thunderbird flying up a river and throwing lightning bolts at the water to ensure a good fish harvest. The black fish are killer whales. They are the protectors of our people when traveling by canoe or water.”

The flag of the Lower Elwha Klallam thus remains faithful to the mythology as well as to the historic and artistic tradition of its people.

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