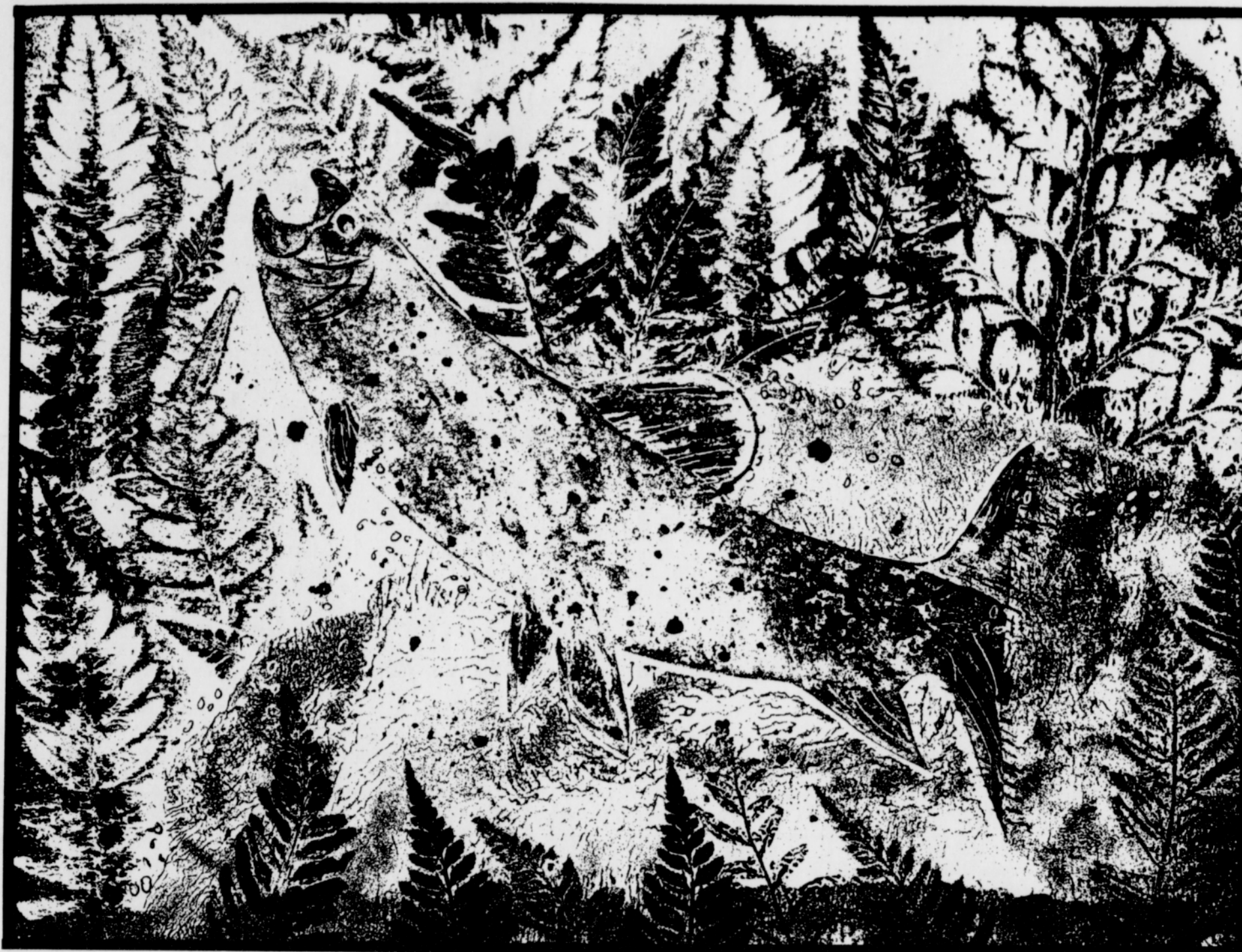




ELOISE FORRER

WORK IS OUR JOY

BY IRENE MARTIN

The theology of gillnetting? It could just as easily be "the morality of gillnetting." Enlarge it, and it encompasses "the morality of natural resource-based decision making" or "the theology of resource use." Currently, there are a number of land, timber, fish and water use controversies nationwide that are particularly evident in the American West. The controversies usually revolve around public issues of who should have access to public resources and lands, for what purpose, and how much public control should be exercised. The arguments for and against are usually based upon widely different ethical norms, so that each group views itself as making ethical decisions within its own framework while seldom recognizing that perhaps other groups, though not using the same reference points, also view themselves as making ethical decisions.

The decision-making process regarding salmon harvest allocation provides a good example of how this ethical confusion has arisen on the Columbia River. Each year the Pacific Fisheries Management Council decides who will fish and for how long. State agencies then implement these decisions. The 1992 El Niño, which caused poor ocean survival conditions for salmon, combined with the proposed and actual listings of various salmonids under the Endangered Species Act, complicated the process immensely. Because the troubled runs are intermingled with healthy stocks in what are called "mixed stock" fisheries, the council severely limited access to fish runs in order to protect the weak stocks. The following observations are by no means a complete analysis of problems, but are intended instead to focus attention on where the various groups are "missing each other."

Rule morality posits that rules or laws are for everyone's good and must be obeyed by all in order for society to function. Citing the Endangered Species Act as the rule which Congress established, the ethical decision would be to obey it. Justification for keeping the rule intact, despite its hardships, might be that the world is evolving to a higher state of environmental consciousness and that the Endangered Species Act is a means toward this end. Opposition to rule-morality thinking could argue that the Endangered Species Act determines that a species must be saved without sufficient reference to human context and that human use is ignored. Hence, if the law itself is flawed, rule morality breaks down. Current language refers to these two views as a preservation ethic versus a conservation ethic, or with a shift in lexicon, as a preservation/conservation ethic versus a development or "wise use" ethic.

A second moral viewpoint, known as antinomianism, reacts against all law, against the tendency "to exalt legalism above human needs." At its extreme, a proponent of this viewpoint might state: "No one can tell me what to do with my land." However, a private owner may not feel obligated to care for the land, land which may contribute to critical salmon habitat. Translated to the world of fisheries, such a view might be that "everybody has a right to catch a fish," which tends to support superior moral rights of sport fishers. An alternative position is that "rights of access belong first and foremost to those dependent upon them." This statement reflects the view of the gillnetters. Native American members of the Wshat religion on the Columbia River go even further, believing that their right to catch salmon is more than a right, it is a sacred obligation that supersedes the law.

Situation ethics claims that there is one absolute, that of love. The facts in each ethical dilemma must be determined, and

a decision made according to what is the most loving action. The decision must be evaluated on its results. The Northwest Power Planning Council's "adaptive management" policies seem to be based strongly on the situational model, although love may not be the underlying principle! A major weakness in this type of decision making on the Columbia River is that no one seems to agree upon the facts. The public and private power companies have openly scorned the fisheries management agencies' salmon mortality figures, and the latter do not tend to find the claims of the companies credible. Given that no one can agree upon the actual situation, the location of the cause of the problem continually shifts to other people, groups, agencies. At its worst, situational ethics leads to a political free-for-all with everyone acting in their own self-interest.

Ethical principles develop to deal with similar recurring situations. Due to the cyclical nature of the salmon's life cycle and predictable behavior, their management should be an easy area in which to develop ethical principles. The Pacific Fisheries Management Council has attempted to do just that by assuming the need for adequate escapement each year in order to perpetuate the runs. Biology, therefore, should be the basis for decision making. However, this principle has broken down in the face of legal decisions mandating catches to tribes which may impact escapement, and to natural conditions such as El Niño, where some runs cannot hope to enjoy adequate spawning escapement.

A final ethical ground for decision making rests in natural law. The Endangered Species Act assumes that all creatures have a right to exist. Not all parties involved in the life cycle of the salmon, however, subscribe to this view. It is fre-

quently opposed by stating that "everyone has a right to make a living," an extension of the Constitution's stated rights of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Frequently the two views appear to be mutually exclusive. A search for equilibrium is seldom made by the parties involved, but rather by outside forces, such as state agencies, industry associations, or environmental groups.

With agencies, fishers, environmental groups, and those who impact habitat approaching the preservation of salmon with different goals in mind and fundamentally different sets of values and moral and ethical criteria for decision making, continual conflict occurs over even relatively trivial issues. In addition, the neglect of the fishing community by government, social service agencies and religious organizations over past decades has ensured that its voice is least likely to be heard. If public policy in the social service fields can so successfully ignore the fishing community, the situation is not much different in the area of environmental concern. Indeed, active environmental hostility towards those involved in natural resource-based adaptations appears to be growing.

In the summer 1991 issue of the *Amicus Journal*, the publication of the Natural Resources Defense Council, an article appeared called "The Reinvention of the American Frontier." Its two authors described rural adaptations such as farming and logging as "extractive" industries, and sought to develop a "kinder and gentler frontier" by replacing them with retirement communities and tourism, viewed as nonextractive and therefore morally correct adaptations. A similar viewpoint was expressed in a letter to the editor of *Longview Daily News*:

"The ancient forests of the Northwest do not belong to the logging interests or even the people of the area any more than Niagara Falls belongs to New Yorkers or the Grand Canyon to the citizens of Arizona..."

"People all over want these trees saved. They are a vital part of the American soul and heritage. Please save these trees. For we won't come out to see stumps."

Rural areas are usually characterized by traditional adaptations based on, in their view, renewable resources. The shift in terminology from such words as fishing, farming and logging to "extractive industries" carries a negative moral weight, which in turn justifies the turning over of resources to the morally superior nonextractive users. The latent function of such thinking, however, is colonialist in nature. It is a classic case of urban exploitation of the rural hinterland. In this case, the hinterland is no longer permitted to export its raw materials, its wealth, to urban areas for processing as it could in previous eras. Rather, rural sources of income in the form of trees, fish and land are transformed into a means of recreation for tourists. Is there not a disturbing echo here of how the original frontier was created, by means of a land grab from the aboriginal inhabitants of North America? Must frontier creation always involve a wresting away of resources from one owner/user by another? What are the social consequences of such decisions?

Robert Lee's study, *Social and Cultural Implications of Implementing "A Conservation Strategy for the Northern Spotted Owl,"* listed four factors affecting people dependent upon the timber industry. These included job loss, a loss of trust in assured wood supplies (and the government who made those assurances), emerging class conflict, and the "dehumanization" inherent in attempts to degrade loggers.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 6

