

is already imported from South America. Fish once caught in offshore and inshore fisheries by American fishers are now being taken by foreign vessels and processed in Asia. The jobs that were once the backbone of rural America are already being exported and this trend can only increase with the expansion of the New Frontier. Rural America is suffering from a decline in income as it tries to compete with 3rd World wage scales and put into practice the expensive environmental demands of our society. Those demands are not unrealistic. It is unrealistic, however, not to expect that someone will have to pay for them. The 3rd World countries that are gaining the jobs by supplying America's demand for cheap natural resources are not complying with the same environmental regulations. The hypocrisy of our society's demand for environmental concern is that we still want our commodities and necessities of life dirt cheap, so that the global ecosystem is sacrificed for the false security of the national one.

Ultimately, the question is indeed one of theology. *Newsweek*, not noted for its theological leanings, identified the issue in exactly that term:

"Those who make their living from the land are mounting their own counterattack. People for the West, a campaign launched by the Western State Public Lands Coalition, has established nearly 100 community groups to spread a pro-industry message. Many bristle at environmentalists who say they won't recognize the rights of those who mine and grow much of what the country consumes. The animosity is as much theological as it is political and economic. Many regard the harvesting of the land's resources as a calling with roots deep in Judeo-Christian tradition."

The article called it "a war for the soul of the American West."

The Judeo-Christian tradition also supports harvesting of the resources of the waters as a calling. New Testament tradition identifies at least seven of Jesus's disciples as fishermen. In addition, Matthew, the tax gatherer, would have been the person who granted permission to fish, and the one who collected taxes based on catches. A senior biologist with the Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife commented recently in a private conversation, "I get the feeling that the people who are on the opposing sides of the Endangered Species listing for salmon are the environmental equivalent of abortion rights activists. Each side is convinced that it has the true faith." Must a pro-development stand negate all environmental concerns? Must a pro-environment stand eliminate all human considerations? There was a time when the Judeo-Christian tradition was the undergirding for a nation's philosophy of taming the frontier. Can this tradition be adapted to include environmental concern? Are there other traditions which are of more value in this area? Where is the place for the ethical decisions of the individual? How does society choose to sacrifice one ethic for another?

In a 1991 workshop, Lee stated that "Conservation of the ecological order is contingent upon conservation of the social and moral order." In the moral order, those who exist within the "scope of justice" are treated justly. The recent campaign against high seas driftnets is an example of people being considered beyond the scope of justice. Washington congresswoman Jolene Unsoeld's letters to constituents have labeled the driftnet fishermen as "pirates" and insisted that they be halted. The possibility that the nets might be modified to eliminate bycatch was ignored. Despite the dramatic difference between high seas gear and U.S. inshore driftnets, such polemics make gillnetters everywhere uneasy, and with good reason. In 1992 proponents of a statewide initiative in Oregon that would have eliminated gillnetting on the Columbia used exactly the same terms to describe Columbia River gillnets as the opponents of high seas driftnet fisheries had used, calling them "curtains of death." The tactics used were not based on an understanding of the gear, but on targeting fishers so that they were placed outside the moral community.

A definition of a disaster is "collective stress that occurs when many members of a community fail to receive what is necessary and expected." The salmon listings under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) are just such a disaster for the fishing community, particularly along the Columbia River. Intimations of this situation have already been felt by gillnetters. Along with the ESA listings has become a concerted campaign by private and public utilities to denigrate commercial fishermen by negative stereotyping. No less a person than a chairman of the Northwest Power Planning Council stated: "I think gill nets have to go in the long run. We can't allow gill nets in the lower river and expect people upriver to make sacrifices to save the fish." Have we returned to the days when "a salmon head is worth a dollar, a man's head is worth nothing"? Somehow, there is a twisted sense of value and values in each of these quotations.

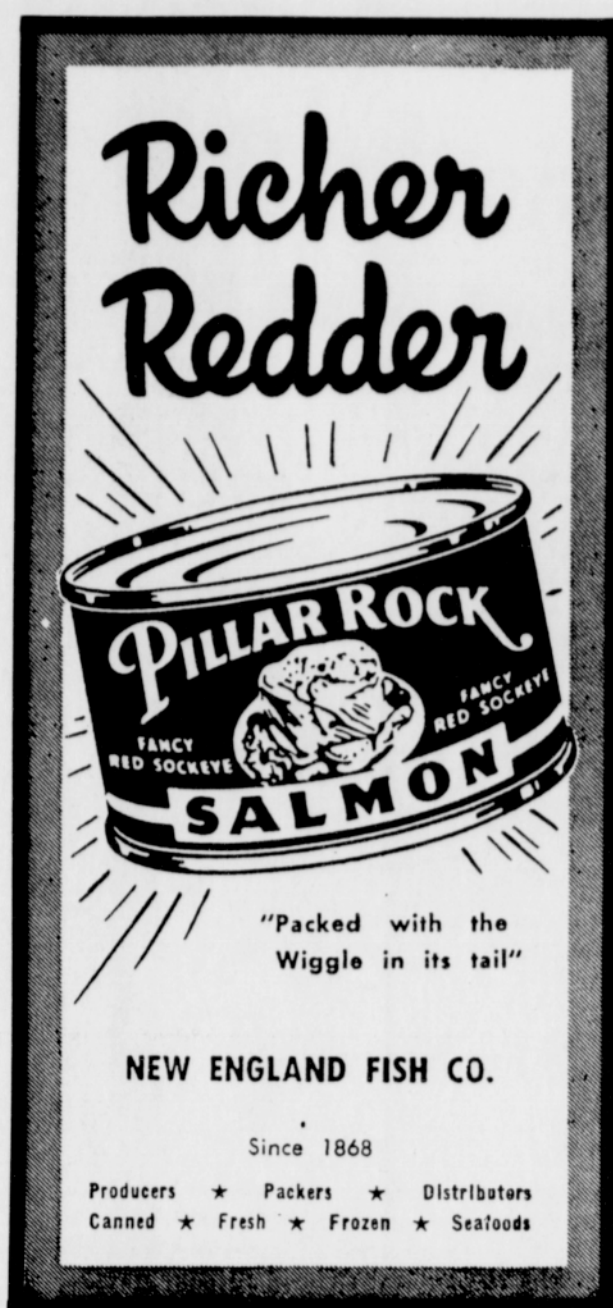
The numerous calls to eliminate gillnetting, either with or without compensation, and without setting the fishery into a frame of reference that includes other impacts on salmon such as dams, irrigation, dredging, development of watersheds, and environmental degradation, have tended to place fishermen outside the moral community and therefore outside the scope of justice. Quotations abound regarding harvest needing to "do its fair share," despite fisheries agencies figures indicating that over 90% of the endangered Snake River stocks in question are killed by hydroelectric facilities on the Columbia and Snake rivers.

The Northwest Power Planning Council held a public hearing on its proposed regional plan for helping the salmon runs in Longview, Wash., in the fall of 1991. Those attending were almost entirely from the commercial fishing community. The hearing officer publicly humiliated the fishing community representatives by querying them about technical details on water flows and regimes, subjects they were not familiar with. He ignored their real area of expertise, fishing gear. State actions, court decisions, and official conduct on salmon issues have steadily eroded the position of the fisher as a member of the wider moral community. "Time was when fishing was an honorable occupation," commented one fisherman's wife. "That's not true anymore."

This shift in values has not been without its consequences on the fishing grounds. Gillnetter Bill Gunderson observed the changes taking place:

"Everybody (in past years) had a personality and they were thought of as human beings. And I've watched it.... It's rather savage. It's sort of barbaric. Watched people lay out (their nets) and they have no concern over who's there first or how close they come to somebody. The technology allows them to pick up that net if they get into trouble.... There's no sense of belonging.... There isn't a sense of permanence. (In the past) there was a sort of guild without a written charter that if a boat, a man was broken down...you helped him out. It was just an unwritten law that there were certain ways that you should behave toward one another. And there was a real sense of community."

The kind of community described by Gunderson existed in small, closely knit communities, often with strong ethnic composition, where extended families and kinship networks were important. Roles were clearly defined but within those roles



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there remained room for individual variation. There was a strong oral tradition so that people were connected with their past and the past of their neighbors and their community. The various communities were linked by a common occupation, gillnetting. The networks created in local communities expanded to include more distant communities, as Columbia River fishermen migrated to Puget Sound and Alaska in times of necessity.

When the Northwest Power Planning Council began development of a regional plan to protect Columbia River salmon, the hope existed that such a plan would be acceptable under the Endangered Species Act and achieve a regional consensus. Implied also was the hope of avoiding a debacle such as that which occurred with the ESA listing of the northern spotted owl. However, the process of developing this regional plan has proven to have astonishing similarities with that of the federal government in developing the spotted owl recovery plan. Both fishermen and loggers have suffered, particularly in the areas of negative stereotyping and blaming the victim. It may be that there is no way to deal with an endangered species listing without inflicting pain. But our society is deluding itself by blaming its surrogates, the fishermen and loggers, for a situation caused by its own appetite for electricity and wood products.

Due to the fluctuating and complex nature of the numerous conflicts on the Columbia River, almost anything that could be written is sure to be obsolete before publication. However, the overriding issues of marginalization and trivialization of a fishing community, and exclusion from the moral community at large, remain valid, despite the turbulence of everyday events and conflicts. Examination of several of the proposed solutions to problems encountered under the ESA illustrate the complexity of the issues and the further marginalization entailed.

One idea is simply to eliminate gillnetting on the Columbia River and come up with an alternative means for harvesting healthy stocks that will not impact endangered stocks. No such means has as yet been developed, although fish traps, currently illegal, appeal to some. Questions about who is to be allowed to use the new means of fishing access go unanswered. History tells us that gillnets were and are in use up and down the entire Pacific Coast and have outlived many other kinds of gear because they were adaptable, selective, efficient, manageable and relatively cheap. Replacing them with gear that meets these criteria will not be simple, nor will it be instant. The Columbia River gillnet has evolved for well over a century to meet changing environmental and technical demands. Fishing communities have also changed and adapted to meet these demands. Mandating new, as yet unknown gear, has repercussions on that community.

A similar situation exists with the proposed leaseback programs, whereby a fisher's license would be leased for a period of, say, four years, and the fish he would have caught would be used to hasten replenishment of salmon runs in low abundance. The solution does not address the problems of keeping a boat operable during the interim. Nor does it address the social problems that occur when large groups of people in fishing communities are not working. Ancillary small businesses, such as gear stores, marine repair shops, and processing and buying facilities will be unable to function. The processing and buying facilities will have to locate new sources of fish to fill their

markets in order to stay in business. Again, this solution does not address the community which is so vital a part of fishing.

This community is far removed from most people's world. It is a community that, despite changes, is still so tightly knit and isolated that even now, in the last years of the 20th century, it is poorly understood. This isolation was caused originally by an accident of history, the fact that the fishery was at the western edge of frontier America, bypassed by most road and railroads, reachable only by water. It is a community which has adapted to changing times by using the age-old techniques employed by fishing communities everywhere: develop new grounds, find ways to work together, find another fishery nearby to diversify into, find another little niche, such as a small farm or logging business, migrate for part of the year to a distant-water fishery. But what happens when there are no fisheries to go to, when the rules collapse, when all the little economic niches are under siege, when everyone is trying to get into distant-water fisheries which now have limited entry and plenty of competition? What happens when fishing communities change into retirement communities and resort towns, sending the price of waterfront property so high that fishing families must relocate? What happens to the advocates for fish when fishing families can no longer afford to support organizations and representatives to ensure the survival of the salmon for their future? Diminished fishing seasons, with correspondingly diminished incomes, and the constant struggle for survival in allocation battles, particularly with the sport fishing lobby, have drained away much of the time, money and energy that could have more profitably been spent on environmental issues affecting salmonids.

There are many issues that can be addressed, all important and contemporary issues in gillnetting. The effect of dredging upon the life web of the Columbia River estuary could fill many pages. Recent studies documenting the effects of pollution on water quality point to serious problems. Genetic issues concerning wild and hatchery salmonids are of great concern. The effect of hydroelectric projects would fill volumes. All of these issues are important in themselves. Their cumulative effect has stressed the salmon of the Columbia River to a point where recovery of the wild runs is tenuous, and where healthy runs need only an El Niño or some other natural disaster to push them beyond the margins of safety. When all the slack is taken out of a system, the vulnerable components of that system need only a slight push to stress them beyond endurance. We as a society have stretched the natural and wonderful system upon which the salmon depend to that point, with a sort of blind optimism that somehow, despite evidence to the contrary, the fish will make it. Then nature "throws us a curve," as one gillnetter is fond of saying, and society's folly becomes apparent. Along with it comes the collapse of the salmon fishery of the Columbia River and the cultural and moral collapse of a community and a way of life.

The connection between the maintenance of biological diversity and cultural diversity is apparent in the following statement of principles from the First National Cultural Conservation Conference:

"Cultural diversity sustains and is sustained by biological diversity. Biological diversity is recognized as a critical measure of the health of ecosystems and is granted legal protection by NEPA (National Environmental Protection Act). Cultural diversity should be recognized equally as critical to the continuing vitality of our national and global social and economic life.

"Human cultural diversity is a natural consequence of locally and regionally specific adaptations to the environment. There is no dichotomy between culture and nature: Therefore the protection and enhancement of cultural diversity will lead to the development of ecologically sustainable folkways.

"The cultural and ecological processes that connect local to regional and global levels of activity may either threaten or enhance the vitality of local bioregions: Therefore, it becomes a moral imperative to enhance as much as possible those processes and activities that contribute to cultural vitality, and hence, diversity.

"Cultural diversity is continuously shaped, modified and disrupted by global and regional economic, social and political forces that tend to favor uniformity: Therefore, it is necessary to understand and engage dominant power structures, social relations and paradigms.

"The empowerment of local culture groups is essential to the processes that encourage and sustain cultural vitality: Therefore, empowerment must involve advocacy, education, litigation and action-oriented research."

The situation facing the gillnetters is one that faced their ancestors. They didn't come to America because they wanted to, but because they had to. They were forced out of their homelands by lack of access to fish. Many of the fishing families of the Columbia River now face the prospect of leaving the communities their ancestors created, where their families have lived for over a hundred years. They are being forced out, not because of anything they have done, but because the fish they depend on have been severely impacted by civilization in all its forms. Some are looking at Alaska or British Columbia fisheries as alternatives. Some have already left.

Among the early Finnish fishermen was a saying: "Beginning is always difficult, work is our joy, and industry overcomes bad luck." Work is our joy! How many people in other occupational groups would say such a thing? Only with the recognition of the value of this unique community and a commitment by the wider society to both restore and nurture the salmon runs of the Columbia River can the Columbia River gillnetters continue to say, "Work is our joy." Within that wider society, each individual has ethical decisions to make regarding wise use of such basics as water and electricity, the things we take for granted which are life and death to the salmon. Without that individual decision of the heart, the salmon will go, and the gillnetters will go also. And the society which is left behind will be its own indictment.



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Eloise Forrer, formerly of Cannon Beach, lives in Gearhart with her husband Paul. Her illustration is from a book by her son Eric Forrer, *Bucket*. (He is also the author of *From the Nets of a Salmon Fisherman*.)

The drawing of an early gillnet boat by Lyle Morris is from *The Columbia River Salmon Gillnetting Coloring Book*, a shared venture by the Columbia River Maritime Museum, Astoria School District and Tongue Point Job Corps Center.