

THE DEEPENING

ARROGANCE, APOLOGY & SATISFACTION



STAN MACK

BY PETER HUHTALA

I could call them optimists, I suppose, these people who seem to believe that the Columbia River channel deepening could proceed in a way that would not radically damage the estuary. I think many of them are sincere in their belief; and in my view, sincerity should be required for optimism.

There are others, I call them illusionists, who spin the tales that the optimists wish to believe. The illusionists do not require sincerity; they either possess a vested interest or are being paid to promote the interests of their employer. Illusionists who work, say, for the chemical industry, argue that the river is big and generous, quite willing to accept more of the toxic waste that triggers cancer. Employees seek approval from their bosses. (Though I hear that scientists and professors often resist the process of thought control; and I think there are others like fishermen and loggers, for sure.)

Realistic. That's how I'm starting to think of myself — at least as regards channel deepening. Lately I've seen some outreach. Apologetic emissaries of those who previously neglected the points of view of the people of the estuary are reaching out. Now they want a list — a list of concerns. They're looking for a short list of concessions that will make most of the resistance go away. For a moment I bask in a hitherto unknown realm. What they're asking for is a list of demands: from me. Ahhhh....

Ten years, it's over ten years, and now it's over \$7 million spent, trying to find a way to legally allow the deepening. Now they're asking me. I feel oddly qualified to answer, though I am but a carpenter/writer/musician-Finn with but a century-long family connection to the river. Maybe I shouldn't tell them, I think. Let them try to figure it out for themselves; they could read the sloppy 2000 page document dozens of people have complained about in over 700 pages of comments. Now I can be arrogant. They lost. They can't even get permits from the states that supposedly want the federal dollars!

Did I mention "dollars"? At one time I had to be told to follow them (the dollars). I took that to mean figuring who would really benefit if we the people kicked in \$20 million while sacrificing our environment, our health and much of the local fishing industry. I followed the \$\$\$\$\$. The deepening, it turns out, is not about anything that will help 90% of the ships calling on the Columbia River. Some small amount over 5% could even use

the deeper channel — according to the Corps of Engineers. But to that minority, the project means a lot. This is about millions, eventually billions, in corporate profits. These profits are squared off with the aquatic life of the river and the well being of estuary communities; and for now, multinational corporate profits have lost.

I really, really tried to think up some way that the shipping channel to Portland could be deepened without making life worse for salmon and sturgeon and lamprey and smelt and crab — and the people of the Columbia River estuary. I decided to forego my arrogance just a little longer and repeat once again the obvious essentials. The first non-negotiable essential is to perform the dredging and blasting only when salmon and other anadromous residents are not migrating through the estuary. Slow down a little, that's what we've been saying for years, but we've been slapped aside. Many of us are bitter. I find the state of bitterness rather unattractive, so now I resent being made bitter. Where does it end? Nonetheless, the reality is that timing the work around fish migrations won't be considered — the added expense would ruin the cost-benefit analysis.

Hydraulic effects, habitat destruction, toxic distribution, ridiculous dumpsites — they've heard it all before. The illusionists blew it when they refused to listen to the reasoned "realistic" voices from the mouth of the river. Maybe it was our emotional grammar or our alien-to-the-corporate-world lifestyle? Now they want us to rescue their dream.

Finally acknowledging the fact that this project would bring destruction, proponents ask where they can pile money to make up for life. They ask: "What are the criteria for restoration of habitat in the estuary that will compensate for what we need to destroy and alter? List your priorities and we'll get the money. Okay?" For one hundred years the estuary has been trashed year after year by dredging and dumping. Most of the tidal marshes are gone. The channel deepening study acknowledged these facts, then went on to claim their plan would have no significant impact. With their lie exposed, now they want us to show them how to make it all better. Why does this make me uneasy? Why aren't new solutions being investigated? This is the opportunity to plan shipping on a regional basis, with ports cooperatively building on their individual strengths rather than wastefully competing. It's time to remove the blinders and move forward with ways to enhance commerce without destroying the environment and liquidating the businesses that depend on natural resources.

I really think that optimists have been deluded. I'm sorry. They will probably feel a little foolish as they finally realize that this channel deepening is a seriously destructive proposal. It's not just the fishermen and the scientists and the conservationists and the residents of the estuary who know that this project would devastate the environment; the project has run into five denials when sponsors approached state or federal agencies for approval. This is a problem because those agencies are generally subject to political influence. The project has got to be pretty bad for natural resource agencies to buck the will of the politicians who fund them.

Right now those who sincerely care about the Columbia River are winning this dredging debate. Watch. The proponents of dredging are going to pretend to care about what we have to say — as if the hundreds of pages of comments and suggestions we have offered over the past years were lost or overlooked. They want a short list. List?! The states gave them lists, the federal resource agencies gave them lists, and the lawsuits gave them lists. Honestly take care of all these concerns and I, to repeat a commitment I've made, will pilot the dredge.

The reality, to me the "realist," is that deepening the Columbia River navigation channel is very unlikely to find a path in the coming decades. The current attempt to mediate scientific controversy is inherently doomed to failure by its very structure. Sustainable Ecosystems Institute has been hired to help the Corps of Engineers to talk nice with the National Marine Fisheries Service and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. The idea is to convince the Corps to change the "Biological Assessment" portion of their deepening plan in ways that might appease the endangered species concerns of other federal agencies. The incontrovertible problem with the approach is that it is an attempt to shoehorn elements of the existing Corps study into a consent-worthy state, when it is actually the base study that needs to be done. (But please don't pass this on; let them waste another couple of years.) The best good hope of the project is to restructure Congress so that the applicable environmental laws will be repealed; then wait for judges to retire and be replaced with magistrates who will acquiesce to the demolition of the Columbia River Estuary.

Oregon and Washington are being asked to contribute \$28 million apiece to the channel deepening project. This is utterly ridiculous. No project exists at this time. The permits have been denied. NMFS and U.S. Fish & Wildlife are not expected to issue new biological opinions until a year from this summer. There will still be Clean Water Act issues outstanding. Then there are the lawsuits in federal court. The states would be setting aside money that would probably never be spent. I'll wager that every legislator could think of a better use for these millions.

My arrogance is creeping back. I'd better watch myself because arrogance is the basis for the failure of the Corps of Engineers to make their case on behalf of the upriver ports and their corporate clients. I'll be safer to bask in cautious confidence. This confidence derives, I think, from understanding some fundamental flaws in the process of developing the channel deepening plan. These flaws cut to the heart of a law called the National Environmental Policy Act, a law with which every major federal project must comply. In the end, the NEPA violations should take this project down — that is, if sponsors somehow usurp the Endangered Species Act, the Clean Water Act and the Ocean Dumping Act. I'd almost like to see it go this way because the NEPA suit could underscore the rude and heavy-handed way the people of the Columbia River Estuary have been treated. It would expose this gross attempt at environmental injustice. It could partially vindicate the disenfranchised voices of our communities.

But lawsuits are complicated and the piles of paperwork might not render real satisfaction. Satisfaction, in this human and environmental struggle, chums in the heart along the edge of tension where we resist the intrusion of that which we know is wrong.

Peter Huhtala is executive director of the Columbia River Deepening Opposition group. He lives in Astoria and can be reached at the CDOG offices at 325-8069 or E-mail huhtala@teleport.com.



Columbia View Marketplace

A Garden Gallery

- Antiques & Collectibles • Herbal Apothecary
- Garden Accessories • Aromatherapy Bar
- Wood Crafts • Local Arts • Herb Plants • Potpourries

1380 COMMERCIAL ST. ASTORIA

7 days a week
9 am - 6 pm • 325-1574





GODFATHER'S BOOKS AND ESPRESSO BAR

Audio Book Sales & Rentals * Cards * Pastries
Incense * Occult & Metaphysical * Lattes & Literature

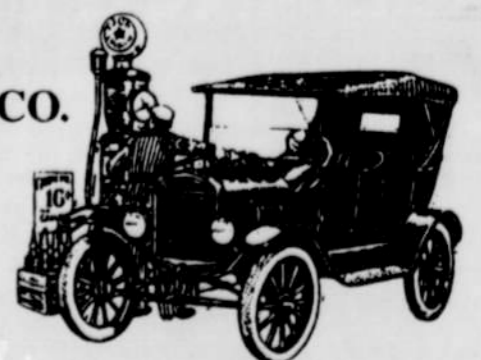
1108 Commercial • Astoria, OR 97103
Phone: (503) 325-8143

Terry Hahn

THE AUTO PARTS CO.

Where Your Satisfaction
is Our Biggest Concern!

325-1612



BRAND NEW LOCATION AT 730 BOND STREET, ASTORIA, OREGON