

THE ABC LIONS OF CLATSOP COUNTY

AN IMMODEST PROPOSAL (APOLOGIES TO JONATHAN SWIFT)

BY DANTON THORNE

Sea lions are a problem on the Columbia River. Their barks, like a howling pack of lobo wolves, can be heard from one end of Astoria to the other. They are particularly irritating in Upper Town at the East Mooring Basin where hundreds of the sleek-furred sea mammals bask in the sun while they digest their ill-gotten meals of prime Columbia River salmon. Why do I say ill-gotten? Is that ill-gotten as in *stolen*? It certainly is.

The sea lions who are popularly misconstrued as "endangered" actually don't catch their fish on the fly. Sea lions covertly trail commercial fishing boats that leave the basin and wait by the nets until the hard-working commercial fishers net a salmon; then the sea lions move in and rip the fish from the nets — often damaging gear beyond repair — with their powerful lion-like jaws and claws. They devour their ill-gotten prey in a spasm of gluttony, ripping the fish apart and widely scattering salmon parts to the joy of seagulls who scavenge the scraps right before the eyes of the hapless fishermen.

Fishermen try to protect their nets with seal bombs — actually large firecrackers — which are only effective at short range and for a short time, and do little but cause the sea lion to move farther down the net to steal another fish.

Astoria sea lions are not *Steller Sea Lions*, a protected species, but *California Sea Lions*, who much like other invaders from the south have overpopulated mightily in the Northwest — devouring natural resources and spreading their waste over the public docks.

Do I advocate killing these beasts? No, of course not. That would be against the law and inhumane — and my proofreader says she "loves those little critters" — so I would not advocate harming a hair on their furry pelts. Also, being a law abiding type I would never promote breaking the law. As is the post-modern day popular maxim — the 21st century is the rule of law and not of the people: and the law is written by people who interpret the Constitution as they wish, not as the framers intended.

But I digress...

I would rather cut loose for a moment with an immodest proposal. I propose that a Sea Lion Theme Park be established in Astoria for the good of the sea lions and general populace alike. The East Mooring Basin — already rendered virtually unusable for any other function than sea lion viewing by sea lions lounging about the docks and rocks — could with a little renovation be converted into a world class theme park that would generate income, create jobs and solve the dilemma of sea lions consuming true endangered species. At present we have a protected species devouring endangered species — a very bad situation.

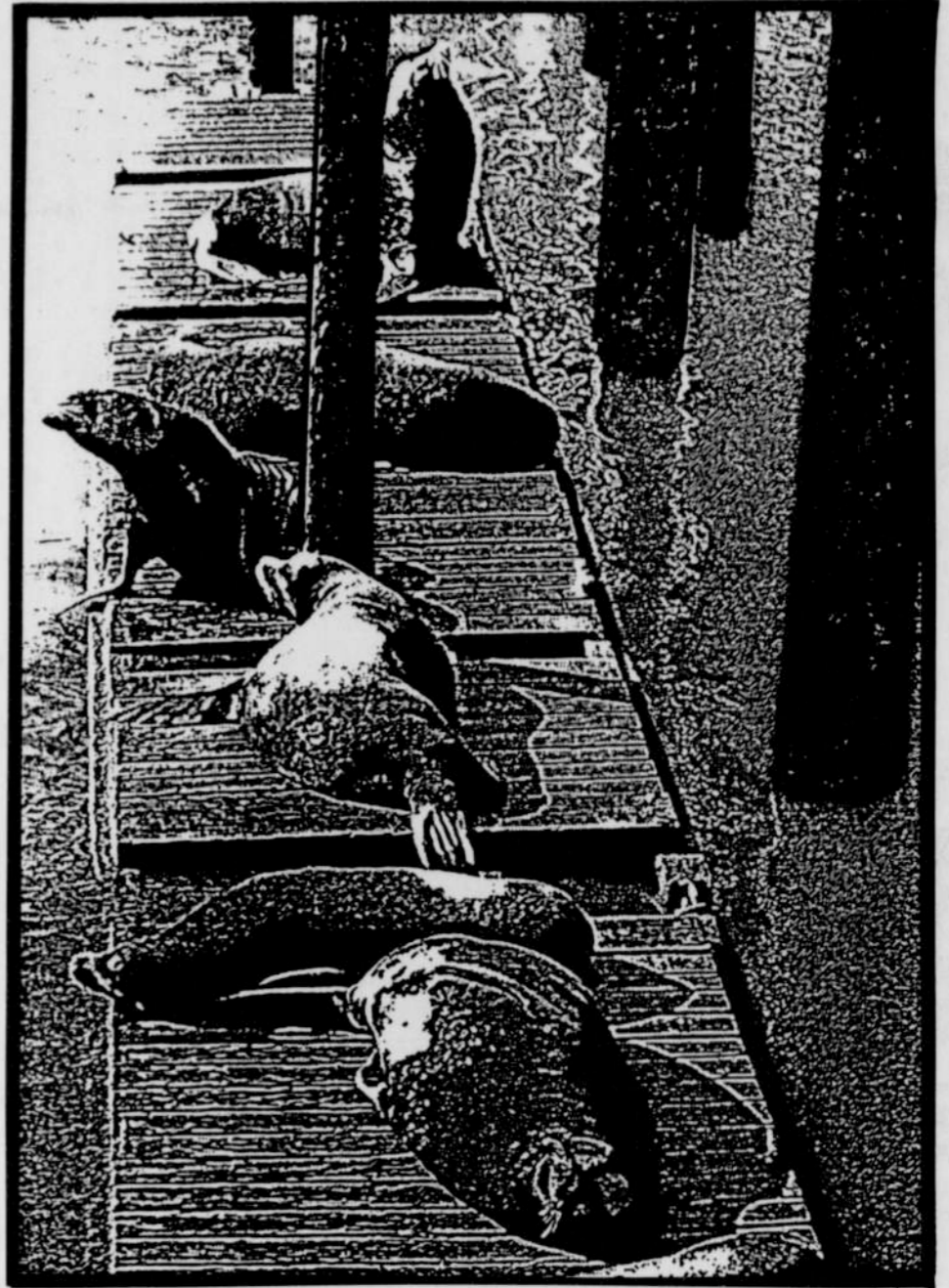
The advantages of a sea lion theme park are manifold. First of all, with a small change the East Mooring Basin could be turned into an enclosure that would hold the beasts. Bulwarks would be needed to tower above the present rookery which would contain sea lions and tourists alike. Slick concrete walls would suffice, probably about ten feet high. Lock-like gates would be needed at either end for entrance and egress.

Covered bleachers would be built shoreside where the old George & Barker Receiving Station once received millions of pounds of salmon deliveries from Columbia River gillnetters, and a gift shop would be built on what was once the Great Fish Camp of the Clatsop Indians. People who could prove they had an ancestor who had seen a Clatsop Indian or traveled to visit a grave of a Clatsop Indian would be designated as honorary Clatsops and could work in the gift shop dressed in traditional tribal garb on the condition they flatten the heads of their newborn with a cedar slat attached to the babies' foreheads as was traditional and resulted in the unique flathead look for which the tribe deservedly garnered much fame.

Sea lions trapped in the "zoo" — or to be politically correct, the Sea Lion Observation Area — would be fed hatchery salmon carcasses packaged much like McDonald's fries and sold to tourists, who would pay a nominal \$2 entry fee with children under 12 admitted free. By feeding the sea lions tourists could participate in interspecies interaction. The sea lions might learn to do tricks like the seals at the Seaside Aquarium and become functioning members of society by providing entertainment revenue for the state (which desperately needs any kind of revenue).

When sea lions died from job related diseases such as arteriosclerosis, heart failure or diabetes, job-ops for marine veterinarians would be created here, and a sea lion veterinary research hospital would be a welcome addition to Astoria's currently shaky economic base. Some sea lions, those with good genes, would grow to great age and obtain a Buddha-like quality before passing on. The deceased sea lions would be rendered by the honorary Clatsop Indians into dogfood, the bones and fangs would be used for carving, and the pelts for coats and sea lion shaped purses and bags decorated by sea lion ivory. No waste here.

Many jobs would be provided for college types who had degrees in biology who could study the animals and their language, and we could have a Sea Lion Interpretive Center holding classes in the culture and language of sea lions.



PHOTOGRAPH BY MARV BONDAROWICZ

As the sea lion population grows it would soon be larger than the confines of the East Mooring Basin theme park. Young rogue males could be de-sexed and leased to other harbors, conveniently out of Astoria's tourist marketing area, and royalties collected on proceeds reaped from other communities' sea lion theme parks.

This proposal, which I confess to be my idea entirely, would have many economic benefits for the Astoria community. The state of Oregon, instead of selling hatchery salmon directly back into the food chain in competition with private industry — driving prices down into the sewer — would make so much money from sea lion salmon consumption sales as well as a tax on admission, that the tax on salmon caught in state waters could be removed which would make Oregon's high quality salmon competitive with untaxed Canadian, Norwegian and Chilean imported salmon in today's "free" market economy.

It is apparent to me that the time has come for new thinking about sea lions. We should stop allowing them to infest our waterways and disrupt our economy and make them pay their way. The only other alternative is extinction, which is certainly not humane or in the spirit of the *Environmental Protection Act*. I certainly don't want sea lions to go the way of the Passenger Pigeon.

Danton Thorne (aka Mike Strom) is a writer, artist and salmon gillnet fisherman.

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