

Hungry Minds

To dine with the best company
To dine alone is impossible
To dine with my brilliant,
Audacious and totally remarkable
Friend is the best company.
—Voltaire

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What Will It Take?

The Nestucca River runs out of the hills where it originates in the Coast Range, a rugged, over-logged stretch of hills that sits along the northern quadrant of Oregon between the Willamette Valley and the sea. Some folks have called the Coast Range a "sacrifice zone" for the timber industry, yet even so the area still contains some magnificent scenery, trees and waterways that still allow salmon to make their way home to familiar spawning grounds year after year. Alarmed about dropping fish populations and dwindling natural habitat, environmentalists and sportspeople have overseen the enforcement of some regulations that have curtailed logging and fishing in the area. Yet others see this area as a potential tourist mecca, or as the ground on which dollars for a weak local economy may be generated. The Nestucca is only one of the numerous rivers that flow out of the Coast Range along this stretch of Oregon, but it is one of the larger, and it is especially popular for its sport fishing and natural beauty.

Several years ago, Tillamook County and the U.S. Department of Transportation got together around a road project that would rebuild and widen a piece of roadway that runs along the Nestucca River east of the tiny community of Beaver, into the Siuslaw National Forest, deep in the Coast Range hills. The funds would come in the form of a grant to the county to improve local roads which lead into national forest land. Little was said about the proposed project, although some folks in the area opposed it from the onset. Their protests seemed to fall on deaf ears. The project was to involve reconstruction of approximately seven and a half miles of roadway; the cost of the project was estimated at some 8.4 million dollars.

The work would be completed in two phases. In the summer of 1993, despite lawsuits pending and environmental impact questions unresolved, the first phase of the project was begun on a stretch between ten and fourteen miles east of Beaver. At this point, with that piece still not completed, numerous problems have been encountered, and all the money is spent.

The Tillamook County Commissioners want to make this winding scenic byway into a big-time highway across the mountains. If three unfinished miles have cost over eight million dollars, not to mention the devastation to the hills and river, what do they think another forty or so miles will mean?

In 1992, a friend and I purchased a tract of land which fronts along the Nestucca River for approximately a thousand yards at the beginning of the proposed project site. We were never informed about the road construction plans, so the letter suggesting that survey crews would be in the area came as a surprise, not quite so surprising, unfortunately, came the realization that even though the letter had stated

that permission would be asked before entering our property, nothing of the sort took place. The following was my reaction the morning last August when that event took place: "Who do you think you are, crashing in like this with machetes, theodolites and your funny-colored plastic ribbon?" "Why, we're with the government, ma'am." Maybe that explanation was supposed to provide a viable excuse for whatever mayhem they wanted to create. "Don't know why anyone hasn't talked with you; the county should have." "Your letter said someone from your outfit would ask permission to enter our property. Well, here you are on it, and nobody asked." "Well, uh, they should have. We're just doin' our job. This is only a proposal, anyway, somebody'll be out to negotiate later, about buying the land and all." "I see. Well maybe I'll just go give somebody a call in the meantime. The guy who signed that letter, he anybody you know?" "Oh yeah, that's a good idea, ma'am; they've got it all up there. Somebody up there'll answer all your questions, just give 'em a call!"

Does this peaceful river valley really need a fancier, wider road through it? Somebody "up there" has already decided it does. When you ask them "why?" they come up with a lot of nebulous explanations about logging traffic in the past (present?), helping out with county funds, added traffic. Never mind that there are seven winding substandard miles before one even gets to this proposed project, and on beyond, nothing but forest service roads leading into the hills to towns forty miles away. And when will they stop? The questions only generate rhetoric, no answers.

The real insult comes when nobody asks. Nobody asked those of us who live up here if we wanted this road to be rebuilt. Nobody asked if they could tromp around on our land over there and stick stakes all over it with blue and white and orange ribbons on them. Nobody asked us if we want to sell that property over there, the piece we just bought and got surveyed and recorded less than a year ago, the part that buffers the river and our place from the existing road with its noise and high-speed trucks rumbly up and down to the first phase of the blasted road project four miles upstream.

What is it they presume, anyway, riding around in their government owned wagons? That the land is theirs to use as they please? And I, because I have a deed registered in some courthouse someplace, presume it's mine. The river just keeps flowing on by, and only she knows the real truth.

I guess I didn't feel like being so tough, or I would have told that government survey crew to get off my property until somebody asked permission and gave me a good enough reason for needing to be there. Control. Just a game of control. That tacti might have worked for a minute or two, and made me feel vaguely powerful in the face of a behemoth that doesn't think much about

the river's truth or mine, just that somebody said some bucks should be thrown this way and these guys were given a job assignment, and to get their paychecks they're doing it. That's their truth. If the river gets full of silt and stops flowing, or the salmon stop coming up it to spawn, who knows what difference it will make in their private hearts at night, when they face the wall with just themselves and the dark?

The state owns the road, they say, and well, the state says it owns the river too. I only "own" up to the high water mark if it's considered navigable, and it doesn't seem to matter that only a white water raft would dare to take on these rocky shoals. At one time, fifty years or so ago, before they logged out all the forest up above, drying out the land and devastating many of the feeder streams along the way, folks say it was. Must have been a sight to behold back then! By most standards it's one of the most picturesque rivers around today, except where the upriver project has dug out streambeds and caused washes that made the river run red in the middle of the driest month of the year.

And if the State owns the road, and the State owns the river, which one comes first, in the scheme of things? Would they sacrifice this beautiful, pristine river, the trees alongside her, the earth that bounds her, for a bigger highway, seven miles of brand-new road in the middle of the woods, to help the city folks drive faster for a little while on their way to fish and litter and leave campfires smoldering? Don't get me wrong, I've been one of those, wanting as bad as the next person to find some peace and quiet in one of those National Forest campgrounds. Now I live here. But even back then, I never really minded driving over rough roads or traveling a little more slowly to get to those spots; much nicer to see the river left undisturbed once I got there.

Not like the mess up the road! Looks like a war zone up there, like tanks and artillery have been blasting away at the landscape for months, then earthmovers brought in, trying to cover up the chaos. Then they have the audacity to spray putrid green stuff all over the reddish-black soil; "instant grass", to pretend the whole thing won't wash away the first time it rains. Streambeds have been disrupted, huge chunks of embankment carved out and moved, no living thing has been left undisturbed, bugs, people and all; and they still haven't stopped the hillside from sliding down the way it has for eons, right across their fancy new roadbed. Some of the folks up there made a fuss to start with, but it didn't stop the machines from coming in and doing it anyway. Other folks, whoever they may be, think the road project brings them bucks, I suppose, although nobody that I can tell is really owning up to much. Any way you cut it, the river doesn't win.

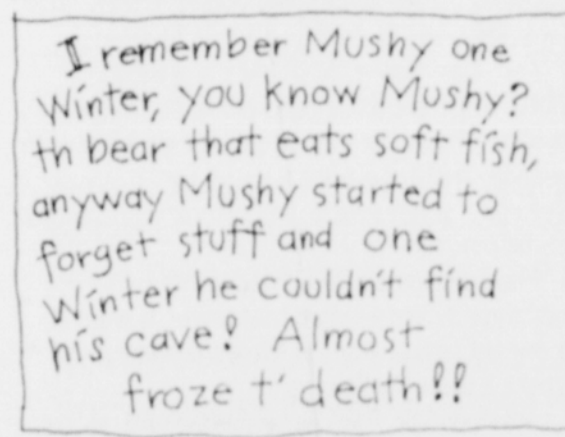
When my kids were small, we used to read a book about a tree that loved a little boy, and the little boy who thought he loved the tree, but the little boy just kept going to the tree and asking for more and more until one day he came and there was nothing left but a broad stump for the then-old-man-little boy to sit on and think about all he'd lost. Any guesses which one knew the most about the real meaning of the word Love? Trees, and rivers, just give and give to all the little boys who come and ask for one more favor, laboring under the delusion that they can make the trees and rivers come back the same as they were before all the asking started. Just like you can't plant an old-growth forest and make it come back, you sure as heck can't make a river run after you've plundered and polluted, maimed and buried her.

The river keeps on giving and giving, a lesson in the kind of Love we all need to know a good deal more about. But still we can't get the message. Will we grow up and see before the river is gone and all we have is an empty bed of rocks to sit beside and tell our children and grandchildren about? Ah, the grand times we had here! How pretty the water looked when the sunlight shone just so! And the fish that swam here once, came home to lay their eggs so new ones could leave and return year after year! The lush ferns that used grow along her banks where the water lapped gently against the rocks!

What will it take? I write this and choke back a large lump that rises in my chest, sits there, and pushes up the tears that wait just behind my eyes. The grief about what we're doing to the land, the trees, the rivers, all over this earth, is so overwhelming that it mostly goes denied. Who wants to feel it? If everybody did, there'd be so much weeping and raging going on all around there'd be no time to get the work done. Those fellows on that survey crew, do they ever get a wave of it, looking up from the numbers in their scopes and charts? Or what about the workmen up above, wielding their huge machines while they rearrange the landscape in irreversible ways, a landscape that was perfectly splendid before they came? I'd like to think maybe some of them do. The one fellow said, "We're lucky. We get to leave before the Bad Boys move in." (It's not entirely clear which ones he was referring to.) But if any of them feel it, it's not enough to stop them. Government jobs, and contracts, are plums these days. Road construction pays well too.

What will it take?

Joyce L. Cochran
Blaine, Oregon
Fall 1993



Something to Preserve

In that mad and broken time we landed on this shore, my white trash cousins, ancestors of Gary Gilmore, James Watt, Jim Jones, Diamond Jim, a bloated tornado on that eastern seaboard. We ripped this virgin girl with smallpox, liquor, the plow, the cotton gin, the handgun -- my ancestors. Flea market knights and barons of bathtub gin -- we split forest gods into toothpicks and sold you slum in dusty neon carnivals you never knew you wanted. My Grand Da plundered paper and lost it all long before I saw life, and my uncles, fighting for the freedom to commit ruination, the only god they bowed to.

And now, now, after the smoke has cleared, the chips have fallen, and the babies, they're stillborn, now, when the only smiles are those of cadavers in the woods, now, when I must remember my obligation to love, I stand on this far-off western shore, close to the water, the last place to rip apart and alchemize into bank account securities, now, at last, what's left of a tired and rapacious seed turns once to stare, stupid and ashamed, to search, dull and terrified, to look, praying, for something there behind me to preserve.

-- Bill Clunie

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It's better to debate a question without settling it than to settle a question without debating it.
Joseph Joubert

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