



One could make a good case, and many have, that history will call our time the Age of Idiocy.

Given a dark sense of humor and an even superficial grasp of the past, it's possible to muster from this distinction a perverse sort of pride. During the long run of humanity's slapstick little comedy on the planet, competition between truly stupid episodes has been nothing if not keen.

The Children's Crusade comes to mind. And Manifest Destiny. And the notion that witches, when hogtied and pitched into a pond, would float.

Forrest Gump was not the first to point out that stupid is as stupid does.

But the stupid is not always idiotic. To qualify as an idiot act, being dimwitted isn't enough. Ignorance, if not bliss, can at least be charming. Idiocy is another matter. For an act to be idiotic, those performing it must know better and go ahead anyway. Idiocy is the sum of stupidity, indifference, and blind contempt. In full flower, it's an impressive force.

As you may or may not have heard, the United States Navy recently agreed to halt bombing exercises in and around a marine sanctuary off the Olympic Peninsula. The ceasefire will give them time to consult federal "fish experts" about the possible negative effects involved in pattern bombing salmon runs.

Sure, it sounds farfetched, but you just never know.

A spokesperson for the National Marine Fisheries Service acknowledged that "a potential to damage chinook salmon and other protected species migrating to the Snake River" might follow from dropping 500 lb. cluster bombs on their migratory route.

Hi, we're from the government and we're here to annihilate you.

Fish huggers, small surprise, see

At the risk of beating a dead horse, we can't help seeing a little irony in the timing. In June of 1982, while one branch of the government was unleashing high-tech mayhem and destruction upon the region's totem fish, several other branches were arresting River People for catching a few of the shell shocked survivors.

It's hard to imagine a Big Picture in which this makes sense.

Lest we forget, the late David Sohappy, a Yakama priest, did hard time in the federal slammer. In a just and less idiotic world, he'd be followed by scores of pilots, an admiral or two, the Secretary of the Navy, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Shall we all, once again, hold our breath?

strafing endangered species as an act of unblemished insanity. Everyone has an opinion. To the military mind, air strikes might be just what's needed to toughen up the salmon for the real challenge: leaping forty storey dams.

Looking for a few good fish, that sort of thing

Anyway, idiotic as it might sound in the face of vanishing salmon runs, attack aircraft from Whidbey Island Naval Air Station have been blowing up the ocean off Gray's Harbor for at least fifteen years. Fortunately, no damage was done.

"At this point," a government spokesperson was quick to calm concern for the nearly extinct, "the Navy has reported no evidence whatsoever of fish kill."

Talk about luck.

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"What would you have done?" That was the question he asked after he'd told me the story didn't really have an answer. He's a farmer, 63 years old. In 1983, after 30 years, he paid off the mortgage on his farm. He and his wife are completely dependent on income from the fruit, berries and livestock they produce.

A while back he read an article in the newspaper Sunday supplement about a rare, perhaps endangered plant found along the Oregon coast.

Darlingtonia. Jacob's Pulpit, sometimes called the "Cobra Plant" because of its shape. It looked familiar to him. That afternoon he walked to a small low spot in the middle of his cherry orchard. Less than an acre, it is always damp from a seep in the hillside. He was right. The damp ground supported dozens of Darlingtonia.

He thought about a report he'd seen on television about this rancher in the southwest. It had been discovered that this rancher had an endangered snail living in a pond on his land. Eventually, in order to use any of the land around the pond, he had to fence it off at his own expense. He was also forbidden to use any pesticides within a half mile of the area.

The cherry orchard earnings are the largest part of my friend's income. He walked back to the barn. He filled a spraycan with herbicide. He went back and killed every Darlingtonia. He's checked since to see that none have survived.

"If they were declared endangered," he said, "they might have done me like they did that fellow with the snails."

"What if they wouldn't let me spray my cherries? The cherry processors have a zero tolerance policy on worms. One worm in one cherry and they refuse the whole crop. That's one, one single worm."

"That isn't all. I'd have still had to pay property tax on the land I couldn't use. They won't let you set it off into a separate tax lot, so if you don't pay taxes on it the county takes your whole farm. I'm sixty three. I just couldn't take the chance. What would you have done?"

I think the one lesson I have learned is that there is no substitute for paying attention.
Diane Sawyer

"He didn't say 'al dente,' did he?"

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