

MORE TALES FROM THE WORLD OF WILDLIFE

We last heard from Washington State Fish and Wildlife enforcement agent Mike Mercer during the mayhem of Elk season in the foothills of Mt. St. Helens. At that time, we discovered that deer and Elk have somehow adapted well to industrial forest land. We learned that fall is the time when all great killing comes to a head. We witnessed fair amounts of big game and even more men and women who wanted to kill something, some badly enough to do heinous crimes to satisfy the urge.

The opportunity to observe the wildlife enforcement process recently presented itself to me again. This time, efforts would be turned toward fishing activities on the Columbia River. A State jet boat would take agents Mercer, Bob Powell, Mark Hart, and me from Vancouver east to Multnomah Falls.

"We've taken the finest salmon stream in North America and turned it into a storm drain," Mike told me as we left for the patrol. As early as the turn of the century, we were warned that the salmon runs on the Columbia were in peril. Any moron with an ounce of foresight could have ascertained that the intensity with which we removed salmon from the Columbia River would be short lived. We now know that over fishing shares the blame for the salmon's demise with hydroelectric dams, logging, agriculture, and a multitude of bad regulation, or no regulation at all.

Sport fishing and the rod and reel have replaced commercial fishing and the gill net, but even sport fishing is now quite limited on the Columbia River. Still, many people seek the fish out. "Our job is centered on trying to protect something that doesn't exist," agent Mercer complains. He later admitted that the enforcement presence is, none-the-less, very important. Without it, poaching and fraudulence would be rampant on every bend in the river. Mike would like to be optimistic about the eventual fate of salmon in the Columbia River but maintains that we have finished them. Real solutions are not possible. It is not likely that the dams will be removed, that forests will replace tree farms, or that Hanford contaminants will not leach into the river. Instead, we will continue to squabble and compromise until the last great "June Hog" inches its way toward Idaho, only to find itself alone on a trek that once involved millions of its kind.

Unlike my last patrol with these agents, this day was calm and largely uneventful. Aside from having to retrieve a freshly written ticket that blew away in the transfer from agent to violator, the day presented no real challenges. Mark Hart captained the boat. Banter and personal slander echoed through the cabin of the boat as Bob Powell and Mike Mercer took shots at one another on a variety of fronts. When the green copy of a ticket whipped out of Mike's hands and landed in the river, Bob said that we should hurry to retrieve it before it sunk. "It won't sink, you idiot," Mike told him, "it's made of wood." A discussion then ensued about uniforms and foot attire. Mike noted, "These black military style boots are playing havoc with my gout, everything is form over function with this outfit." Bob had just returned from a doctor's check-up. Mike was particularly interested in Bob's experience with being probed for prostate cancer and repeatedly made inquiries about the process. Bob refused to lend details. "A person your age should have that done every other week," Mike told him.

The pilings that once supported huge fish wheels are scattered along the shores east of Prindle Island. Today, they make shelter for squaw fish, a bottom feeder that eats salmon and steelhead smolt. The Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) pays fishermen \$3.00 per squaw fish in an effort to expunge the species. There were as many people fishing for squaw fish on this day as there were fishing for sturgeon or steelhead trout. Perhaps people are concerned about the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) warnings that fish from the lower Columbia River have high concentrations of contaminants in them. Or, perhaps the prospects for fishing are simply too discouraging. At any rate, fishing is an ancient and powerful passion. Most serious fishermen are forced to spend more time and money to go to a place where fish still exist. Such places, of course, are themselves feeling the strains of popularity. Upon pondering these questions, Mike turned to the other wardens and said, "Oh well, you can live in a place where there's a little bit of wildlife, or you can move down town and be annoyed by the starlings shitting on your deck."

On returning west toward Vancouver the heat intensified and the river thickened with water skiers and sail boats. A jet ski shot across our bow shooting a ten foot rooster tail of water. "Damned motorized, Japanese water maggots," Mike exclaimed, "this whole place is turning into one vast beer commercial." Things cannot stay constant for ever. The Columbia's fate was sealed long ago. Most people seem immune to the changes that have stirred the river over the last century, stating that its metamorphosis is only the normal course of action. Perhaps so, but as Bruce Cockburn says, "the trouble with normal is it always gets worse." Many of us will never fondly or blindly accept the degradation of the places we hold in high regard.

Along the river, suburbia slithers deeper and deeper into the remnants of our woodlands and forested hills. Some forms of wildlife adapt. Some are pushed further out into what remains of their habitat. Others, in time, simply cease to exist. I accompanied Mike on a cougar complaint later in the day. East and north of Woodland, we meandered through the former wilds, finding small subdivisions nestled in the hill tops and river bottoms. The complaint included terrifying accounts of tattered garbage cans and piles of feathers from a neighbor's turkey pen. Earlier this year, Mike was roused from the dinner table to respond to a call about a cougar near Vancouver Mall, a place that is surrounded by suburbia. The cougar was darted, collared, and released in the Willapa Hills. These are the kinds of conditions that wildlife agents face today; wildlife conflicting with human activity. We seem to have little use for most wildlife species, until such time that they are nearly extirpated. Mike sees this dilemma as potentially lethal for his job. Human activity is everywhere and wildlife is going away. Soon there may be no conflicts to mitigate. The job will be left to park rangers who will patrol fenced roadways, keeping the camera wielding crowds from throwing popcorn at the marmots.

As we approached the dock at Washougal, I wondered how the Columbia River would be regarded today had we made more intelligent choices regarding its use. The scenario is almost too ridiculous to be given serious thought, but most people who have fond memories of the Columbia River have a historical perspective. "Finding a solution is futile," Mike told me about the salmon's plight, "wait until there's no fish and then over react in a style that only the government could come up with. My father lived in the best time," Mike went on, "but he didn't know it. This is, of course, only one person's view but as far as the Columbia River is concerned, Mike appears to be correct. The mighty Columbia "rolls on" in a way that nature no longer dictates. The salmon's condition is simply indicative of the river's health and should not be surprising to any of us.

Obviously, everything depends upon your perspective. "Preservationists are the minority," Mike told me, hoping that I would be irritated, "they see things differently but always with a perspective that spans time." Indeed. But they have historically been ineffective with their causes. Only when problems become so bad that even the blind can see them do we react. A more common perspective has forged the Columbia's state of being. It was immortalized by folksinger Woody Guthrie in 1941:

You jus' watch this river'n pretty soon
E-everybody's gonna be changin' their
tune...
That big Grand Coulee 'n Bonneville Dam'll
Build a thousand factories f'r Uncle Sam...
Roll on, Columbia, roll on.
Roll on, Columbia, roll on.
Your power is turning the darkness to dawn,
Roll on, Columbia, roll on.

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