



Deep summer, the dog days, the time of the year when most people see the beach. Welcome back. The summer beach is a different beach than we see during the rest of the year; even the locals find themselves in a new landscape. High pressure systems now sit swirling offshore, bringing an occasional sunny day. Winds pull hard out of the north; the south winds of winter do an about-face spin. Sculpted anew in this seasonal choreography, dunes and less imposing ripples of sand abruptly change directions, migrating slowly southward after their plodding winter migration towards the north. Aprons of dry sand leave long southward streaks on the leeward side of windbreak rocks and logs, artfully arranged arcs and curves, tossed there, grain by grain, in the instantaneous drop in wind velocity, the confused pathways of turbulent air that hang just downwind from such an obstacle. Nearby, rock-bound mussel beds hiss and crackle with stressed out invertebrates in the hot, low-tide exposure. An occasional gust of dry east wind litters the beach with myriad forest insects.

Up there, in the background, along the tops of the big headland ridges -- Tillamook Head, Cape Falcon, and their kin -- lenses of thick gray clouds hang and tumble. Here, moist ocean air blown downshore bounces into the sides of headlands, and then abruptly rises over a thousand feet to breach these peaks; air pressure is lower there, at the headland tops, and wet air condenses into a dense haze of tiny damp droplets, spinning and falling. Spilling over the headlands' tops, the air drops again, returning to the higher air pressure of the coastal lowlands. As quickly as the moisture had condensed into clouds on its way up, the air's moisture returns to clear, gassy nothingness on the way down. For days at a time, these clouds cling to the headland peaks, momentarily condensing and dispersing, tumbling, rolling, in perpetual and gentle motion. The ground is damp up there, in the muted gray light, under a perpetual summer drizzle, fostering wet cloud forests of dripping ferns, fluorescent green mosses, lichens and liverworts clinging to rocks and wooden rot and the trunks of trees. Eagles rest there, after an occasional low and cursory sweep through the dense, bristling, rock-top nesting colonies of murre and pigeon guillemots, looking to make a summertime lunch of the sick or the lame. Fledgling songbirds harass their parents for a buggy meal in the indistinct, mist-concealed overhead branches.

If there is any one thing that changes the look of the summertime beach, however, it is the people. People everywhere, arriving from distant places by Land Cruisers, Land Rovers, Land Destroyers, luxury cars, sports cars, busses, motorcycles, vast lumbering Recreational Vehicles, and any number of other gasoline-powered contraptions.

Their numbers increase every year. And while their numbers have changed, so too have their origins. Until recently, the Oregon coast was a much funkier backwater, a subdued place sometimes visited by the subdued people of the Willamette Valley, a place seldom visited by tourists from afar. Today, the coast has been placed under the full admiring scrutiny of the tourist gaze. Our visitors include an increasingly diverse cast of characters: occasionally, there are tourists from distant states and countries, but the biggest changes in the summertime social landscape manifest the changing demographic dynamics of the region as a whole. The big cities just beyond the mountains are now awash in recent regional immigrants, arriving from California and points east: software engineers, producers of high tech gizmos, dot-com entrepreneurs, and all of the retail workers, bankers, planners, lawyers, and builders that help keep this genteel new Northwest running. Skilled people, by and large an urban people, people who have spent quality time on beaches in other, more densely settled parts of the country.

They bring their remembrances of the beaches past to this part of the world. Looking out over the Oregon beaches, one can see the imprints of this inheritance on the summertime landscape. I speak mostly of what one might call "proxemic behavior" -- the culturally-influenced differences in the ways that people place themselves relative to (and in the proximity of) other people, places, and things. In certain parts of the world, for example, it is considered good form to stand very close when talking to strangers, so that you can feel (and smell) their breath as they speak.

In the United States, this kind of behavior can cause people to back away slowly, call Security, or seek legal counsel. Off and on during the late 20th century, studies of proxemic behavior became popular in the fields of psychology, sociology, anthropology, and architecture. Authors in these fields reveled in the observation that, the further west one went in this country, the more likely people were to build their houses far apart within the wide-open spaces, to stand at a considerable distance when speaking, or sit as far as possible from other people when choosing a seat at the theater. In the west, the best neighbors were neither seen or heard; they were free to do their own thing,

so long as they didn't do it in any way that might affect our space. Supposedly, the academics hinted, this all illuminated some extreme western manifestation of standard-issue American individualism. The changes of the last few decades have jumbled up this tidy generalization, as the differences between regions have been torn asunder by mass communications and mass migrations.

Today, on the beach, we see very different proxemic behavior that was the case only ten years ago. Formerly, people tended to walk down the beach, sit as far from one another as possible, and only crowd together in large groups if there was a special event (e.g., a Crab Festival) or something very interesting that had floated in on the previous tide (e.g., something very big and dead). Large concentrations of "beach gear" -- the assorted towels and umbrellas and vinyl windblocks and stereos and beachballs and other multi-colored paraphernalia -- were relatively rare. Today, well-accessorized groups of beach-sitters tend to loiter in large concentrations, often only a few feet from an adjacent parking lot, often sitting so close to one another that they could reach out and touch the stranger on the blanket beside them, if they were into that kind of thing. This, even as the beaches a short distance away remain relatively empty and uncrowded.

Not long ago, such behavior would have drawn attention: beachcombing locals would have peered out from behind distant logs in dazed bewilderment; reporters from some little newspaper or another might have gathered to determine if this gathering signaled an accident, a new cult, or some sort of peculiar, slow-motion performance art; police might inquire if these people had gotten the proper City permits for, well, whatever it is that these people are doing. But this is an impromptu gathering. It is a gathering of strangers. It signals nothing more than the fact that these people share some basic assumptions about how they are to place themselves upon beaches, and place themselves relative to one-another. Rather than proximity indicating a heightened degree of intimacy between these people -- signaling that they are family or friends, who are ordinarily welcomed into Americans' "personal space" -- this reflects a sort of anonymous, eye-contact-avoiding, herd-bound behavior that is fostered by the jam-packed impersonal spaces of large urban places and the tempo of life at the busy beaches nearby. (Some Oregon coast tourists now even arrive hours in advance to lay out their gear, to visibly "stake out their spot" in the most heavily used sections of the beach as one would make a reservation in a restaurant, place bright orange cones in a parking space, or lay a coat over 'taken' seats in a movie theater. This too is very different.)

All of this is not necessarily better or worse than the old ways, the ways of the Old-Time Oregon Coast Individualist-Rustic®, really, it is just very very different. I recall how strange it seemed at first: I recall seeing, perhaps only eight years ago, a person park their car in a large parking lot adjacent to the beach, walk a few feet, drop all of their belongings, and plop down directly in the first patch of sand in front of the beach access trail, where groups of people continued to walk to and fro. This was astonishing; at first, I thought that they might be in distress, that I might need to summon medical assistance.

No one would sit in such a busy place! He must have overexerted himself carrying his beach gear! The poor guy -- no beach umbrella, not even the biggest and most colorful one, is worth a heart attack! But slowly it became clear: this was where he wanted to sit, this was an intentional beaching. No indeed, this was nothing to be concerned about. I have come to learn and accept that this is how they do it in other, more crowded parts of the country. Somewhere, this is considered perfectly normal behavior. And increasingly it is considered normal here. Increasingly, our own time-honored desire to be away from the pack might strike people as peculiar, anti-social, indicative of deeper personal issues. Let us bear this in mind. Cross-cultural differences exist even within "American culture," among people who superficially appear the same.

As we increasingly find ourselves crammed together, we must learn to play nice at the beach and get along with others, no matter how odd they might first seem. Everything on the land changes, including its human occupants. Summertime at the beach reminds us of this. More so every year. Whether you are out on some wind-swept beach by yourself, or sunning comfortably with the herd, may you enjoy yourself. May you experience little more than minor social disorientation in this ever-changing landscape, this oceanside beach, in these deepest depths of summertime.

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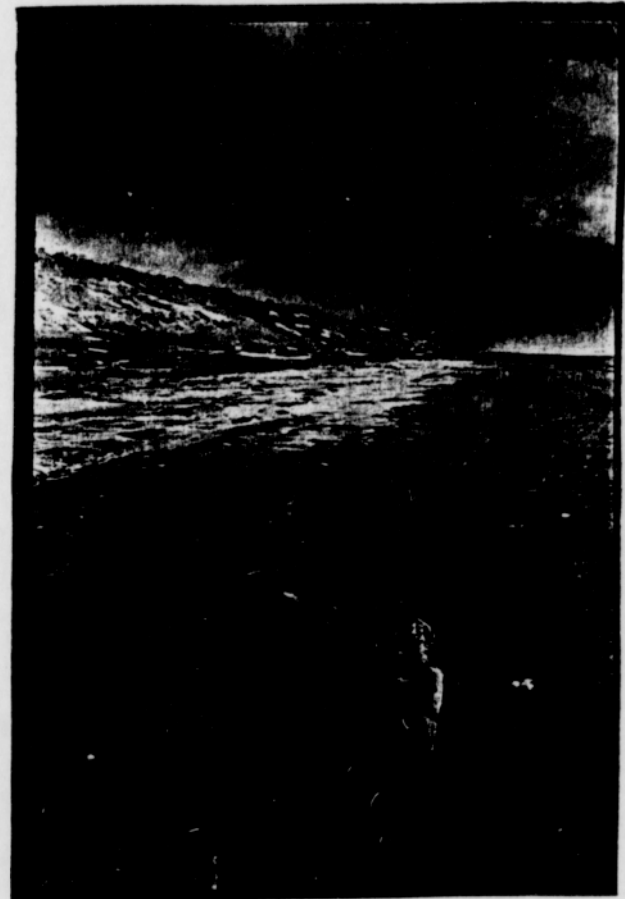
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The Return of the Saber Toothed Salmon

by H. B. Lloyd

Long ago in what we call the Columbia River, there lived a species of Salmon that were over six feet long and weighed hundreds of pounds and had large protruding teeth that were used to fight off predators like giant sharks in the ocean and massive grizzlies in the rivers. But the river and the sea and the land and the times changed and the salmon changed with them. New predators appeared and they swept the rivers and the sea with nets and blocked the rivers with dams and they poisoned the water and the salmon almost died. The salmon knew that they must fight back and they gathered in the deepest part of the sea and pondered what to do. There were few left and most of those present were not truly wild, they had been raised by people and lacked the wisdom of the wild. The oldest of the oldest family of salmon explained to the others that there was only one hope, only one hero who could fight back, the last of the Saber Toothed Salmon. She was rarely seen since she quit migrating centuries ago, when the Columbia changed its course and she lost her way and returned to the sea without spawning. It was decided that a young salmon would be sent to find her and lead her back up the river, where she could finally find her place and spawn. The task fell to the smallest, youngest, gentlest and smartest of the salmon raised by the people. He had a fresh memory of the river and knew the dangers.

The ascent started in early winter, to take advantage of the weather that keeps most of the fishing fleets in harbor and the water running fast and cold. The old saber tooth had no problems with the nets that were out in the mouth of the river, she either ripped them to shreds or pulled the boats under. The taste of the water seemed to cause her the most trouble, her skin started looking soft and her mouth with its massive tusks was snapped shut. The first dam had a relatively simple fish ladder, and with the young male's guidance she managed to navigate and destroy it at the same time. She could feel her eggs inside coming alive after centuries. After the second dam had been disabled the people began to track them and tried to stop them but they could not be stopped. With the small male safely inside her mouth she would smash into the giant generator fans, ripping their blades and freeing the water. When they reached the far side of the final dam she smashed into the massive concrete base again and again until a small crack appeared. She continued until the dam cracked and the water ran free. The water swept down the river, smashing into the next dam, and one by one they gave way to a wall of water that was a hundred feet high by the time it reached the ocean. She and the young male continued until she smelled something familiar in the water. The young male told her the people called this place Canada. In a quiet eddy under a huge log near where the water was running swift and clear she laid her eggs, and as she was dying the young male swam over and fertilized them. There will soon be a new kind of salmon on the old river, and they will be respected.



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