

FISHING FOR POETRY

Hear Rob Seitz at the Gathering

Friday: Seitz will emcee with fisherpoet Pat Dixon at the Columbian Theater Friday, helping close out the night with his own poetry at the end of the 9 p.m. set.

Saturday: On Saturday night, hear him read during the 7 p.m. set at the Wet Dog Cafe.

Photo by Alex Pajunas

Rob Seitz, second from left, prepares for his turn at the mic during a 2013 FisherPoets Gathering reading at the Voodoo Room. Seitz used to fish for crab, pink shrimp, albacore and groundfish out of Astoria; he now lives and fishes in Morro Bay, California, and is involved in efforts to maintain sustainable fishing.

ROB SEITZ LEARNED EARLY HOW TO FIND THE WORDS TO DESCRIBE HIS WORK

Rob Seitz became a fisherpoet at a tender age.

As a child, he lived with his four siblings and his parents in a single wide trailer near Fairbanks, Alaska. When temperatures dipped to 50 degrees below zero, his parents found something for the kids to do inside that small space.

“Dad used to make us memorize poetry to keep us occupied,” Seitz recalled.

They learned verses written by Robert Service and Edgar Allen Poe. “All the rhymers were easy to memorize,” Seitz said.

When he wasn’t reciting poetry, Seitz went fishing for salmon and halibut with his grandfather around Snug Harbor. Those days held a “lot of good memories.”

That’s how Seitz became a fisherpoet. He will make his 18th appearance at the FisherPoets Gathering Feb. 26 through 28 in Astoria.

In 1988, he became a full-time fisherman in Alaska, struggling for a decade with the disastrous effects of the 11 million gallon oil spill caused when the Exxon Valdez ran aground in Prince William Sound. Later, he worked out of Astoria, fishing for crab, pink shrimp, albacore and groundfish. But the fishing was always done on other peoples’ boats because he couldn’t afford to buy his own and still keep up the amount of

fishing required to eke out a living for his family.

In 2011, Seitz seized an opportunity to buy his own boat and became the only trawler on Morro Bay, California. The area’s fishery was undergoing a radical change.

After being declared a federal disaster when the fishing stock became nearly depleted, Morro Bay became the site of a collaboration between the fishers and the Nature Conservancy. More than 3.8 million acres of fish habitat along the California coast had come under federal protection; it was closed to trawlers and strict regulations were placed on other fishers. The conservancy bought boats and fishing permits from the local fishermen who saw no future there, and then the conservancy leased the boats and permits back to fishers who agreed to specific sustainable practices.

Seitz saw his chance to buy a 56-foot trawler from the conservancy, and he named it the “South Bay” after the area where he fishes. Seitz and his wife, Tiffani, also operate South Bay Wild, a fish processing and marketing company. They sell the groundfish they catch to local restaurants, co-ops and farmers markets.

The Seitzes also are deeply involved in efforts to maintain sustainable fishing and keep the industry economically viable for future fishers.

Net Meditation

To mend a hole in a net,
one must always begin, and end
on a three-bar.

The rest is just points,
and siders.

Pass the needle through the mesh,
Then around it to make the knot.

Then repeat, repeat, repeat.

Once your hands
know how to fix the holes,
your mind is free,
to go elsewhere.

But when the end of February comes around, Seitz heads to Astoria to recite his poetry and swap fishing stories with old friends at the FisherPoets Gathering.

“It has become a big part of my life,” Seitz said. “It’s almost like a family reunion.

“FisherPoets gives me a more creative way of thinking,” he added. “It reminds me

of what I love about fishing.”

He got into fishing, he said, because of its simplicity. “It’s not easy work, but it’s simple. Going out on the ocean is simple.”

Isn’t it dangerous?

“They say that, but if you drive to Seattle in the winter, it seems pretty dangerous to me,” Seitz replied. “A lot more people die on the freeway than by fishing.”

Author of a small book of poems entitled “2.5 gpf: Poems and Thoughts on Fishing and Life,” Seitz writes poetry to fill the monotonous hours on the trawler. The “gpf” refers to the volume of water in a half-filled deck bucket.

Poems rattle around in his head long before he writes them down. Seitz used to apply pen to scraps of paper to capture the words while on the boat; nowadays he writes the poems on a computer. But by then, the poem is fully formed.

“My whole approach was trying to document the life of a fisherman and help people understand what it was like,” Seitz said of his poem, “Net Meditation.”

The poem talks about the repetitious task of mending a fishing net, work that Seitz, who makes his own nets, enjoys.

“You can do it fast or try to make an art of it,” Seitz said.