

## CLOSE TO HOME

# A light in the forest

*This summer, former congressman Don Bonker returned to the ancient cedar grove he helped protect*

By DAVID CAMPICHE

It's common nowadays to proclaim that all politicians are corrupt. That they all are driven by a deep abiding lust for power.

I'm here to tell you that it isn't necessarily so. Don Bonker was a congressman who represented Washington state for eight terms. He served us with dignity and due diligence. In short, he cared.

Over three decades ago, Bonker was sitting at the breakfast table at the Shelburne Inn, which I own with my wife, Laurie. It was fall, and the porcinis were plump and luscious. Perhaps he ordered a wild mushroom omelet; he loves our Northwest delicacies. Already, just after first light, he was busy at work. He did not have a cell phone in those days, but he was fully engaged. Such is the life of a congressman: Duty calls.

Miles away, in the middle of Willapa Bay, a national treasure was — literally — on the chopping block. At the center of that undeveloped island was an ancient grove of Western red cedar, some trees dating back to the diaspora of Mesoamerican peoples. Much as it had for 5,000 years, the 274-acre stand lay pristine.

"Don," I said, disturbing his routine of early morning engagement. "I need a big favor." I could see the furrows on his handsome face tighten. Everyone needs a favor of a congressman. But he was kind and patient and responsive. I explained that Weyerhaeuser was going to fall an ancient forest. To my youthful mind, that would be a tragedy for the living and for future generations. So few of the trees remained, and this was over 30 years ago. Now, a sliver of all old growth remains. The great virgin forest



that had once covered most of the Pacific Northwest had seemed inexhaustible only generations before. Weyerhaeuser company owns a large chunk of the land mass of Pacific County, and a good portion of Clatsop, to boot.

That morning I presented the situation. I implored the congressman to take a boat ride with me to the island, where we could take a walk through the ancient cedar grove. I did very little else, but I learned a life lesson, a lesson about planting a tiny seed. It is vital to commit. It is vital to participate. It is vital to hope.

Congressmen and congresswomen are the busiest of people with schedules that would choke a bull elk. Bonker had startled me when he agreed to the trip, and thus began his fervent dedication to first save that grove, and, over time, to purchase the entire island, lock, stock and barrel, to establish a permanent refuge for the wildlife, the island and the people.



PHOTOS BY LAURIE ANDERSON

**Above:** Former U.S. Rep. Don Bonker and his granddaughter walk the Cedar Grove Trail on Long Island, named in his honor.

**Left:** Former Congressman Don Bonker, fourth from left, with his wife, Carolyn, third from left, recently brought their family to experience the Don Bonker Cedar Grove Trail on Long Island, which is part of the Willapa National Wildlife Refuge.



Former Congressman Don Bonker, his wife, Carolyn, and Willapa National Wildlife Refuge Director Jackie Ferrier enjoy a front row seat aboard their jet boat as it courses through Lewis Slough on Long Island in Willapa Bay.

to the island, I brought along a substantial picnic lunch. He remembered that in detail.

Today, Laurie, my partner for nearly 40 years, baked loaves of her sourdough artisan bread and assembled a parcel of mouth-watering sandwiches. We cobbled together both a pasta and a potato salad, lacing them with herbs

and spices. We gathered fruit and brewed a large pot of black coffee. Thus armed, we descended on the island. It offered us its lush primal best, like an old friend at a wilderness rendezvous.

Yes, much of Long Island was logged, once or twice, in the last

This year, in late July, the former congressman returned to the Shelburne Inn with his entire family. There was the first reunion in 18 years for this lovely and exceptional family. A major objective of the reunion was to return to Long Island and for Bonker to walk with his young granddaughters, his two children and their spouses, and with Carolyn, his exceptional and lovely wife — to stroll through this unblemished cathedral of giant trees.

Jackie Ferrier, director of the Willapa National Wildlife Refuge, dropped everything on her busy schedule and organized the trip. As I've stated in earlier columns, the woman is a whirlwind of dedication and efficiency. Ferrier plants seeds. And all of us with a lust for wilderness owe her big time. At this moment she is pursuing a move that would place the refuge headquarters on the south end of the Long Beach Peninsula. And that would be a tremendous asset for our community.

The first time I escorted Bonker

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