

SCRATCHPAD

Fisherpoets ask how to make people care about the environment

By **ERICK BENDEL**
COAST WEEKEND

Poems, stories and personal essays presented at the annual FisherPoets Gathering often ask: How can humans live in balance with the natural world, what do we lose when we don't, and how do we communicate this message in a society running on self-interest and short attention spans?

I talked about this over coffee at The Logger Restaurant with Billie Delaney, a commercial fisherman who lives in Brownsmead, the day after she gave her

final performance at last weekend's Astoria event. Fishermen who, like Delaney, work in Bristol Bay, Alaska, are heavily represented at FisherPoets. Some sported buttons opposing the Pebble Mine, the proposed mineral extraction operation that critics believe would endanger fish populations in the Bay region.

To get people to understand possible threats posed by large-scale projects like the Pebble Mine, awareness-raising groups often focus on the things people interact with — the sock-eye salmon they eat, or the native tribes they admire — that may

be harmed. (By some quirk of human psychology, people have trouble getting activated around the need to defend natural formations like river bars and watersheds, she said.)


Delaney said organizations often resort to using “charismatic megafauna” — whales, bears, seals and other cuddly creatures — as mascots or symbols to make environmental issues seem real and urgent. But the starving polar bear whose pathetic, bony image breaks our hearts is only dying because the animals it eats are dying, a pattern that rumbles through the food web.

It would be nice, in Delaney's view, to be able to have an intelligent public dialogue that accounts for the complexity of these issues without relying solely on cheap emotional appeals. The disappearance, for example, of krill, a life form essential to the diet of many Antarctic animals, tends not to inspire strong feelings, but it is a big deal nonetheless.

“It's really hard for people to be like, ‘We gotta save these krill!’ because nobody cares about krill,” she said.

Remember that grieving killer whale who carried her dead calf

for 17 days off the coast of Canada and the Northwestern U.S. last summer? That sort of painful, high-profile incident takes place against a backdrop of interlocking factors, from the overfishing of orcas' food supply to disturbances and pollution caused by putting urban infrastructure on natural waterways.

Just getting people to pay attention to these issues, though, seems to require exposing them to a flood of tear-jerking social media posts that, while perhaps inspiring people to care, invariably diminishes the conversation right when it should be deepened. 

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