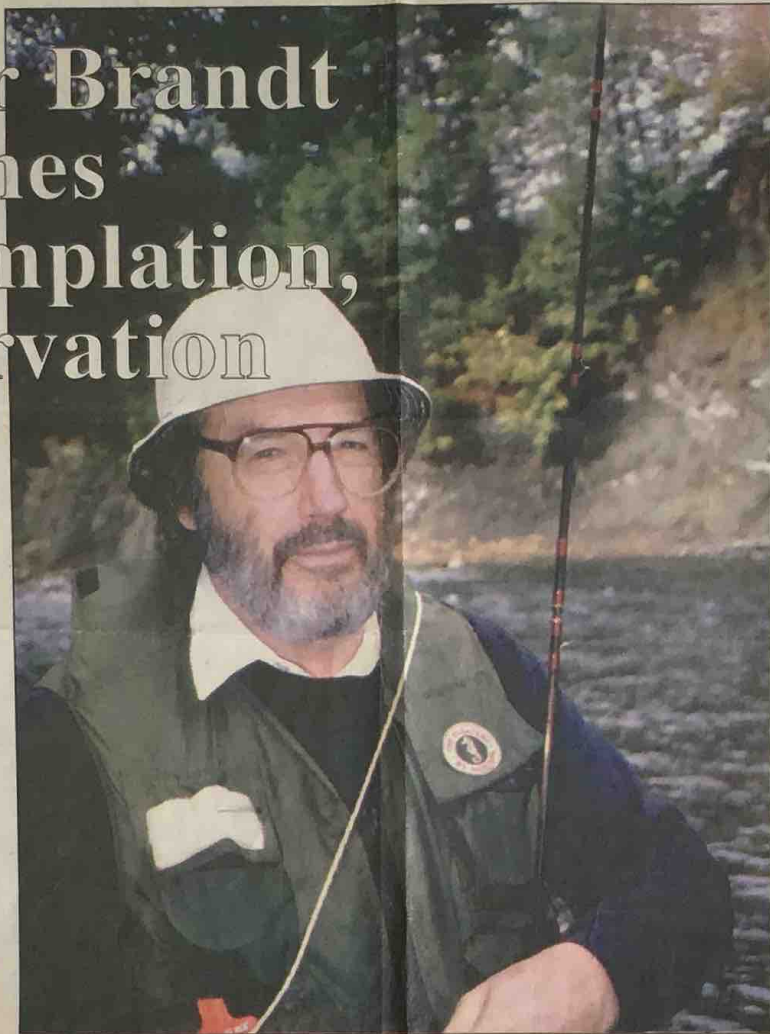


# Father Brandt preaches contemplation, conservation



Bob Jones photo

Brandt was shocked by the conditions of the rivers he'd once fished.

**Hermit priest fishes, fights for environment, muses about spirituality**

By Bob Jones

**F**ATHER CHARLES Brandt doesn't quite match my dictionary's description of a hermit: One who abandons society and lives in seclusion, often for religious reasons. Brandt certainly lives in seclusion for religious reasons, but he has hardly abandoned society. He holds a monthly mass at St. Patrick's Roman Catholic Rectory in Campbell River, conducts meditation groups at his hermitage, and is in great demand as a guest speaker. In addition, he belongs to several organizations devoted to conservation and the environment, including the Steelhead Society of B.C., Friends of Strathcona Park, the Oyster River Enhancement Society, and the Vancouver Island Resources Society. Typically, he usually serves as a director, secretary or committee member.

While Brandt's activities as a conservationist have given him a high profile in the print media, television and radio, he's also acclaimed as one of North America's most skilled paper conservators and book binders.

When he appeared on CBC's *Man Alive* last April, many viewers across Canada were introduced to this quiet, scholarly hermit priest for the first time. Not so the board members of several mining, logging, hydro and land development organizations. Brandt has tackled over poor conservation practices and environmental protection. They, along with politicians and bureaucrats at various levels of government, have been all too aware of Brandt since 1985. That's when the Comox Valley chapter of the Steelhead Society of B.C. re-formed in Courtenay, and Brandt was appointed chairman of the Tsolium River Enhancement Committee.

Mount Washington Copper Mine operated between 1964 and 1966. When it went into receivership in 1967, there was no legislation in effect to require reclamation of the open pit mine. Water and oxygen mixed with exposed waste rock to create copper leachate, which is lethal to fish. This deadly mixture drained from the mine site through Pyrrhotite Creek into Murex Creek and the Tsolium, annihilating salmonid stocks throughout the entire system.

Brandt gathered the necessary facts and data, then started a letter-writing campaign to provincial and federal environment ministries. Much to the shock of recipients, his lengthy

address list also included well-known TV personalities, radio talk show hosts, newspaper environmental reporters and journalists, all who had an interest in conservation. Before long the Tsolium River became known throughout North America as a classic example of resource mismanagement. The provincial government finally started a reclamation project in 1987. While the work still continues, copper levels to date are not yet at acceptable levels.

Brandt had a vested interest in the Tsolium, for his first hermitage was located beside the river when he moved to Vancouver Island in March, 1965. The tale leading up to this event is as interesting as the man himself.

Born in Kansas City, Missouri, in 1922, Brandt served as a navigator/bombardier in the U.S. Air Force during the Second World War. He then earned a B.Sc., majoring in ornithology, then followed this with a Bachelor of Divinity.

Although ordained as an Anglican priest in England, Brandt later converted to the Roman Catholic faith, then spent several years studying for the priesthood and working in various monasteries throughout the U.S. It was during this period that he took up the ancient craft of book binding.

While at a Trappist monastery in Iowa, Brandt learned of a small group of hermits living near Headquarters, an abandoned logging camp northwest of Courtenay. After arranging for a visit, he journeyed to the colony to meet the scholars and theologians who had left their respective monasteries to seek a simpler, more contemplative life as hermits.

After his acceptance into the colony, Brandt constructed a small hermitage and filled it with old book binding equipment acquired from a Trappist monastery in Oregon. His days were then devoted to prayer, meditation, studies, and to earning his living by repairing old or damaged books, and binding new editions. He was elevated to the priesthood by Bishop Remi De Roo in 1966, the first time a hermit had been ordained in over 200 years.

It wasn't a case of all work and no play. An ardent angler during his youth, Brandt rediscovered the joys of fishing in the Tsolium River. Dave Muir, a federal fisheries employee, introduced him to cutthroat trout and fall-run coho, which provided good training for winter steelhead fishing. His first steelhead was caught from the Tsolium on Christmas Day, 1966. At 18 pounds, 6 ounces, it is still the largest he has ever landed.

Brandt still fishes whenever time permits, but now it's usually with a fly rod. "I don't really enjoy too much the mechanics of salmon fishing from a boat. It's much simpler to just put on a pair of waders and fish along a river or an estuary without a lot of equipment like boats and trailers and ramps. You have a better relationship to the earth, the water, the birds and so forth. Like Isaac Walton said, it's the contemplative man's recreation."

**6** There's a deeper level of consciousness that the contemplative life tries to tap.

In 1967, federal fisheries erected an experimental pink salmon hatchery on Headquarters Creek, a Tsolium tributary located near the colony. Brandt helped construct the facility, then worked there as an assistant technician. When it closed after the 1968 season, he stayed on as caretaker.

As his book-binding business increased, Brandt realized he needed larger quarters. Earnings from working at the hatchery paid for 30 acres of heavily forested property on the Oyster River, and in 1969 his hermitage was trucked to its new

location. It's now part of the present, much larger building.

In 1973, Brandt left B.C. to further his knowledge of book binding and paper conservation. After training in Oregon, California and Massachusetts, he studied at several paper conservation centres in Europe. In 1975, while in Switzerland, he accepted a position as paper conservator at Moncton, N.B. After budget cuts closed the centre in 1980, he worked in Ottawa and Winnipeg before returning to his hermitage in 1984.

Brandt was shocked at the condition of the rivers he'd once fished: The Tsolium was dead; Puntledge River cutthroat, steelhead and summer-run chinooks were in serious decline, and fall-run chinooks had been wiped out; the Oyster River had suffered severe flood damage from clearcutting and its fish stocks were dramatically reduced.

"The whole quality of the Oyster was different. I remember nice pools and plenty of gravel bars. Now the pools are filled in and the gravel is gone. Clearcut logging created very uneven flows — in the summertime very low, in the wintertime very high. There's no question that clearcutting in the headwaters area had really deleterious effects on the river by way of flood damage, and the movement and loss of gravel. The records show it wasn't until after they started clearcutting in earnest that we've had such bad flooding. I have photos of the estuary taken from a helicopter. You can see quite clearly where the gravel has gone — it's all right there, fanning out from the river mouth."

**B**RANDT SAYS his interest in conservation is actually at three levels. "The first is restoring and preserving man's contemplative spirit — mine and other peoples'. The second is restoring and preserving what flows from man's spirit — what he writes, what he creates from his ink or crafts. That's one I'd apply to book binding or paper conservation: it's not just to make money — I don't really need a lot of money. It's a very satisfying thing because it's close to man's spirit."

"The third level is restoring and preserving the earth. If we don't do that, we have nothing. Museums like to preserve Indian artifacts, but what's really important isn't just preserving their artifacts and taking them into a pristine environment, but preserving their spirit, their culture that the artifacts flow from. To do that, you have to preserve their environment — their rivers, their streams, their mountains. So we have to look at the whole earth, not at just getting one little artifact out of the bad environment and into a good environment."

Despite the general hubbub that surrounds him, Brandt still devotes a good part of his days to solitude, prayer and meditation. "I live in a very beautiful environment — the trees, the river, and so forth — they are a very genuine part of my life. It is also like three levels: I'm really intent on the contemplative aspect. What I mean is, we have an ordinary consciousness, like when we're talking. We're conceptual, meaning we have ideas; we are creative; we write; and so forth. Part of that flows from a deeper consciousness, of course."

**6** Man has manipulated the earth, exploited it, altered it geologically and chemically . . . lost the sense of the unity of all things.

"There's this surface consciousness, but we have an even deeper level, and that's really what the contemplative life is: a kind of non-conceptual way of approaching reality with a deeper level of consciousness. It isn't conceptual or thought out, but it brings you into contact with the earth, with people, and with God in a way you can't really do with thought. That's really what the contemplative life is."

"There has been a sort of evolution in my thinking. All the great religions like Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, Christian Mysticism, Islam, have what we call a 'perennial philosophy.' This goes back thousands of years, before Christ. The idea is that it isn't just matter out there, it's all filled with some sort of basic consciousness and spirit — that there's a unity between man and nature and living things. This was a philosophy accepted in the west right up to the Renaissance, about 1500. "Then a group of scientists came along who were religious people as well: Sir Francis Bacon, Isaac Newton, Galileo, Descartes. They began looking at everything outside of man's spirit as sort of a mechanical system — that the earth was purely matter. What happened after this new way of thinking was the industrial revolution. Man began to manipulate the earth, to exploit it, and it's had dire results."

Thomas Berry speaks of the four components of the earth: the land sphere — that's the earth; the water sphere — the rivers and ocean; the air sphere; and the live sphere — plants and animals. This is all sort of one big organism we call 'Gaia.' Then there's the mind sphere — man is given consciousness of this. What man has done with this mind sphere is to take these four components and alter them geologically and chemically in every way. What we have to do is regain this sense of the perennial philosophy which we've lost."

"The Indians still have it, this unity of all beings, that we are part of the earth and it is part of us. Like Chief Seattle's prayer, 'You are one with nature, nature is one with you, we are all part of one another.' I don't think the elders do, and we should really listen to the elders."

"I feel very close to the native people, to their natural mysticism. There is a bad element, too, an aggressive, violent element, but you find that everywhere. I really would like to see a settlement of their land claims — I think that's extremely important. I don't think they want it lock, stock and barrel, and I'm not afraid they're going to take away my property." Brandt pauses, then smiles. "It's not my property anyway — I'm just using it while I'm here."

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