

A BEAR ENCOUNTER

"It is in the history of civilizations that conservationists are always defeated, boomers always win, and the civilizations always die. I think there has never been, in any state a conservation government, because there has never yet been a people with sufficient humility to take conservation seriously. This is natural enough. No man is intimately concerned with more than his lifetime, comparatively few men concern themselves with more than a fraction of that time; in the last analysis all governments reflect the concerns of the people they govern, and most modern democratic governments are more deeply concerned with some brief, set term of office than anything else. Conservation means fair and honest dealing with the future, usually at some cost to the immediate present. It is simple morality, with little to offset the glamour and quick material rewards of the North American deity: Progress."

Measure of the Year
Roderick L. Haig-Brown

Empty rivers. When I drive through the state of Washington, that's all I see. Sure there are still remnant fish here and there, some token runs of beleaguered steelhead and salmon hold on despite a myriad of reasons not to, but these insipid ribbons now represent the squandering of a society which seems to have lost touch with such matters. To encounter so many beautiful rivers devoid of a rich heritage in a region once defined by its bountiful resources can still cut through the numbness of today's overwhelming indifference. As images of what-should-be swim through the rage of the few who care, these waters of lifelessness engulf those who wade in search of glimpses from the past, the dreams that once fed fancies of youthful exuberance not too many years ago. One has to wonder if the price of progress is worth the cost. Though man's ingenuity has the ability to proceed into the future without sacrificing the biodiverse settings which surround him, the lack of concern for this basic fundamental principle could be a flaw that one day proves fatal. Empty rivers, that's all I see.

I still explore, and will continue to do so, for waters of significance. And though Vancouver Island has not been immune to the same influences prevalent in the state to its south, I look there to connect to a man whom we all should have paid more attention in

the past. Roderick Haig-Brown's home still stands on the banks of the Campbell River upstream less than a mile above where it enters the inside passage between the Island and the mainland called the Straits of Georgia. The man was a pioneer conservationist in an era that took a dim view on such beliefs (not that the times have changed much since then.) And the river was once a great one, but its life was cut short by a dam, few fish return there anymore. These days Haig-Brown's house has been restored and the property is now a protected provincial heritage site where educational programs and tours along with seminars, workshops and retreats are regularly scheduled to address topics such as conservation, fisheries, and natural history. That these hallowed grounds preserve the life and spirit of the man who may well have been the first writer ever to address the controversial conservation issues of his time is a credit to a province bent on perpetuating many of his concerns.

When fishing this region, I seek a window of enlightenment; I search for the door that opens to a realm of inspiration. If one is to carry on the torch of concern for our vanishing anadromous fish, it is essential to first find an ember. There is an undeniable presence along the rivers Haig-Brown once fished, and I long to hook into any kind of insight he may have left behind lingering within some forgotten reach before that opportunity vanishes too. Alongside these waters, perhaps there is something more. The Earth still remembers what has been lost in less than a century of development, for in terms of cosmic time the change has occurred in but a tick. And if one listens closely, mournful cries, like a mother lamenting the death of a child, echo through the void. Though the forces of nature continue to speak, the truth of its message fades into the distance as our ability to listen gives way to the confusing cacophony of modern existence.

I once read a moving story written by Father Charles Alfred Edwin Brandt that reflects the simple substance of man's relationship to the Earth- especially in this part of the world. While fishing stories relate the essence of why many of us fish, this piece expressed the fusion of mind, soul, and body with an elemental unifying force sometimes found in the

outdoor experience. It should be noted that Father Brandt is a renown paper conservationist and restorer of old books. As a Director of the Haig-Brown Kingfisher Creek Society he has been active in the maintenance of Haig-Brown's library. For this reason alone, I was interested in reading Charles' short story. Additionally, as an environmental conservationist, he has been quite active in projects geared to restore salmon runs to some of the Island's depleted rivers. When I began to read the piece, that it took place on the Campbell River captivated my imagination.

In this tale Charles had just hooked an enchanting wild Campbell River summer steelhead when he became aware of a strange presence on the shore behind him as he fought the fish for a better part of an hour. From over his shoulder he happened to notice what appeared to be a black bear blending into the bushes as it watched the entire activity, but when the fight was over, the bear was gone. At the very moment he released the fish, however, he was alerted by a sound directly behind him. The noise which startled him though was caused by a big man dressed in black; in fact, this man was a friend, the local head of fisheries from the Ministry of Environment. Charles figured his friend was likely the "bear" he had observed. After exchanging congenial conversation, both men began to walk back to the parking lot. Charles was just about to ask him about the coastal cutthroat project on the nearby Oyster River, an effort each took very seriously, but when Charles got to the top of the hill where the vehicles were parked, the man was gone as mysteriously as he had appeared. There was no sign of him.

In the mythologies of the North Coast indigenous people, Charles went on to describe, they speak of a primordial age "when finite divisions between humans, animals and spirits had not yet been created, a time when humans could become animals by putting on skins, and animals could become humans by taking them off. Then everything was connected; earth, sky and land by beings who could pass through and among them. All was infused and penetrated by the Great Spirit." Present day totem carvings, some prominently displaying the bear, keep the mythology alive. Because I desire to retrace some of Haig-

Brown's footsteps and hope to be embraced by the primordial Great Spirit in the process, I read this unique story before every visit to Vancouver Island.

These days I drive there occasionally to pursue sea-run cutthroats. Since I have always been impassioned by the variety of cutthroat sub-species found throughout the west, it has long been a goal to catch at least one of each in its native habitat. The sea-run cutthroat is a hearty fish that spends a portion of its life within the estuaries of the Pacific. In certain areas, particularly on Vancouver Island, populations of these fish have responded quite well to the restrictive measures enacted to restore their numbers. Usually I catch sea-runs with a cumbersome 7 or 8 weight in the process of swinging flies for steelhead. The few available days were to be spent, instead, hunting this fine fish balanced with the proper gear. Haig-Brown once wrote that "the true sea-run cutthroat is a very special fish and makes very special fishing." Again, the words of the master guided my efforts. Sometimes it is too easy to get waylaid by the glamour of the steelhead, too often these little gems are either overlooked or merely taken for granted. For many reasons, I wanted to catch a sea-run cutthroat by choice, and not by accident. And since the timing was just about right, I planned to spend one day fishing the Oyster River, mentioned in the Charles Brandt story, with the hopes of encountering just a few- while coming to grips with the reality that steelhead numbers on the Island's eastern shoreline were approaching all-time lows.

As the low light of dawn emerged through a foggy mist one day in late April the lower pools of the Oyster near the waters of the Straight beckoned from the bridge crossing. This is a small river, its water flows crystal clear, originating from the heart of the Island's glacial interior. A # 8 rolled muddler was the fly pattern suggested by the local shop to match the salmon fry as these diminutive fish drifted toward the waters of the estuary at this time of year. In theory coastal cutthroat should be well tuned into this event. Furthermore, with a little luck some sea-runs should be hanging in the lower reaches looking for a meal. Apparently the news was out, for on that tranquil morning several silver beauties came to my offering. Not big, but feisty, these anadromous cutts seemed to

exhibit the same vigor common to their larger salmonid relatives, especially on equipment scaled proportionally down to size. Given the objectives of this recent trip, I felt energized, absolutely wired to the reason behind the journey.

Later that afternoon, following the advice of a knowledgeable friend, I walked a few miles upstream along the public path that led to many pools. The plan was to fish from the restricted barrier, marking water closed to public angling for the protection of the fish, all the way back to parking area, but it would take an hour to get there. The hike was pleasant and reflective until the quiet buzz of nature was abruptly invaded by the irritating blast of two dirt bikes. Glued to the seats of these abrasive machines were a duo of insecure late teenage males looking as if their fannies were genetically engineered for that purpose. Appearing a bit guilty, they stopped to chit-chat for a while. Though it never came up whether motorized vehicles were allowed on the path, the kids remained a bit edgy. Before taking off though, and while the engines revved, one offered a tidbit of encouragement based upon his limited fishing knowledge of the river. As the noise delightfully dissipated up the trail, the ensuing silence was, to my dismay, short-lived, for ten minutes later the boys returned somewhat spooked.

"There's a big black bear up there on the trail!" one exclaimed, as they slowed to a complete stop, "We aren't going any further."

The other added, "I don't like bears. It should be shot!"

Surprised by the reaction of the two pseudo-macho adolescents, I could only imagine this was the mentality responsible for the dead bear my wife found last fall while she was walking along the Klamath River. Minus its paws, the mutilated carcass was subsequently left in the California sun to bake in symbolic testimony to wanton disrespect.

Questioning my sanity for moving on, the boys figured they had done their good deed by offering the warning. I thanked them, but privately I really thanked the bear for balancing nature, at least for the rest of the afternoon. Coming upon the exact spot on the path where it was obvious the boys had come to a screeching halt, I stopped to look and

listen. Sure enough, substantial crunching in the dense undergrowth scarcely a forty foot cast off the trail confirmed that something was out there. Assuming it was the bear, I decided not to tempt fate by dawdling. Onward I trudged.

There were still a good twenty minutes left before reaching the restricted water. Most of the walk to this point took place out of the Oyster's view. So a few hundred feet up from where the alleged bear was making noise in the woods, a side trail led to an observation point, and this proved to be a good place to see what I had been missing. There, the river was medium sized, but recent rains gave it a bigger than normal appearance as it sliced a cool corridor through a forest of spruce and cedar. This is a piece of water that certainly could entice a contingent of faithful followers. At that point it possessed the distinct character common to many cutthroat waters throughout the west-very long, inviting runs with the right depth and broken surface separated by shallow, swift riffles. Although the best looking section on this stretch would have to be fished from the other side, it was obvious, even from a distance, that crossing would be difficult. Though it was alluring, I was sure there had to be water upstream which didn't required wading to the opposite shore. As I admired this beautiful piece of cutthroat water while debating a strategy for the rest of the day, I detected movement. Then, at that exact same moment, the big black bear appeared! Walking slowly out of the brush toward the tailout above the definitive hole upon which I was gazing, it swam effortlessly across to the other side, shook the water off a rather large body like a huge dog, and meandered confidently into the woods on a path which it apparently knew well. Immediately, Father Brandt's tale came to mind accompanied by the thrilling chill that comes from being touched briefly by a special moment.

As far as coincidences go, seeing the bear after recently rereading Charles Brandt's story was a fairly mild one. In the minds of many, it would hardly qualify. But my life has been defined by coincidences of one kind or another- some have been quite sensational. A few have even spooked potential relationships. A psychologist friend once told me he

firmly believed that coincidences are merely random events that have the appearance of being significant, but occur only by pure, empirical chance. However, after working together for a year in Idaho's Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, he admitted that I redefined his perception of the concept. There was no way, he concluded, that the regular unexplained events in my life could possibly be random.

I figure whatever this aberration is, it must have come from my mother. She believes strongly in a "reality beyond" that provides us with what we need, when we need it. Call it Kismet, Karma, Divine Intervention, Universal Force, etc., if you are plugged into this Power, the unexplained happens. For instance, several years ago my mother paid for a small amount of groceries with a \$20 bill at a time in my folks' life when twenty dollars was a lot of money. Distracted momentarily, it wasn't until she reached the parking lot that Mom realized the clerk neglected to include a \$10 bill in her change. After attempting to rectify the mistake, she was very hurt- like anybody's honest mother would be- when the clerk accused her of lying. Needless to say, Mom had to accept the loss of ten hard earned dollars and move on. The very next day, Dad was removing Christmas lights from the front porch of our home in late March. As he kicked back a pile of old soggy leaves to establish solid footing for the latter, he discovered, to his amazement, a wet, washed out- but still usable- \$10 bill partially hiding under the-exposed earth.

The way I see it, maybe a coincidence is a conduit to our primordial past when, as Father Brandt wrote, "finite divisions between humans, animals and spirits had not been created...everything was connected...all was infused and penetrated by the Great Spirit." Perhaps coincidences are a vestige of a sixth sense where instinct and inner voice fused primitive races to a keen awareness of natural forces for the purpose of physical and spiritual survival. There is no question that aboriginal peoples understood this dimension of oneness. For them there was but a fine line between life and death. In present day terms, this is a difficult notion to comprehend. In a world of ingenious machinations our ability to look within ourselves has become increasingly hindered by a myriad of

fascinating distractions. As a consequence, it would seem that the modern version of humanity is destined to lose touch with the capacity to listen to Earth's rhythms, to no longer feel the power that our withering sixth sense once provided. Whatever it all means, I enjoy the speculation. So when my inner voice told me to follow the bear, I did.

The river was chest deep where the bear crossed, but the bottom was smooth and the gravel gripped my wading shoes like the caress of an old friend. The depth of flow dispersed the downstream push of water while the wading staff fashioned from a bleached-out, broken branch provided all the support needed to reach the other side. After a brief rest, I walked down river and proceeded to methodically fish through the lower third of the run first. The water felt "fishy" though there was no sign of a cutthroat. Preparing then to trek back to the head of the pool, I stopped abruptly when the intense focus of the mission was interrupted by the distinct crackling of a creature walking down the path utilized by the bear less than one half-hour beforehand. Naturally assuming the bear had returned for an encore performance, I slipped quietly behind a willow, fumbled for the camera and prepared to take the obligatory wildlife snapshot that, when developed, usually appears to be a dark, undefined lump on an otherwise boring print. This time though, I was positioned nicely to actually shoot a great picture. But when the creature came into view, my initial feeling of disappointment was immediately displaced by a sense of awe. Another coincidence? Maybe. Perhaps the bear really did remove its skin, but when the elderly gentleman with a fly rod in hand stepped through the opening, I just stared as if suspended in a mystical dream. Again the Father Brandt story flashed as a possible explanation for the bear's transformation. The senior angler then ambled gingerly over the round river rock to the upper bend where I was headed.

In silence, still out of sight, I observed the man as he began to fish the water with the simplicity of an expert. Clad in a vintage vest, his patched waders properly understated his presence while his skillful casts delivered a fly with a distinct sense of purpose. Undoubtedly this fellow belonged there, and it was a fitting stroke of chance that I hadn't

beat him to the spot. In an attempt not to startle him, I voiced a greeting from a distance. He smiled warmly, as I approached, saying hello in the same gesture.

"You didn't see the bear, did you?" I asked and then continued without stopping, "About 30 minutes ago it headed up the very path you just came down ."

"You don't say!" he replied with a chuckle, "Nope, didn't see him."

Since the camera was cocked and ready to shoot, I confided to him my disappointment that he wasn't the bear- but if he didn't mind, I'd take *his* picture instead. Chuckling once again, he pleasantly agreed to the offer.

After the photo shoot, we talked for quite a while. The man was a scholarly, gentle soul who knew a great deal about the local rivers. Asking him several questions relating to the coastal cutthroat, he filled in many blanks about their behavior and run timing. Although he had caught a very nice cutt up river, he informed me that these fish just completed their spawn, so most had probably dropped back to the estuary with this last bump of rain. And though he detailed some good "holes" to sample immediately below our position, he concluded that the best opportunity at this time of year would be found in the lower pools, thus confirming my early morning experience.

The conversation evolved to a serious discussion about the issues facing west coast salmonid stocks. The man turned somber as he reflected upon the disintegration of the resource. Though he considered the coastal cutthroat a bright spot, the populations of native steelhead and coho, particularly on the Oyster, have declined dismally. His pain was clear as he described the way it used to be not too very long ago. He added that local sportsmen were trying to do something about the situation though, as he pointed to the nearby live rearing pens in the river designed to help coho get a jump start before heading down to the ocean. In fact, it was his turn to tend to the pens that day.

When I expressed my concern for this eroding resource along with a passionate drive to do something about it, he asked if I had yet visited the Haig-Brown house. Replying that I already had, he was pleased. He indicated there was no better source for what I was

attempting to do. It was then I realized that the bear had led me to what I was looking for all along- and this fine man seemed to be it. We continued to talk about empty rivers and Haig-Brown's concept of simple morality: that is, preserving the last of our wild salmonids for future generations at whatever cost to the immediate present, because it is simply the right thing to do.

"It is in the history of civilizations that conservationists are always defeated..." echoes the words of Haig-Brown through the nexus of time lost, and with predictable certitude, the cycle repeats. The trend he observed years ago continues as if mankind is doomed incapable to do anything about it. Specious politicians make promises in order to get elected with no commitment whatsoever to matters of nature. Even those most concerned with fishery resources-sportsmen, biologists, commercial interests- can't agree upon any plan that makes long lasting sense. And while "progress" continues to suck life blood from the veins of the world we once knew, I find it difficult to look into the eyes of today's youth knowing it is their heritage we have laid to waste. Conservation! That's all it would have taken.

It was a beautiful afternoon. Likely, we both felt the pull of the river when I sensed that it was time to move on. Compelled by the need to enter the silence of my own space, I expressed my sincere thanks for his shared knowledge. I gave the gentleman one of my cards before heading down river, but that prompted another brief discussion about rod building and bamboo. Finally, I said good-bye.

"And by the way," somewhat embarrassed while reaching out to shake his hand, "I apologize for not asking your name before this."

" Oh! That's okay," he said with a twinkle in his eye. "My name is Charles Brandt."

In an instant the consideration of coincidence, random event, destiny or even fate flashed through my mind. Or maybe this was simply a portal in time back to when human, animal and spirit were one, a primitive age when nature was life. Whatever it may have

been, for a fleeting, special moment everything significant converged into one notable experience. Nothing made sense, yet somehow everything did.

Reflecting upon the bear and the powerful force it symbolized in Native cultures, I walked down to the next run. And just before casting my fly, I looked back up river.

The man was gone.

Hello Charles -

It was certainly an honor talking with you the other evening. I hope one day to see you again in person.

Included is a rewrite with a different ending more in keeping with the spirit of the piece. I am happy you are pleased with the representation. It would be a privilege if you did circulate the story to those who would appreciate it.

For now, take care Charles.
Be well & peace *Jerry Kustich*



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