

A Place In The Universe

You find the humble cabin of Charles Alfred Edwin Brandt at the end of a long driveway surrounded by tall timber. His modest home is lost in a grove of old growth forest, high on a bluff over the Oyster River, on British Columbia's Vancouver Island. It strikes you at once as a place of calmness and reflection.

Inside Father Brandt, one of the few hermit priests ever ordained by the Catholic church, is seen working on an old bible.

A paper conservationist and restorer of old books, he looks up from his work table, and smiles. Father Brandt doesn't get that many unannounced visitors, you are sure, but he is not taken by surprise.

"Come in," he says, with a warm handshake. "Let's have tea."



A keen fly fisherman, a lifelong advocate for rivers on Vancouver Island, an activist in his own manner, Father Brandt has been a quiet force for conservation in the Pacific Northwest for more than three decades.

He is in his late 70's now, but still attends local meetings to discuss watershed issues, and of course, he still prays.

More than 30 years ago, Father Brandt led a fight to save the Oyster River estuary

from development. He half won. The trailer park and marina complex he opposed on the south bank of the river went ahead, but the boat yard was at least forced to run a channel into the ocean, rather than directly into the river as had been proposed.

And he raised such a ruckus over the project that the north bank of the river was set aside as a nature preserve.

If you are going down to fish for Oyster River sea-run cutthroat now, you can follow winding trails through old growth forest on the north bank, below the old highway bridge. But when you emerge from the trees you are faced with the sorry sight, across the river, of the marina and trailer park. It is a striking contrast, and a shocking reminder of the consequences of making the wrong choice. The Oyster River today could be as beautiful and wild as nature intended it - had government listened to the wisdom of Father Brandt.

Instead, they got half a river.

Father Brandt has worked on what was left, too. Using gentle persuasion, and a calm, peaceful approach, he has won the support of everyone from politicians to logging company executives, to the cause of the Oyster River. Spawning beds have been restored, new rearing channels opened - and it is possible, some days, to having fishing on the Oyster, at least for sea-run cutthroat, as good as it ever was.

Father Brandt remains deeply worried about the bigger picture, however - about the ocean beyond the estuary of the river that he loves.

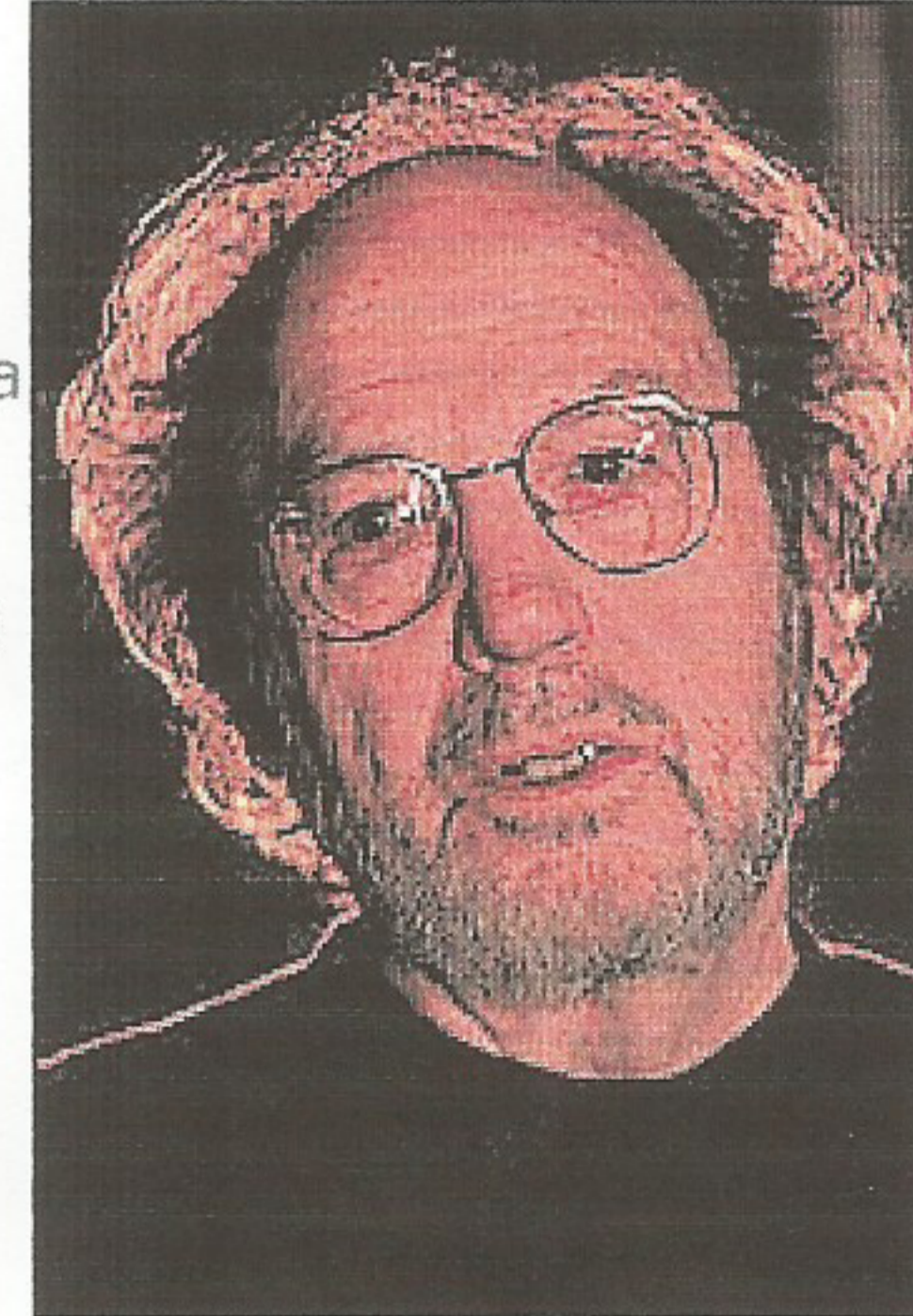
While much is being done to restore upstream habitat, on rivers throughout the Pacific Northwest, many estuaries remain under pressure. Housing projects, resorts and marinas are all attracted to estuaries by the views, the wildlife and by the sheltered waters. This is where people want to live. They want their condos and retirement homes facing the beaches around the rivers, where the birds gather, where the fishing is good, and where you can run your boat into freshwater, to wash away the corroding salt.

But it makes no sense, argues Father Brandt, to spend millions of dollars restoring the upstream parts of rivers while allowing the estuaries to unravel.

"We are losing the estuaries of the Strait of Georgia and that is very troubling," he says. The Oyster River, which flows beneath the bluff where his hermitage is located, dumps into the Strait of Georgia, which separates Vancouver Island, from British Columbia, on Canada's West Coast.

It is typical of countless rivers along the coast of California, Oregon, Washington, and British Columbia, where development has been allowed to compromise nature. Many rivers have nearly been destroyed by growth.

Father Brandt says the pressure on estuaries is likely to increase as population grows. He believes the Oyster River is a perfect example of what to avoid.

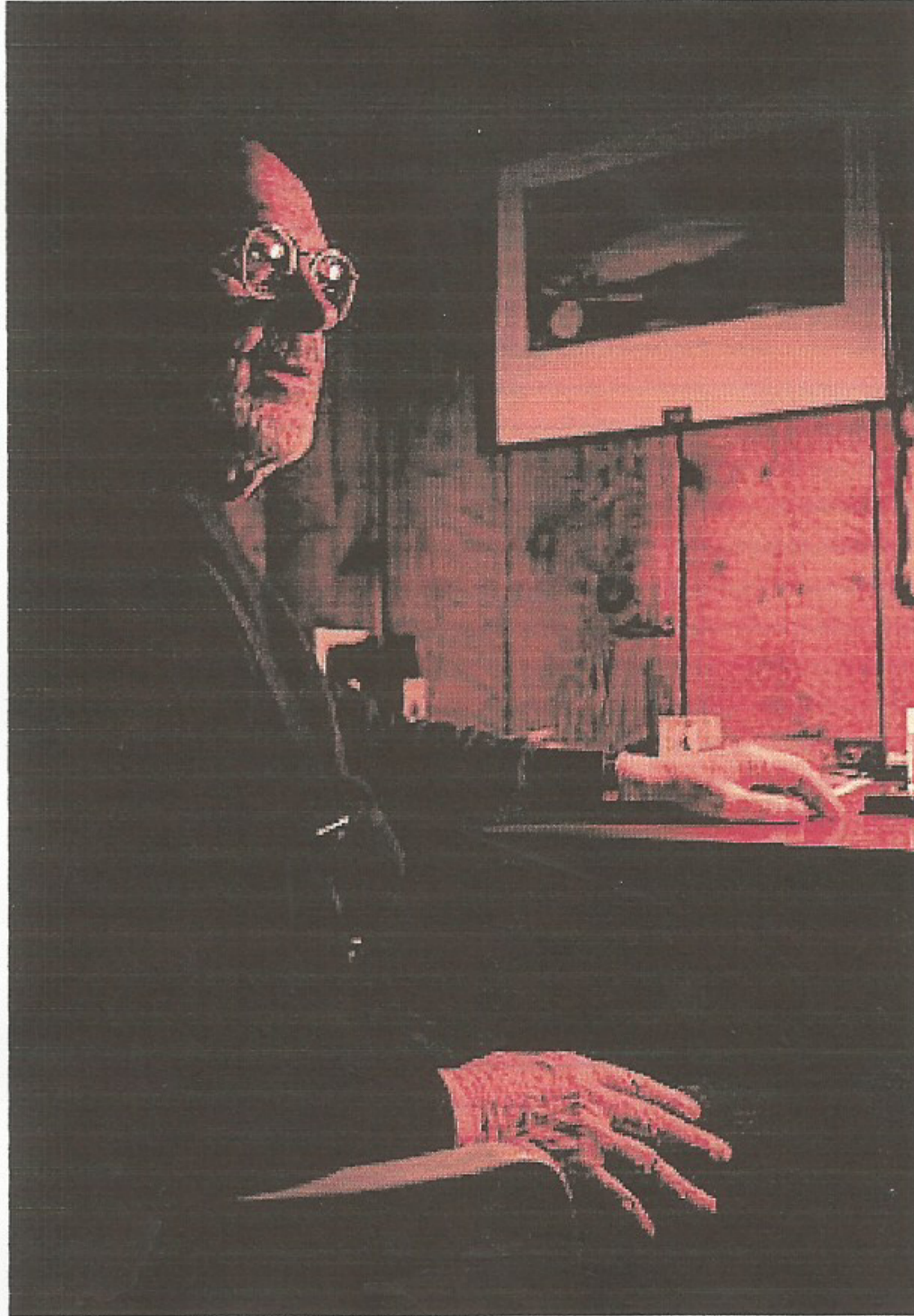


Estuaries, he argues, should be protected as vital habitat not only for fish, but for birdlife as well.

A birdwatcher as much as he is a fly fisherman, Father Brandt pours the tea, and then puts a video in his VCR. Flickering to life on the screen are the waterbirds of the Oyster River. He's filmed them over the seasons.

"Aren't they incredible," he says, marveling at their beauty. "They change with the seasons, just like clock work."

Outside we sit under some great old trees and listen to the river, far below.



Father Brandt talks of the fishing he's had there, of the places that almost always hold a trout for him.

In a moment the conversation switches to the topic of mortality. And for some reason I admit openly to harbouring a deep fear of death. He doesn't respond with a religious lecture, does not promise a place in heaven. . .

"Of course, all the matter in the universe is the same," he says, looking up at the sky above the waiving tree tops. "Certainly death is transforming, but you simply can't just go away. We are made of the same stuff as the stars."

In a short essay he wrote about fishing, Father Brandt revealed his attitude towards the natural world in which we all live - but which fly fishing takes us closer to. Wading in the Campbell River, in pursuit of a

summer steelhead, he sensed he was being watched.

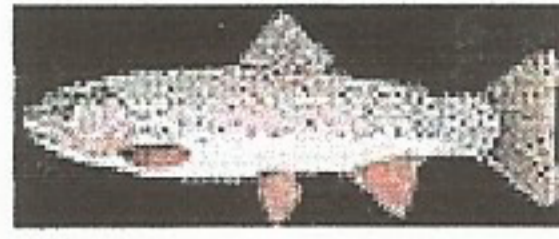
"It wasn't the sense of being I always felt when wading the bar, the bonding with the other fishers of the river - the mergansers, goldeneyes, herons and kingfishers - as well as the trees along the bank and the other aquatic life in the river itself; it was something else.

This other life I always sensed was part of the sacred community of the natural world, not a collection of objects, but a community of subjects to be communed with, not primarily to be used or exploited. And the river is always a symbol of the journey that the universe is making, from its primordial flaring forth to the present terminal phase of the Cenozoic era."

After sitting in the woods talking until dusk fell, I made my way back down Father Brandt's driveway, feeling fortunate to have spent a few hours with such a special

man. It would not be too much to say I felt blessed by his presence, for here was someone who had found his place, not just in the world, but in the universe.

Story by Mark Hume with Photography by Nick Didlick



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