



REV. CHARLES BRANDT AT MOUTH OF OYSTER RIVER . . . "the whole estuary would be turned into a mini-port"

—Steve Bosch Photos



ALL VEHICLES MUST
STOP
AND
REGISTER

ALL PETS
MUST BE
ON
LEASH

NO
MOTORCYCLES
or **SCOOTERS**
ALLOWED
IN PARK!

PACIFIC PLAYGROUNDS LTD. MARINA . . . firm wants to dredge new boat channel through delta

Everyone wants piece of

By MOIRA FARROW

COURTENAY — As B.C. rivers go, the Oyster River near here is a mere slip of a thing only 28 miles long.

But for decades it's been known by sport fishermen for its salmon, steelhead and sea-run cutthroat trout.

And even those without the faintest interest in fish have enjoyed the warm water and silvery sand of the beach at the river mouth.

In recent years, however, loggers of MacMillan Bloedel Ltd., have moved into its upper watershed, gradually stripping off the trees, in many places right to the river's edge.

Those who live near the Oyster tell how the logging, which lessens the soil's ability to retain water, has subjected the river to fall and winter floods.

In rainy weather, mud and silt from logging roads slides down into the stream where eggs and fry need clean gravel to survive.

The floods have caused such erosion that some residents with river frontage have bulldozed gravel out of the stream to shore up the banks of their property. Now much of the lower section of the river has been bulldozed into channels which biologists claim are lethal to fish habitat.

More interest in the Oyster has come from the Campbell River Water Board, which has applied for a licence to use 11 million gallons of water a day from the river.

Finally, there is Pacific Playgrounds Ltd.

This company, which was incorporated in Alberta, plans a 340-acre development including a subdivision, condominiums, trailers, shopping centre, luxury hotel, golf course, swimming pool and beer garden.

The project, part of which has already been constructed, would border both the ocean and the Oyster River.

So far, the Oyster has been little affected by the development but that situation won't last long because the next



GEORGE WARD
... wants to expand

phase of construction involves dredging a boat channel through the river delta.

The developers claim that this deep water channel, which would give 24-hour access to a boat basin adjacent to the estuary, is essential to the completion of the project. At present the boat basin has only limited access at low tide.

But if the developers do build the channel, it will be over the long and loud objections of the defenders of the Oyster River.

They are a group of private individuals, civil servants and special-interest associations.

They include a hermit priest, several resort owners, the fish and wildlife branch, the Steelhead Society of B.C., the B.C. Wildlife Federation and the Scientific Pollution and Environmental Control Society.

In a head-on confrontation with this group is a 26-year veteran of the Alberta oil fields, George Ward, who is managing director of Pacific Playgrounds

"At one time I had a dream for this area — I was going to make it another Coney Island," said Ward in an interview here last week as he looked out over the beach and sparkling sea.

"It could be, you know. But I've scrapped that idea now because I'd be involved in even more ecological arguments."

Ward, who now lives in the area, although his company's head office is in Calgary, has long been planning a recreational resort on Vancouver Island.

Tiring of the rugged winters in Alberta, he left the oil industry and moved here in 1969. He acquired the 340 acres of property in five different parcels of land and now has 2,700 feet of river frontage and 2,400 feet of ocean frontage.

The first 40 acres of his project, a boat basin, trailer sites, picnic grounds, campsite and 10 housekeeping cottages, went ahead without a hassle.

Then came the scheme to dredge a deep-sea channel through the Oyster estuary because Ward is convinced the success of the rest of his development hinges on having a full-scale marina at the river mouth.

So he asked the Comox Strathcona Regional Board for permission to construct a test channel in the estuary. And that was when the controversy started.

Watching Ward's operation was Rev. Charles Brandt, a priest of the order of St. John the Baptist.

Brandt is dedicated to leading a hermit's life and his home for the past 3½ years has been a cedar cabin he built himself in thick forest on the banks of the Oyster.

"I looked all over the island until I found this place," said Brandt in his immaculate cabin with the name The Hermitage over the front door.

He is an ardent fisherman and makes his living hand binding rare old books which are sent to him by universi-

ties all over North American.

Even in the short time he has lived here, Brandt — who is secretary of the Vancouver Island chapter of the Steelhead Society — has noticed a decline in the cutthroat trout in the river.

He has tramped the banks of the Oyster from its estuary to its mountain source and, when he heard of the plan for the test channel, he decided it was time to step temporarily out from his hermit seclusion.

"The test channel itself would probably do no damage but it would be a foot in the door," he said.

"It's what would follow if they build a permanent channel that bothers me. The channel would involve constructing three rock breakwaters and the whole estuary would be turned into a mini-port. The developers could increase the size of it any time they liked."

Brandt, who does his research thoroughly, has discovered that there is a provincial recreational reserve dating back to 1937 on four miles of foreshore starting just north of the Oyster estuary.

The estuary is located almost exactly mid-way between Courtenay and Campbell River.

Oyster River action



BOB BORLAND
... "river beaten"

The priest said he also discovered that Pacific Playgrounds built its existing boat basin without permission from the department of lands.

Armed with this information, plus his fisherman's knowledge of the importance of an estuary to salmon and sea-run trout, Brandt went to

the defence of his favorite river.

He attended meetings, wrote letters and prepared briefs. Soon he was joined by a small army of concerned citizens.

There were meetings of the regional board and its environmental committee and all kinds of letters went to government departments in Victoria.

The fish and wildlife branch made clear its objections to the test channel with a statement saying: "The proposed dredging operations within the estuary would upset the productivity of these waters for both fish and waterfowl by destroying important habitat."

Ward countered by hiring engineering and oceanographic consultants to make feasibility studies of the channel. He claimed their studies showed that the plan would not be detrimental to the estuary.

Even the University of B.C. got into the battle against the channel because a large tract of farmland endowed to the university is adjacent to the river.

Finally, at the end of July, a crucial decision was made by the regional board. After listening to a brief from the steelhead Society, the board

decided that plans for the test channel should be delayed until Environment Canada has finished its study of the estuary.

Fisheries biologists of Environment Canada, a branch of the federal government, are making a six-month study of the Oyster estuary and their report is due in early December.

The regional board also urged the provincial government to hold a public hearing on the use of the Oyster estuary and Brandt said he has indications the government will agree to this request.

So, until December, everyone involved in the controversy sits, waits and talks.

Resort owner Bert Sewell of nearby Saratoga Beach is among the most outspoken opponents of the project.

"I don't want Ward to wreck a river and that's what I feel will happen. We've already lost a terrific lot of sand off our beach since the boat basin went in," he said.

Another Saratoga Beach resort owner, Bob Borland, agreed with him wholeheartedly: "This poor old river has been beaten enough. All the developers want to do is turn a fast buck, make a million and get out. I'm convinced 85 per cent of the people around here are opposed to the devel-



BERT SEWELL
... lost sand

opment — and that's a conservative estimate."

Ward has a different story: "I'm sure at least 90 per cent of the people around here are not against our project."

He declined to specify the size of the financial investment, or how many lots there will be in the subdivision.

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