

Living on the Estuary

By Tom Gaskill

An Introduction

The story of William and Beth Seelander is the story of an old and wise couple retired to a cabin in the wooded mountains of the coast range. The Seelanders lived for many years along the shores of the bay. He has tried his hand at many types of work over the years, from fishing for salmon, lingcod, and flounder to building boats and back to fishing. She has worked as a mother and mender of fishing gear, crabbing and clamming to help feed a family of five. They are both 72 years old (born in 1935) and have lived on the coast their entire lives. The Seelanders have seen many changes over their lifetimes, including a world war, the coming of television, and the mechanization and growth of technology in the fishing and timber industries. They have seen booms and busts in the economy of the region. Together they traveled to the east coast of the United States and to Korea, China, and Italy, each time visiting the coastal fishing communities in these places. They both finished high school and a couple of years of college, but fishing has always been their way of life. He has also worked in a lumber mill and briefly as a logger.

They now have grandchildren and wish very much to have their grandchildren know the rich, wild, and healthy outdoor lifestyle that brought such great rewards to them. They view the inheritance of the natural heritage of the coast as very important. Healthy forests, streams, estuaries, and oceans mean a great deal to them, and they hope that someday the jobs which they have had throughout their lives will still be an important part of the economy of the region. They wish for their grandchildren to learn the skills which will help them to understand the sea, the land, the rivers and bays, and the way that people, the region's economy, and their quality and way of life are tied to the health of these places.

I. The View from the Cabin

The view from the cabin is extraordinary! Looking to the west, the couple can see the Pacific Ocean in the distance. They are just barely able to make out the breakers on distant sand beaches where they recall how the salty spray builds a thin coat of brine on the windows of houses exposed to the sea air along the lower bay. Up on this ridge however, the air is fresh and clear, washed by nearly 120 inches of rain each year with an occasional snow shower thrown in.

Smoke curls from the stubby cobblestone chimney as the old couple makes their morning tea and steps out on to the porch to take in the view, high up in the coastal mountains of southern Oregon. The morning is cool but mild, like it often is along this stretch of the North American coastline, where temperatures seldom drop below 40 degrees Fahrenheit and reach 70 degrees only on very calm, sunny days. Of course, up here at 2,000 feet, the cabin sees some snow, and summer days a person can watch the fog belt roll in off the Pacific Ocean while they bask in the sunshine and warmth that sometimes pushes 90 degrees. But this morning is like many mornings in the spring; rain has saturated the earth over the past few days, soaking the rich green conifer forest of Douglas fir, Western hemlock, Western red cedar, and a dozen other species of trees. Eventually the precipitation will filter down through a forest soil thick with a layer of humus, the spongy living carpet that covers the forest floor. The rain will dampen a maze of needles, branches, moss, and fungus and then, if enough falls, it will flow into the sandy, rapidly draining soils where it will reach sandstone bedrock and may eventually begin a long, slow return to the sea through creeks, lakes, rivers, and the estuary.

The creek that runs down the slope just below the cabin is fed by a spring year round. This special kind of wetland is nourished by groundwater where the soil and bedrock can no longer hold the water below the surface. During frequent winter storms, this little creek may swell to many times the summer flow as runoff rapidly fills the streambed, bringing sediment, bits of decaying plants and nutrients with it. Down where the creek grows in size and flattens out a bit, spawning salmon will seek beds of gravel to lay eggs and renew an ancient cycle of life that has fed the black bear, the eagle, and the people of the region for thousands of years. This cycle also feeds the stream with nutrients that, in turn, support a chain of diverse creatures like the aquatic insects, amphibians, fish, ducks, otter, mink, and bobcat the Seelanders have encountered over the years.

For now, the couple's attention is drawn to a large, crow-sized, red-headed woodpecker carefully mining insects from a tall, dead Douglas fir tree trunk, called a snag. This Pileated woodpecker not only feeds on the insects that are breaking down the snag, but she will also seek out or create a hole for a nest in an old, decaying tree as a place to raise her young. Snags, like the tall and graceful living trees and the dead logs that fall to the forest floor, play an important role in the ecology of the watershed. Ecology is the complex of relationships between the living and non-living parts of an ecosystem. The coastal forests of this basin or watershed contribute a great richness of nutrients, minerals, and sediment to the distant estuary where the flowing waters of the river will meet the churning, salty tides of the ocean. Though we are gaining in our knowledge through the efforts of science, we still know very little about the ecology of the watershed, estuary, and ocean environments.

An early morning wind driven by the sun-warmed air rising from the valley below stirs the tops of the trees, 200 feet or more above the forest floor. Chattering a prehistoric call, the Pileated woodpecker abandons the snag as a handsome brown and white Osprey lands on the remnants of a broken branch near the top of the dead tree. The couple smile now, as they closely watch their friend the Osprey, recently returned from migration, a sign that spring is indeed moving on towards summer. Sometimes, as they watch this noble bird dive to the river, powerful talons open and seeking a slippery fish, they are reminded of the many young Osprey that they have watched fledge from the nest to search out new territory over the years. Feeding along the shores of the rich bay these young birds have, no doubt, found a wealth of herring, young salmon, surf perch, and sculpin swimming unaware beneath the shallow waters of the estuary. A rich harvest for a wary hunter!

This morning, the adult Osprey has a shining silver Coho salmon in his talons, another reminder of the powerful connection from river to estuary and beyond, to the great ocean. To follow a Coho salmon of the Pacific Northwest coast on the journey from birth to death is perhaps one of the best ways to understand how the watershed connects through the estuary to the ocean. As the morning sun finally tops the ridge, the old woman and the old man finish their tea, wave a quiet goodbye to the Osprey, and leave the cabin. Today, they will spend time volunteering for a project which they hope will keep the wild and beautiful Coho salmon runs returning for many centuries still to come. We will follow them as they explore the many parts of the salmon's world and learn about the connections between the land, the sea, and the people that come to the coast and that live here. Welcome to the richest place on earth, the estuary!