

Revived

Letter from the Elwha BY

AUGUST, 1996: I was a bartender at Lake Crescent Lodge in Olympic National Park, enjoying my last unstructured summer before starting medical school. I'd driven to Washington from the right coast, slowly making my way through Yellowstone, the Tetons, and Missoula before landing on the Olympic Peninsula. By night I'd bartend and write. After last call I'd sit in my cabin and, under the glow of candles, type my medical school applications on an old electric typewriter. And by day, I'd fish.

Most of my angling time in Olympic was spent chasing Beardslee trout, a sort of mythical strain that purportedly only run deep in the lake—a lake some eccentric locals claim has no bottom. Beardslees are apparently landlocked steelhead, trapped in the lake when an apocalyptic landslide snipped off a river thousands of years ago. Locals told me they were elusive and huge, an aquatic unicorn in a sense, and were uncatchable on a fly.

After chasing these chromatics for three months, I surrendered to the reality that perhaps the locals were right. Early in the season I'd caught plenty of rainbows at the mouth of Barnes Creek, which ran next to my cabin. But when jetski season hit the lake in July, the only fish I saw come out of that lake did so by lead line and downrigger.

I did catch one Beardslee, trolling, with a crazy man I served at the bar. We sputtered along in his boat under the shadow of Storm King Mountain for hours, the spry, seventy-year-old telling tales from his youth the entire time: An ambulance that shot off a bend in the road on the shores of Lake Crescent in the '50s, plunging into the water with a patient still secured to a gurney, never to be seen again; iron-hard men toppling giant hemlocks fifteen feet across; stringers full of Beardslees, maybe thirty in a single day.

This was the Olympic Peninsula, and Lake Crescent wasn't the only fishery. Just up the road the Elwha River courses through the temperate rainforest, amid Paleozoic-sized ferns before crashing into the sea. I drove along its shores, trying to spy promising pools, runs, and riffles. The river was once a prominent salmon habitat but had fallen into despair when two hydroelectric dams were built early in the 1900s, decimating the salmon run.

The first time I saw those dams I was shocked. Sheets of moss carpeted the giant cement face of the lower dam, which plugged the river. Water oozed under its sluiceway. It sat rotting, like a dead animal, providing no significant electricity as its heyday was over, and it, like the river, was in disrepair.

I probably walked the shores of the Elwha a half-dozen times before wetting a fly. Friends and I used to hike up past the dams to a set of thermal springs. Unlike the ones at Sol Duc, which were developed into a tourist attraction, these pools were turbid and raw, dug into the side of a hill overlooking what was once a jagged valley but now was a lake. Backpackers and rambling hippies came in small numbers to these pools. We'd find naked groups of them smoking pot, drinking wine from the bottle. It was a loose, relaxing time and place. But just downstream, the fish were dying, the passage to their spawning grounds barricaded by what was once thought to be a low-impact solution to the area's energy needs.

Before fishing the Elwha I asked for some advice in Port Angeles.



AUTUMN ON THE
OLYMPIC PENINSULA.

The first fly shop was tiny. White pegboard walls streaked with rust stains from the ceiling's leaky pipes held only one or two of each item, including fly patterns. Scant inventory was spaced out to present an illusion of a well-stocked store. The disheveled, bushy-haired young man who worked there sat at a bench with his back to me. He was crouched over his vise working on his masterpiece egg pattern.

"Excuse me," I asked.

"What?" He replied, without spinning around.

"I was wondering if you could give me any pointers on good local water."

"I don't fish around here," he said. "It sucks."

Two blocks away I found another shop, a well-stocked one. So much so that I figured the purveyor must have a hoarding problem. Gear was jammed into glass cases, reels sat stacked high like a house of cards, and rods stood tall and dense like a forest of bamboo. The walls were layered three and four plumes deep with hackle. This was truly a mausoleum for poultry. But I walked out with some decent advice on how to chase Dollies, and if I was lucky, salmon, on the Elwha.

The Elwha is a fast river, creamy green with haystacks and quick

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riffles. Boulder gardens guarded undercut banks foaming with bubbling eddies. The sun was low in the sky as I entered the water for the first time. A few clouds were out, touching the tips of the surrounding Olympic Mountains. A caddis hatch was just beginning.

I waded upstream, finding the river much faster than it appeared. Careful to maintain my footing, I worked up and across. The sky began to darken, and within minutes snow was pounding down, a caddis hatch was rising, and I was trying to cast through the visual barrage without losing my balance. I kept working along like this for several minutes, through the vertigo and the storm, hoping for an eat.

Clambering onto a boulder, I cast to the far side of the river where a cloud of caddis hovered over feeding fish. My slack line was coiled up on the water next to my feet, and the current was strong, making a crisp presentation difficult. But I continued to cast and mend and finally managed to land my fly gently in the pocket, where it disappeared almost immediately. My rod bent, and line tore off the reel as my heart rate doubled. Is it a salmon? Why hadn't I brought a camera? And with that thought, abruptly, the rod became unflexed.

I hopped off the rock and waded into some slower water, where I

soon took a careless step onto a slimy rock and took ten gallons of glacial runoff into my waders. Luckily, the cold rain soon stopped, the clouds broke, and the sun poked out.

Swearing at myself, but out loud, I trudged back to the car, which was resting on top of a hill witnessing my exhibition. I laid out my sopping clothes on the hood, cracked a beer, and sat down. The caddis hatch continued, but the fish weren't showing. In front of me was a tattered paper sign tacked to a tree with a rusty nail. Printed on Washington State Wildlife Commission letterhead, it cited, in fine print, all the salmon fishing regulations for the river. A thin cardboard strip was stapled just below it, with a note on it. Weather-beaten and written in pencil, it read: "This is your river."

On August 26th, 2014, at 4:12 p.m., the last 30 feet of Glines Canyon Dam was demolished. The Elwha now runs straight to the sea, and salmon can once again swim all the way home. After all, it was their river, not ours. And now they have it back.

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