

When I became a trout

David A. Bainbridge

I grew up in the West (California, Colorado, Washington) and like most kids in my peer group had a fishing rod in my hand as soon as I could hold one. My dad was a fisherman, my mom was a fisherwoman, and my brother and I followed in their footsteps. Fishing was part of life and a key activity on day trips from home and vacations in Wyoming, Minnesota and British Columbia. One memorable trip to the Wind River range we caught more than 100 trout, and I can still recall their delightful taste after they were alder smoked in a box my dad built at our campsite.

My first income came from selling worms to fishermen passing our house on the Methow River in northern Washington. My brother and I also enjoyed catching salmon during the salmon run – not using fishing lines but just chasing them down like grizzly cubs in the shallows. After catching one we would hold it up to see how it compared, trying to outdo each other with the biggest catch.

We also regularly brought trout home for dinner. We were avid readers and by my early teens I had read enough to evolve from a “use anything that works fishing ethos, worms, grasshoppers, lures” to flyfishing with a barbless hook on light test line with my grandfather’s split bamboo rod. Working the streams in northern Washington I learned to slide a fly low under the brush to deep holes, to cast even on a windy day, and to understand where trout liked to feed and rest.

I might have remained a fisherman all my life had fate not intervened. First, as the fall salmon run was underway, one of my dad’s friends, Earl, invited us to go diving. Young and foolish this seemed like a capital idea. With borrowed drysuits (this is in the archaic time before wetsuits) we headed out with him for a float down the river. Ice along the shore might have deterred wiser, more thoughtful people, but we felt confident in our cotton thermal underwear, wool socks and drysuits. The water was crystal clear, cold and filled with salmon. It was a delight, despite the icy water leaking into our oversized “dry” suits. The joy began to diminish as every change in position in the water led to a trickle, soon to be a flood, of ice cold water running up or down our belly, back or legs as we changed position. We were just a bit too small for the suits so the wrists and necks were leaking. By the time we got out we were soaked, thoroughly chilled, but hooked on diving.

When summer came we started diving in the river with snorkel, mask and fins. We retrieved lures snagged on logs and sold them at our worm stand. I made a fishing spear

and started spearing suckers and the occasional trout (not legal -- but I am sure the statute of limitations has run out).

I fell in love with the river. Watching the fish in their world was more interesting than trying to catch them. They were much more beautiful alive. Explosions of color and light flashed as they rushed into the sun from a deep dark pool and spun around to catch an insect. Watching trout slip from eddy to eddy looking for food, shooting upstream in a rush, or engaging in a territorial dual was much more engaging than peering dimly into the water above with murder in mind. As we returned to dive in the same spots we got to know our underwater neighborhood and neighbors better.

Before long, I had become a trout. My fly rod was retired and I have not caught a fish since 1963. I went on to become a restoration ecologist and have in recent years taught ethics. Reading more and understanding more about the joy even fish are capable of feeling was no surprise to me. I had understood it many decades ago when I joined their world.

When I see a dad and his kids heading out for a day of “fun” killing lesser life forms today I feel sorry for them and the creatures they are about to maim or kill. It can be tolerated when it is food gathering for survival where every penny counts. I don’t fault anyone who is a humane fisherperson or doing catch and release - but I can no longer do it. I just imagine what it might feel like.

Far better and more interesting to slip into the water world and see it for the complex, dynamic and interesting ecosystem it is, and to learn to understand and appreciate the lives and joys of fish and other species.

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Bainbridge, D. A. 2021. Tenacity — Remarkable people of the Northwest Fur Trade 1765-1840. Rio Redondo Press. Amazon.

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Bainbridge, D. A. 2015. Gardening with Less Water: Low tech, low cost techniques cut water use 90%. Storey Press. (award winner)

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Trout fishing 1962



Trout's brother 1957



Trout's father, far left 1937