

Preserve the Cycles

By Jim Lichatowich

One morning several weeks ago, I was standing on our deck with my first cup of coffee. The sky was just light enough to see flock after flock of geese flying up the Columbia River. I could hear their chatter as they passed overhead. Aldo Leopold, the influential American author, ecologist and environmentalist, called it goose music and believed the world would be poorer without it.

Those geese following the Columbia to their wintering grounds were keeping alive something very old and very important—one of nature's cycles. Below the geese, under the dark waters of the Columbia the last of the fall Chinook were engaged in another of nature's great cycles. The salmon swim in a river that is part of the hydrologic cycle. They cycle nutrients from the sea into food webs throughout the watershed. All natural forms of life follow a cyclic path whose major events are birth, growth, reproduction, and death. The life cycles of plants and animals are in synch with physical cycles such as the hydrologic, geologic and climatic (water, land and weather). We are fortunate to live in a place where nature's cycles are easily experienced and are still relatively healthy.

Our industrial economy teaches us to think of nature in mechanical terms. Ecosystems, rivers, even our bodies are organic machines. This thinking has produced benefits, but it can, when pushed too far straighten the curves in nature's cycles. Industrial agriculture relies on artificial fertilizer and pesticides that are destroying the natural cyclic renewal of soil fertility. Fish factories (hatcheries) have attempted to do the same thing, even to the point that some question the need for rivers to maintain salmon. Thinking of nature in mechanical terms has masked the significance of nature's cycles even when they are in clear view like the geese flying above the Columbia River.

As Canadian author and environmentalist Naomi Klein says, it will change everything. To put it in a mechanical frame, the continued burning of fossil fuels is like starting on a very long road trip knowing that your car's cooling and lubricating systems are about to quit working. To deal with the problem you dismantle the warning lights on the car's dash. Who would bet on a successful end to that trip?

And yet the Port of St. Helens is making just such a bet in its attempt to convert the lower Columbia River into a major export facility for fossil fuel and in the process create an industrial sacrifice zone. The Port acts like it believes that facilitating the burning of more fossil fuel is a reliable vehicle that we can all depend on to take Columbia County's economy down the road to the future. Coal, oil, methanol it doesn't matter as long as it is or derived from a fossil fuel. The Port is putting at risk the future health and well-being of our grandchildren and the environment that

makes Columbia County a highly desirable place to live. It does create a few jobs, but they are tied to the past; their connection to the future is ominous at best. It is decision-making by a public institution that demonstrates a phenomenal lack of clear thinking, and decision making guided by a weak moral compass.

When I think about the Port's reckless and top secret approach to economic development I'm reminded of the advice of Governor Tom McCall who said: "...Oregon is demure and lovely, and ought to play a little hard to get.And I think you'll be just as sick as I am if you find it is nothing but a hungry hussy, throwing herself at every stinking smokestack that's offered."¹

At what point will climate change silence the goose music? Does the Port believe that the clickity-clack of mile-long oil trains is a worthy substitute?

Jim Lichatowich is the author of two award-winning books, Salmon without Rivers and Salmon People and Place.

¹ Brent Walth, *Fire at Edens Gate: Tom McCall and the Oregon Story*. Oregon Historical Society, Portland, 1998