



The Old Man *AND* The Sea Lion

By Paul Rockwell

A friend warns me. “Think about it, man. Winds, currents, the potential for hypothermia. You’re just too old to go fishing for salmon from a float tube out in Carquinez Strait.”

It’s true that 14 inland tributaries of the Sacramento and San Joaquin Rivers surge past the Benicia State Recreation Area, off Dillon Point where I intend to fish this morning.

The narrow passage between San Pablo Bay and the Delta is 120 feet deep, and migrating salmon follow the currents and swim into Southampton Bay to rest before they resume their inexorable journey to their natal streams far up the Sacramento.

But I am not convinced by warnings from my friends. The tall hills in the west act as a windbreak. And hell, I’m only 76. My arthritis is much worse in bed. And my cardiologist says that omega-3 in salmon is good for my arteries.

I know one thing: my friends don’t complain when I serve them fresh broiled King salmon covered with mango sauce.

It is still dark at Carquinez Strait as snails with headlights move slowly across the trellised bridge. I am wearing waders, standing next to my float tube in two feet of water on the east shoreline of Southampton Bay.

A silver bluish rim is forming around the black, distant hills behind Benicia. Light clouds are turning pink. I put on my fins and begin paddling across the Bay. The stillness of dawn reawakens my sense of hearing, dulled by the din of city life, and I can hear baitfish scattering, breaking the surface pursued no doubt by striped bass.

As I glide smoothly across the Bay, I recall a frustrating fishing experience last year at Benicia, three miles east. Benicia is a charming town: antique shops, shoreline restaurants and salmon fishing just 100 yards off the First Street jetty.

But there is a major problem for float tube fishermen at Benicia: robberies on the water. The salmon are plentiful but so are the sea lions who show little respect for the territorial and property rights of senior fishermen.

You hook a big one and a 400-pound mammal steals it and runs out all of your line. Drives me crazy.

Last year, two sea lions—I named them Pepe and Rosanne—identified me as an easy mark. It got to a point where every time I took out my float tube, the quizzical mammals swam over to my raft, pushed up their heads as if they wanted a handout. I don’t denigrate cross-species friendships but I’m not a floating truck stop for voracious predators.

Like presumptuous houseguests, they would not leave. So this year I am over at Carquinez Strait or rather Dillon Point where the currents are especially hazardous.

As my V-shaped tube glides over the surface, I begin casting, counting to five to allow my lure to sink. Then I reel in. I am drifting too close to the edge of the main current where there are swirls and counter currents and I must expend precious energy to paddle back off. Now I count to 12.

Finding the right depth is key to finding fish. As the sun rises, salmon go deep. I am jolted. Wow! I'm hit. "Fish on, fish on!" I yell. Why am I shouting? There's nobody in hearing distance.

Line peels off my reel in spurts and I let the fish run 50 yards until it begins to slow down. Now I raise my rod, then lower it as I pump the fish toward my tube. He starts another run but is getting tired. I can see his black back, a flash of silver. What a beauty!

"I'm a fool. The sea lion is not after me. He wants—he is running off—with my salmon!"

Robbery On The High Seas

As I look out over the water, I see a black body, a hump in the distance. No! No! It's a huge sea lion, twice the length of my float tube and it's moving toward me with the speed of a rocket.

I feel like I am in one of those World War II naval flicks where you see a torpedo heading toward your vessel. I am filled with a sense of impending calamity. Out of fear for myself, I forget the fish at the end of my line.

Then suddenly my rod bends over double and there comes a shock of recognition. "I'm a fool. The sea lion is not after me. He wants—he is running off—with my salmon!"

Line peels off my reel so fast I would sever a finger just to touch it. I will lose a hundred yards of line if I do not cut it now but I am



Paul Rockwell holding his prize salmon

psychologically incapable of cutting off a fish even when it is in the mouth of a large predator.

To hold on, I use the tube as a drag, turning it toward the sea lion, raising the rod and letting the creature pull it. My tube skims across the water. Why doesn't the sea lion just eat the salmon now?

He's moving toward my tube. I reel in slack. Momentarily I glimpse the fish in this mouth. What is he doing? The sea lion dives and to my shock releases the fish. My salmon is free. The fish is too exhausted or stunned to swim away.

I grab my big net and scoop him up. I have him! I connect him to my stringer but I keep him in the net on my lap. Take no chances. He does not fight but is still alive. There's no blood, no gash in the flesh.

I am amazed. Did my float tube or my big fins spook the sea lion? I doubt it. Is this salmon—could be 20 pounds—a reward for all my giveaways over at Benicia?

Now I am back out in the big current. Luckily it is still moving toward Benicia, not toward the Golden Gate. I must rest and I must drink.

My body aches. The arthritis in my right hand is worse than a night in

bed. I lie back, hold the salmon on my lap, look up at the near-cloudless sky and just float. I feel like Huck Finn on the Mississippi River.

I feel a kind of bond with the salmon on my lap. The scale of travel in the ocean, the unexplained precision of their homing instinct, their uncanny sense of smell and metronomic timing, the drive and urgency to procreate and die, all compose one of the inscrutable wonders of the natural world.

I float on currents over which I have no control but the wind is actually helping me move toward the city. Now bystanders on the shoreline have spotted me.

They greet me at the edge of the water. "Are you all right?" I hold up my salmon by the gills but I am too exhausted to tell the story. I slip off my fins, take a cheap, disposable camera from my pocket and put it into the hands of a young man.

He snaps a picture and helps me carry my tube and gear.

There's some old, cold coffee in my thermos. I'll need it. I am apprehensive about the drive home. A slow-driving senior, a nemesis of tailgaters, risks life and limb driving on Route 80. I will stay in the right lane and play it safe.