

"Interview With a Champion of Salmon"

The recent news that local and global stocks of wild fish are now one-tenth what they were one-half century ago, and that Canada's Atlantic Coast cod, lobster, and crab fishers and politicians are fighting with each other and with the federal government for opportunities to continue plundering the East Coast's marine stocks is a grim reminder that humans get old far sooner than they get smart.

The reminder isn't entirely grim. Indeed, it underscores the fact that a small but dedicated number of people put fish ahead of profits. People everywhere are enormously indebted to those who champion the cause of fish, and it's in our long-term collective interest to know about such citizens.

The following interview—taken from a transcribed interview—focuses on one such man. The interview opened with Watershed Watch Salmon Society (WWSS) asking Mike Gage (MG) where he was born and raised.

MG: Born and raised in Great Britain.

WWSS: Great Britain?

MG: Yep. Came here when I was 19. Moved out to the west coast in 1959, in October or, I think, early November. Went to Comox where I had an old Aunt I'd met once or twice in Britain. She'd come to the west coast for the mild climate. I ended up working on a farm in Saanichton for about six weeks then came back up here and started working at the UBC farm near the Oyster River for about a year and a half, clearing land and getting ready for dairy farming.

WWSS: Was that when they were just building the UBC farm?

MG: Well the Experimental Farm was there, but they didn't have much stock, or any stock really. They had one old Jersey cow that I milked every day for the landlady who looked after us. I worked with old Dave Roberts from Campbell River, a famous Cat [Caterpillar tractor] operator, as well as Harold Magnusson. Very skilled operators, and they built a very nice farm there. I learned how to operate a Cat from Dave. From there, I went working in the woods, for contractors, and I met a logger's daughter who I ended up marrying. One day, I got a look at her father's payslip, and decided I should get into that business. He was a pole-maker up behind Oyster River, so I ended up hooking on a Cat for six months or so, and then worked for Norrie Brothers for five years out at Elk Bay, and in behind Menzies Mountain.

WWSS: So you started working in the forest industry in the 60s?

MG: Yes. By 1961, I was in the industry.

WWSS: How old are you Mike?

MG: 62.

WWSS: What did you do in the industry?

MG: Prior to being on staff with MacMillan Bloedel, now Weyerhaeuser, I spent about seven years operating bulldozers and rock drills for various local contractors in the construction of logging roads and in land clearing. I started at Oyster Bay, then went to Elk Bay and then Port Neville. At Elk Bay, I helped the old Driller-Blaster load explosives in the evenings or on the weekends. I learned the ropes, and when he quit in Port Neville, I took his place. Overnight, I became the Driller-Blaster. I did that for a couple of years, and trained a few others too. I always wanted to get away from it, not that I minded the hard work, but the noise and the dust were hard to take. And sometimes you were in a lot of mud working in the tracks of a D-9. I got off the drill as soon as I could, and went yarding logs with a D-6 sized Cat and an arch. From there I went onto D-8s, and a D-9, building roads for Baikie Bros. and clearing land right up above where we live here. Did a bit of that, then ended up with MacMillan Bloedel in 1967, at Kelsey Bay. I worked on the Grade crew. I operated a grader, then a Cat, and then drove logging trucks when we started logging at Eve River. In 1970 I went on staff. I've been on staff with MB, and now Weyerhaeuser, ever since.

WWSS: Well that covers that bit. When did you get involved in environmental things or fisheries issues?

MG: Probably with the fisheries concerns because I was a sports fisherman right off the bat. I fished with an old cousin of mine at Oyster Bay using 12- or 14-foot aluminium boats. The old Elgins. I think they were a Simpson-Sears outfit. Had a Simpson-Sears engine on it. We fished off the weedbeds at Oyster Bay in July and August most years and into September as well. Did very well. That's when I started using Lucky Louis plugs, way back in those days. Then, after moving in to Campbell River from the logging camps, I became very active in the Fish Guides Association. In fact I was a founding member of the original old association... Rippingale, Winters, Joe Painter, myself, Knowles, and...uh...gee I can't think of the other guys name. Anyway, we were all founding members of the Campbell River Guides Association. And we made some good headway in those days. We brought in some good legislation right off the bat for the mouth of the Campbell River, to stop the slaughter of chinook by jiggers and snaggers who took to foul-hooking Tyee in the Tyee Pool.

We brought in the single-hook and no-bait rules, which stood up for years. That was in 1978 I believe. Now look at it. Barbless hooks, no bait, no powerboats in the pool, and a six ounce weight rule. And the weight rule is from Hidden Harbour all the way to Orange Point. I joined the Tyee Club in 1975, was a director in 1978 and 1979, and became President in 1980.

WWSS: So you've been president of the Tyee Club?

MG: (laughs) Well, let's see, I was president of the Tyee Club until 1993, so that's 13 years.

WWSS: You've also been involved in other things. For example, the Campbell River Gravel Committee.

MG: I'm still chair of that. It's a wholly owned subsidiary of the Tyee Club.

WWSS: Wasn't it responsible for having a tremendous amount of gravel placed in the Campbell over the last few years.

MG: Yes. It's been less than 10 years actually. We started in 1995. Campbell River was still doing very well as a resource community in those days. The forest industry was doing well, as were others. That was my first time ever at fund-raising, and I couldn't believe the success I was having (laughs). I was strictly going one on one with all the forest executives and managers around town. I knew them all. I'd met them all before, and respected every one of them, no matter which company they worked for. They were all fine people, and real easy to talk to about salmon enhancement. They opened up their cheque books and we collected \$177,000 in cash and, if we include in-kind work—I think Jim Van Tine did the calculations—about a quarter million. We used it to open up that Lower Island channel.

I was overwhelmed by how much money was around and, by how easy it was to direct it into fisheries. It seemed the forestry people felt some ownership responsibilities for the fish streams, the Campbell especially, because they were logging on their borders.

So they came tearing in there with funds, and it was really disheartening when the whole channel got blown out about six weeks after it was finished. The whole thing full of fish too.

WWSS: Many people remember that. BC Hydro took a lot of flack for that too, and the mayor got on them. Wasn't he quite vehement?

MG: Yes. That was my first involvement with Jim Lornie. He has been a special friend throughout all this salmon enhancement work. People in the community probably don't realize how instrumental he was. I was so upset after losing all that money, all those funds that were generated in the community, and I just didn't know who to turn to. It was Hydro I was determined to go after, but I didn't know where to start, and I wanted to do it first class because I knew they would have their executive and their legal people lined up against us, to prove that they weren't wrong. So Jim sent them off a scathing letter, right to the top. I forget who BC Hydro's president was. Jim told them in so many words that if they couldn't manage their water License better than that, they should step aside and let someone else have a go at it. I'm sure that got their attention because that was in mid to late November 1995, and by December the first, I believe, we were invited to the Fisheries Office in Vancouver to meet with Hydro people. And that was a little overwhelming. I guess a lot of this interview will be about our dealing with Hydro, and that turned out to be such a positive event, in the end.

WWSS: It seems Hydro has done a turnaround these past six years or so.

MG: Oh, they have; they have. That first meeting was Chaired by Gary Logan—one of the head guys in Salmon Enhancement in Vancouver for Fisheries and Oceans Canada. There were two Fisheries Officers sitting with their backs to the wall, in uniform, with an open file on the issue because they were getting ready to charge Hydro with mismanagement, for lack of a better term. And there were two or three of us from the Tyee Club, Jim Van Tine and some other fisheries officials. Across the table from us were 12 Hydro representatives, at least three of them legal people. This was a face-off between the “white shirt, collar and tie guys” down one side of the table and us on the other.

The characters down the other side of the table intimidated me. But when one of them opened by saying, “Mr. Gage, you and the people of Campbell River are going to have to understand that in the process of generating economical power for the people in BC, fish could get hurt. And they probably are going to get hurt.” I couldn’t believe my ears, and I don’t think the other Hydro reps could either. I could almost see them bowing their heads. I don’t think these were the words with which they had planned to open the meeting. More likely the statement reflected the speaker’s “style”. So we threw mud at each other for a few minutes. I told the speaker that in a handful of words he had inadvertently revealed his philosophy. Fish were far lower on the ladder than was power generation. I told him that Campbell River residents feared as much and wanted change. We can’t carry on wasting locally generated and donated money—sure, from the forest industry, and multi-national corporations in some cases—but local nevertheless. And we’ve lost all that now, and can’t go back to these people expecting one red cent more.

So anyway we threw mud at each other for about 20 or 30 minutes. They went through a wall full of fancy graphs that charted rain events. I happened to have a calendar for the month of November, the rainfall, snowfall and rain on snow events and my record of 24,000 cubic feet per second of water coming down the Campbell.

So, we met right through lunch time and, at about two o'clock that afternoon, their executive Drew Dunlop stood up and said, “Well this has been a good meeting. It’s good that both sides could clear the air a little bit. And Mike, that channel will be entirely rebuilt, and we will be a significant contributor. It’ll be ready for the fish next fall.” I thanked him very much and then said that Hydro wouldn’t be only a significant contributor, but the only contributor.

WWSS: (laughs) Good one.

MG: Yes, well we still smiled at each other, and shook hands. The meeting was over at 2:30. Following that, we had a stiff-legging match for a couple of months about what the price tag was going to be. I held onto that like a dog with a rag, though maybe I shouldn’t have. But they sent us a cheque for \$150,000, we told them it was going to cost 190K (It actually cost \$146,500, and they let us keep the change, which went into the Gravel Committee).

Since those days, BC Hydro has been a much better corporate citizen though they've had their screw-ups at the power station, they've certainly paid more attention to the needs of fish. They've changed their philosophy. I gather that they had three or four Biologists onboard whereas they now have 18 or 20.

WWSS: It's rumoured that the Salmon River diversion was open during the high-water period that washed out the spawning channel on the Campbell, and that Hydro kept the diversion open despite a warning of heavy rain. And didn't the shutting down of the diversion lead to flooding in Sayward?

MG: Yes, well, but since those days Hydro has changed. It's doing well and has become a significant contributor. I don't have the figures, but for several years Hydro has contributed about 50k. And that's after the rebuilding of the channel. It was Hydro engineers along with DFO that re-designed the thing and rebuilt it. I believe we've now spent, between the upstream work and the estuary, over five million dollars. The Gravel Committee has been a significant contributor, as has the Nature Conservancy.

WWSS: Well now, there's the next step. You were involved with the Nature Conservancy.

MG: Well, yes, but before discussing the estuary, I should mention that we've built over two kilometres of upstream spawning channel. And in the margins, well away from the mainstem. There was some argument about re-building the second island channel. I maintained all along, and still maintain that the second island channel had to be rebuilt even if Hydro had difficulties keeping it from washing out. That's the benchmark. What goes on there shows us how well they are managing the water. Because that channel is where it is, and because Hydro has such a significant investment in it Hydro is more favourably disposed to this interim flow management thing we've got going there.

WWSS: And that's really noticeable now, too.

MG: Which gives us a two metre flood buffer. And, yes, it's noticeable now, but in fairness to nature, Hydro and us, we've had two years of drought too, and that's really helped them along. But you're absolutely right, and now whenever we have a flood or heavy rains my phone rings, Jim Van Tine's phone rings, or the hatchery phone rings. The public wonders what's being done. Why isn't Hydro spilling more? Is Hydro spilling enough? Questions get asked because the public is concerned.

WWSS: Ok. Let's move down the river then to the estuary. What about it?

MG: Yes, well, here's where my old friend Mayor Lornie comes in again. He phoned me up one evening and said, "Hey, how would you like to belong to an organization like the Nature Conservancy of Canada?"

And I said that I didn't really know anything about them.

“They’re sort of like Ducks Unlimited,” he said. “They go around buying up real estate to protect special places.”

So I said well that sounds interesting. I guess I could go to a first meeting. If I liked it, I’d stay; if I didn’t, I’d leave.

“Well,” he said. “You need to send them a resume and all that stuff.”

So I put my Grade 12 to work, and got a pen and wrote a history like I’ve given you. And I also explained to them I worked in the Forest Industry, that I was a logger. That’s what put bread on my table all these years. So I did all that, and I went to their first meeting.

Because it *was* their first meeting, they were assembling a new Board in BC. They had done well east of the Rockies, but they had never been very big in BC. When they said they were looking for a flagship project in BC, I couldn’t immediately think of anything in the Campbell River area, but I thought of something a couple of weeks later, while walking my Springer Spaniels around Freshwater Marina. I used to walk around there and keep an eye on things. And remember, that a couple of years before Campbell River Mills had gone broke and Baika’s Island, which had a shake mill on it at that time, just sitting idle. And there were things growing up around it and nothing going on there any more. And I remembered when two barge loads of lumber went out of there each week.

So I looked at the island. It still had some old growth on it. Then I went over to it on the Maple Street side. And then I talked to Van Tine at the hatchery. I asked if we wanted to purchase some land in the estuary, what would we want?

So we looked at the map of the estuary, crayoned a strip around it, outlined a lot of property, and wondered where we might get the amount of money required.

Well the Nature Conservancy people wanted to invest in the coast of BC and wanted a significant piece of property. Something with a high profile that people will look at and say; “The Nature Conservancy did that.”

I made a pitch at the next meeting of the Nature Conservancy board, despite being nervous about Baika Island being such a slum on the highway side, where the old shake mill still stood. But the board was open-minded and genuinely interested. Suddenly we were on a big fund-raising campaign again. And damn successful too.

WWSS: And you said, “Hey I’m good at this?”

MG: (laughs) Yeah, well, it was kicked off by David Anderson coming in with a half million bucks from DFO.

Later, I got some real shots from someone in Vancouver because that money came right out of an enhancement budget, but I didn’t know that at the time. And I didn’t tell DFO where to find the money, or how to manage its money. Anderson redirected the money to us. And

my fundraising target, locally—me being the local guy and all—was supposed to be \$150,000. Well, I took a couple of the right people from Weyerhaeuser around the property, and right off the bat picked up 100K. So I immediately jumped my target to 250K, and we ended up raising 287K. It was a success.

Anyway, we were able to pay it all off in 18 months, with a 270K loan from our eastern branch, I believe, to close the deal. That was made to the BC office, and of course had to be paid back at a later date. That's now been taken care of.

So there you are. We purchased that property and Van Tine has his project, and the Raven Channel is hooked right up to the boom pool. I'm sure that's going to be in use this year. It'll probably be full of chum salmon soon by mid-November, or sooner

WWSS: Yes, but will salmon use the channel if they haven't come from it? Will DFO have to trap spawners in the channels—sort of lock them in there—for a couple of years?

MG: I don't think they'll have to do that down in the estuary. They've started already, and more and more are using the Raven Channel. And the Second Island channel—well, the chum are using that now, and the carcasses are stacked up like cordwood there.

WWSS: Yes, Kingfisher Creek evidently had more than 100.

MG: The Campbell system had 35,000 chum last year, the biggest run on record.

You know it's amazing still though, that despite our concern for fish—yours and mine—and our successes in looking after fish, how so few people on the street realize what a terrible situation the fish are in right now. Other than the Campbell, which has a constant water supply from the lakes, there's no water anywhere. Probably record returns all over and, well...

WWSS: The Oyster River recently is dry. A few coho trapped in pools here and there, and a few chinook trying to spawn. And out along the beaches? Lots of coho with nowhere to go.

MG: Well, Nature can be cruel at times.

WWSS: Yes.

MG: About the Gravel Committee, I should have included Joe Painter. He was a big help, along with Peter Winter. But Joe and I were in it from the start.

The Nature Conservancy effort was supported by about the same bunch of generous people I tapped in 1995. I tapped them again in 1998-99, and had the same response, even though times were a lot tougher then, a helluva lot tougher.

We tapped into some personal money from around town, too. Some came from the estate of old Joe Meredith through Jim Lornie, cash to spend at his discretion. Lornie put the whole thing into the estuary purchase. I'm not going to tell you how much it was, but it was less than 50K but a helluva lot more than 10K. You know the fish in this community had a real good friend in that Mayor.

WWSS: They've had a friend in you too, Mike. Up the river, down the river, into the estuary, and around the channels. Your involvement with the Nature Conservancy, the Gravel Committee, and the Tyee Club. What about your involvement with the BC Hydro Bridge Coastal Restoration Program?

MG: I sit on the Board. The committee was struck about two years ago, and I showed an interest right away. There are three members of the general public—Craig Orr [executive director of Watershed Watch], April Mol, out of Maple Ridge, and me. There are three First Nations—Brian Assu from Campbell River is one. And there are three agency people.

It's an interesting board, and through it Hydro is basically doing what its conscience has finally pricked it into doing. I think Hydro has definitely done some damage over the years. Now wherever they have a footprint and an issue, as they call it, they put money back into it. The overall amount is \$1.5 yearly. The board decides who qualifies, who deserves funding. I'm able to stir some people in Campbell River to at least apply for some of the money, and I've never been told to step away from the table when the vote came along. Because I, well, although I'm Chairman of the Gravel Committee, most of the money to date has been funnelled into channels, which were Gravel Committee Projects of the moment. This year where, I'll just step out of the room when it's time to vote on issues linked to the Gravel Committee. As long as people like Mel—have you met Mel Sheng? He's with fisheries. You've met Craig Wightman?

WWSS: Yes, of course.

MG: Well, Mel Sheng is Craig's equivalent in DFO. He's enthusiastic and, well, if he's got any problems it's that he's just spread too thin, just like Wightman.

Those kinds of guys back you because they think what you are after is genuine, and nobody argues about it. That makes it easy too.

In thinking about it, the main reason I got involved was, well, I have few hobbies other than shooting pheasants (wistfully) in Great Britain every fall, if I can afford to go back there (laughs), collecting Lucky Louis fishing plugs, and rowing in the Tyee Pool. I've always been involved in salmon fishing, and just want to put something back.

WWSS: Well Mike, you've done a lot for fish in the Campbell River area, and many, many people appreciate it.

Note: Shortly after this interview, Mike Gage was awarded the Community Stewardship Award by the District of Campbell River.