

Being salmon: The cycle of life — and death

BY G.A. BRADSHAW

I'm going to die. Time is running out for me and for my companions, my brothers of the river who, like me, were born in these waters four years ago.... Our lives are coming to an end after a long, dangerous journey but we have made it here to the place where we first emerged into the world, the place where we have chosen to die.



You can learn a lot from salmon.
Photo: Igor Shpilenok.

This is the voice of a Salmon narrated in the documentary, *Land of the Giant Bears*. After several years of living in the wide Pacific, the fish return home to spawn—lay or inseminate eggs in the streambed gravel where they were born. The journey is arduous, and many have begun to die even before they give life.

Their bodies, weakened by labor and age, become splotched by skin-changing fungi. Yet wherever they reside—from ocean saltwater, stream highways and byways, to reaches of tiny, natal creeks—the salmon are home. An appreciation for the unity of fish and water is reflected in the now popular phrase, “like a fish out of water,” used by Geoffrey Chaucer. The 15th-century English storyteller drew on a common saying about our scaly kin to describe the extreme unease and awkwardness that we feel in unfamiliar, uncomfortable places or situations.

Certainly, the last legs of the salmon’s journey home are physically uncomfortable. Their bodies are spent, and natal waters often require deft navigation to successfully wind a way along the rocky spines. Indeed, there are many moments when they are “fish out of water.” Salmon who travel up the creek running below our cabin are two or more feet in length. In many places, they are too big for the waters to cover. You can sense the salmon’s relief when a glistening green pool is reached where she can rest and literally catch her breath. But, even under less stressful conditions, salmon are in physiological tension every place they occupy.

They are anadromous, meaning that they are fish who live in salt and fresh water. In both cases, the composition of their environment is radically different from that of their own internal systems. On average, ocean waters are three times

as concentrated with ions (salts) as the salmon’s interior. In fresh water, the opposite is true. Creek waters are much more dilute.

To thrive and maintain well-being

in these environments, salmon use *osmoregulation*. Young salmon emerging from their freshwater birthplace do three things: drink a lot of water, decrease kidney production of urine, and initiate molecular pumps in their gill cells, which push ions (salts) out. These processes reverse when the fish return to fresh water. By this evolutionary magic, the fish’s internal fluids retain a healthy profile. Salmon are a perfect illustration of Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh’s reconfiguration of the Four Noble Truths.

These four truths—the existence of suffering, causes of suffering, cessation of suffering, and the way, or path, to cease suffering—might be thought of as cornerstones of Buddha’s spiritual home. Thay (Teacher), as the nonagenarian is affectionately and respectfully called, suggests that instead of defining and describing the Four Truths in terms of suffering, we approach them from the perspective of well-being. “Even Buddha and Bodhisattvas suffer, but the difference between them and us,” Thay explains, “is that they transform suffering into joy.”

We see this miracle every moment in nature in our beautiful valleys and mountains. Salmon retain well-being through physiological transformation of chemical compositions, which would otherwise cause them great suffering and death, into solutions perfectly tuned to their internal needs. Every undulation of the salmon’s body and fins is flawlessly aligned with the lines of moving water. Inside and out, the salmon follows a path of wellbeing. Even when stretched out on the rack of pending death during the last moments of the spawning journey, salmon stay the course of well-being and life.

G.A. Bradshaw
The Kerulos Center
for Nonviolence
bradshaw@kerulos.org
kerulos.org

The sad state of the ‘Sap Tap Wrap’

BY LAIRD FUNK

Climate change? It is hard to get away from the subject these days. In our West, where, previously, a total of a few hundreds of thousands of acres burned were a mark of a bad fire year, fires have exploded to consume millions of acres, including a never-before-seen winter fire in Colorado. In our South this year, hurricanes were more intense than ever before, Texas suffered a crippling blizzard, and tornados hundreds of miles long erased whole cities.

Parts of the Midwest received months’ worth of rain in a few days or even hours. Yet even as disaster records were set, then broken and reset again, even as the lines between these terrible experiences and the increasing warming of our earth, especially the arctic, become clearer and clearer, there are still those who would insist that these extreme events are simply cyclical and not the result of anything man-made and that there was no need to change our ways.

Well, anyone who does not believe in climate change hasn’t talked to my maple trees here in the Williams area! Over the dozen years that I’ve been tapping our big-leaf maples for sap to make delicious syrup, easily noticeable changes have occurred, mostly in the last eight years.

The centuries-old rituals were much the same. You bundled up to stand the frigid temperatures, made your way through the woods drilling holes and setting spiles, and later you returned to gather often generous sap offerings. Afterwards came the pleasant hours spent tending to the evaporator fire and minding sap levels in the pans. Then finally you got that first delicious taste of still warm syrup on waffles. All of those things were still there this year. Tapping is reason to go outside when you think it is too cold to go outside and a chance to enjoy a once-in-a-year experience available only to those with the right trees and climate. It is always a guess as to how much syrup will result. One year I finished with over three gallons. Last year, I felt lucky to come away with three pints!



Laird Funk’s ribbon won in the “good ol’ days.”

So, what did change? Well, you can’t just go out and plug in spiles whenever you feel like it. There is a certain season when the sap rises up the trunk from the roots where it wintered and can be diverted out a spile and collected. Here in southern Oregon, that tapping season is a period in mid-winter where the temperatures range from the mid-to high-20s before sunrise to the mid-40s after noon.

For the first four years of tapping, that season was reliably around the middle of January. Then it changed just a bit. First it slipped to late January. The next year, it slipped a bit more to late January and early February. The next year it slipped a bit more, and the next, and the next, until finally last year it was the last week of February (two days) and the first of March (two days). The reason my “Sap Tap Wrap” disappeared from these pages was that tapping season began starting after the new spring deadline, February 1, and it seemed too unseasonal to me to have a tapping article in a spring issue. Not only did the dates change, but the duration also, from three weeks one early year diminishing to four days last year and then no days this year!

No days? Historically, the end of the tapping season would come when the temperatures rose into the 50s and the buds began to swell and open. The sap would still flow, but it would develop an off flavor called “buddy.” This year, after our welcome Christmas snows and New Year freezes, our local weather changed to unseasonably warm, mostly sunny afternoons, even if the lows stayed below freezing. The maple trees, like others, had experienced enough cold hours to suffice for a “winter.” Responding more to the afternoon highs than to the lows, the maple buds slowly but surely started swelling and then began opening. So essentially the season was over before it even began.

We’ll just keep our fingers crossed and hope there will be a tapping season next year. So, without sap, there was no tap—that’s a wrap!

Laird Funk • laird@funsonfarms.com

**YOU HAVE CHOICES
WHEN IT COMES TO MEDICARE.**

Let me help you find
the **best plan**
to fit your health needs.

Join Us At One Of Our Meetings
Fruitdale Grange
1440 Parkdale Dr. in Grants Pass
March 16th
10 am & 1 pm

Scottish Rite Temple
3581 Lear Way in Medford
March 22nd
10 am & 1 pm

Call Joe today at
541-846-0674
or
541-761-5674 (cell)
Joseph Longo Insurance

LEHI Family Owned & Operated Since 1976
Licensed-Bonded-Insured
CCB# 96496

PUMP SERVICE, INC.

WATER WELL
PUMP SALES, SERVICE & REPAIR
HAND PUMPS-FLOW TESTING
FILTRATION SYSTEMS
HOLDING TANK SYSTEMS
SOLAR PUMP SYSTEMS and MORE...

lechump@gmail.com

(541) 846-6662