



In the water, in the air, in the Great Divide

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Raging wind wants to rip the white hard hat from my hands. I've long given up keeping it on my head, though it was handed to me during a stern safety briefing before I boarded a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers barge for a trip down the Columbia River, through what any Oregonian knows as the gorge.

This barge doesn't carry grain or shipping containers like others on the river corridor. Its cargo is more special, even a little bizarre: young salmon. Instead of coasting down the river, the fish glide placidly in the holds of the specially designed barge like passengers lazing in cruise ship swimming pools. I can look down on them through metal grates as I shield my eyes from wind-whipped whitecaps crashing over the bow of the gray barge. Finally, I sit down on top of that danged hard hat to keep it out of the wind's fearsome grip.

We ask a lot of the gorge. It produces much of our energy; it carries our cars, trucks, trains and barges; it's our playground and refuge. We ask more of it now than ever -- playing here in ever-rising numbers, planning to construct a casino and resort.

Are we asking too much? We set out on the barge from The Dalles to Bonneville to see.

The gorge is where the Northwest comes together: people, nature and the elements. It bridges all the environments that make this region, with mossy rainforest and dry prairie mere minutes apart. It is, in many ways, the center of everything we've done to fish, and for them. The dams, of course, but also the billions spent to help fish course up and down the river. As much as it may have changed, the gorge remains a place where we can watch through a window in the depths of a dam as giant old salmon, battered and bruised, push upriver one last time.

It's a confluence of water, air, land and politics, where the Columbia finds its only escape through the Cascade Range. The air is harder to see, but anyone who's held onto his hat knows the gorge holds a river of that, too, rushing east or west, depending on the season. The gorge funnels the incredible energy of those rivers together, providing the perfect place to tap the water's energy with dams, and the air's energy with the wind turbines that rise on hillsides.

There is a human energy here, too. Hikers clamber up the lush canyon of Eagle Creek and the wildflowered slopes of Dog Mountain; tourists (yes, we're all tourists sometimes, and that's not so bad) bathe in the mist of Multnomah Falls; mountain bikers fling themselves off rocks; kite-boarders ride the air. We play in the gorge in greater numbers per acre than any other chunk of public land in the region, so it's also where we revel in the water, air and land that make it what it is.

There's no hiding the fish barge. Big white signs on the side label it: "Juvenile Fish Transportation."

The salmon once rode the river, from spawning grounds through the Columbia Gorge to the sea, on their own. That was always hazardous. Now, it's made more so by dams and predators such as sea lions or terns lurking in the eddies, so biologists load hundreds of thousands of smolts onto barges every spring to give them an easier, safer ride toward the ocean.

Chugging down the Columbia, the barge plows into the river of wind blasting in the other direction, passing the anonymous white compound in The Dalles where Google servers house umpteen-billion bytes of data whipping like wind across the information superhighway. The gorge lured Google, just like the now-defunct aluminum smelter nearby, with inexpensive electricity generated by the water the fish and I are riding.

The water -- in floods greater than we can imagine, racing faster than a sports car on I-84 -- carved the gorge thousands of years ago and has smoothed and shaped it ever since. Before The Dalles Dam went up 40 years ago, the Columbia thundered through chasms more than 200 feet deep, carrying young salmon quickly to the ocean. In those same chasms Native American fishermen at places such as Celilo Falls caught adult salmon on their way upstream.

Now the falls lie underwater. The river spreads across shallow flats where predators hover, picking off unwary salmon that slide by. The Corps of Engineers plans to spend nearly \$40 million on a wall below The Dalles Dam to shunt salmon away from those slow, lethal shallows and instead into the faster-moving currents.

It's easy to scorn the dams because of the way they changed the river and the way they affect fish. Plenty of people do in these days of Endangered Species Act lawsuits. But I can't help but find them fascinating, daring even. Before boarding the barge at The Dalles, we stood on the edge of the dam and looked down at water shooting from spillways as if it were blasting out of a jet engine.

The dams may have harnessed the water, but they haven't tamed the river. The energy they generate gives our region about the greenest energy grid in the nation, with far less greenhouse emissions and pollution than the coal plants that power most of the country. If you look at a map of coal plants, the Northwest has almost none. The dams -- and the river and gorge -- are the reason why.

The dams have forced salmon to adapt, and amazingly they have, perhaps faster than we ever could. Two fish ladders at The Dalles Dam give salmon a route upriver. If one shuts down for some reason, salmon find their way to the other ladder in a matter of minutes.

"Sometimes we don't give them enough credit," Miro Zyndol, a biologist at the dam for 13 years, tells me. "They're very intelligent. They search for a solution."

The dams also have adapted, slowly, to the salmon. When the Corps of Engineers built the dams decades ago, salmon were so plentiful they were almost an afterthought. Today, the Corps retrofits dams with elaborate device to funnel increasingly precious salmon away from deadly turbines.

The river gains its energy flowing more than 1,200 miles. It drains most of the inland Northwest, but it gains some nasty stuff along the way: mining and agricultural waste, and pesticides that settle out in slack pools behind the dams. Great white sturgeon that scour the bottom of those pools for decades are now so polluted themselves that male fish produce female hormones. That may well be why fewer young sturgeon seem to exist in the river today.

The fish swimming beneath me in the barge tanks may be safer than they'd be in the river, but do they like it better? I doubt it.

Pine trees alongside the river lean with the wind, just like the kite-boarders flying and flipping so close to the barge it seems they're about ready to smack into its steel walls near Hood River. The captain steers straight through them.

Just as the gorge acts as a giant drain for water, it's also a drain for air. In winter the air tends to blow east to west, accelerating in a wind-tunnel effect as the gorge walls close in. In summer, west to east. Either way, the gorge unwittingly becomes a kind of giant toilet bowl for the Northwest, collecting all the crud in the air just as it does everything in the water.

In summer it gets Portland's offal; in winter it gets what comes from the east, including the Tri-Cities, feedlots and the Portland General Electric coal-fired power plant near Boardman.

This is why the gorge's air puts it among the most polluted natural areas in the West, much worse than the Grand Canyon -- which gets lots of notoriety for its skies -- and about as bad as national forests near Los Angeles. The gorge also drizzles acid fog and rain over plants and ancient rock etchings.

The Gorge gets as many visitors -- about 2 million a year -- as a large national park, but it lacks the same protections. They talked of making it a park, but the compromise struck by lawmakers and approved by President Reagan instead made it a national scenic area, which sounds impressive but leaves a lot open to interpretation. So while the gorge has the prominence of a park, it doesn't have the same foundation.

The guiding standards say, for instance, that air quality must be "protected and enhanced," but nobody is sure exactly what that means, or who enforces it. Even if we nailed down the meaning, the law that

created the scenic area warns against any kind of "buffer zone" to limit outside activities. So wilderness areas in nearby national forests have more protection from haze than the gorge does.

From the deck of the barge, I can't see the ridges where wind turbines are popping up like wildflowers to draw energy from the wind that's plastering my face with spray. The turbines are controversial for possibly intruding on the view. But they remind me of the dams. Given the choice, who wouldn't pick a windmill over a coal plant?

Clouds close in like curtains as the barge pulls around the bend toward Cascade Locks and Bonneville Dam.

Waterfalls dribble down the walls on the left in what's called the "waterfall corridor." It's a little-known detail of recreation history that the secretary of agriculture, on the recommendation of U.S. Forest Service Chief Henry Graves (the successor to Gifford Pinchot), in 1915 created the Columbia Gorge Park division of what was then the Oregon National Forest.

Only 13 years after Crater Lake National Park was created, the 22-mile stretch of the gorge from Warrendale to Viento was set aside to protect its scenic and recreational value -- and put off-limits to logging and homesites. It was, in spirit, Oregon's second national park, but it never really got recognition.

Even now the Forest Service, even with its funds stretched thin, doesn't charge along much of that stretch, keeping it a free and open piece of Portland's backyard. "If we'd charge a fee in those places, we'd make a lot of money because they get heavy use," says Stan Hinatsu, who manages recreation out of Hood River for the Forest Service. "But we're not just about making money."

Hinatsu has shepherded recreation here since 1986, when Congress made it a national scenic area. The gorge is by far the most heavily used Forest Service area in the Northwest, judged by numbers of people per acre, and it's likely to become even more so as Oregonians search for cheap and easy outings in an age of \$4-a-gallon gasoline.

About 70 percent of people who visit the gorge go hiking, another near-record for areas managed by the Forest Service. That's a blessing, given that many more people reason to care. But it's a curse: People love the gorge so much that in place, they carve their own hiking and biking trails.

At Cape Horn, Hinatsu and I walk on one of these homemade trails through a damp forest, drops falling on our shoulders and mud squishing under our shoes. The Forest Service has spent millions to buy some of this land -- especially on the Washington side -- and hasn't had the time and money to build trails.

The trail-building may be well-intentioned, Hinatsu tells me, but it also may run roughshod over sensitive plants or wildlife areas that the Forest Service protects. "There's this recreation demand here -- there's a pattern of use," he says. "How do we balance that with our responsibility to protect the resources?"

Mountain bikers and hikers roam a similar area at the east end of the gorge known as Coyote Wall, etching trails in the cheatgrass. Now the Forest Service has brought several of them together to lay out a trail system that works for everybody. But it'll only work if everyone pitches in to care for it, and watch out for it, too.

About like the gorge itself.

Are we asking too much of the Columbia River Gorge?

I don't think so. We may have changed it, but it has its own power and energy, even with everything we squeeze out of it.

I get off the barge at Bonneville Dam, just before it cruises downriver a few miles farther to drop its load of fish. Then they're on their own.

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