

## The Mind of the Fisherman by John Seidensticker illustrated by Shirley Cleary

**M**y father is a fisherman. Some of my earliest boyhood memories are of my father coming home after dark, his fish basket lined with grass and full of trout. Newly caught trout combined with freshly pulled grass have a lovely smell. On summer evenings, Father would hurriedly pack us all in the car after work and rush the three miles to the ranch. I remember him returning to the ranch house after dark with his fish basket full of trout and his waders or boots sloshing water. No one worried that it was after dark; we didn't expect him to stop fishing until he could no longer see. If he was a little later than usual in returning, the only remarks I remember from Grandpa or Aunt Nettie were about how the fish really must be biting tonight. Mother didn't say anything—at least in public she didn't say anything.

When I was a boy, Father sometimes took me fishing, although I usually didn't catch fish. As it got dark, I would see all kinds of animals in the logs and snags on the river bank, and the mosquitoes were bad after dark. I lost interest in fish and fishing and, when I was old enough to do so, I found reasons not to go.

This did not set well with Father. If I wasn't going fishing with *him*, then I should just go *fishing*. He bought me fishing gear for birthdays and Christmas. I remember him usually getting around to asking most young women I brought home, "Do you like to fish?" His further interest was directly related to the response.

All the years I was in college, Father urged me to "go fishing." Except when I was in places like the Idaho Primitive Area and Yellowstone National Park, where I could not ignore the large and numerous fish that live in the streams and rivers of these wild places, I remained uninterested in fishing. I like to haul out big fish as well as the next person, but big fish were not what Father had in mind when he told me to "go fishing."

I believe that Father had in mind "the process of fishing" and "the mind of the fisherman." This is what had never caught on in me: leaving work for a different world; getting the gear ready; reading the weather, water, and the fish; casting the fly or the lure—the wholeness of it all coming together as the fish rises to take the perfectly cast fly. Bringing the fish home was never what fishing or being a fisherman is all about. What fishing *is* about is the perfect moment when fisherman, rod, line, water, and fish meet.

It seems not the way of sons to follow their father's advice, however wise. I opted to watch birds. I felt this was a more active pursuit. It was an acceptable—even if questionably acceptable—activity by Seidensticker standards. I could use

the fruits of bird-watching in papers I would write. I even got Father involved in a bird-watching project. Bird-watching was an activity I could offer as a counter when he suggested, yet again, that I go fishing. No matter, Father still urged fishing.

Time and events took me away from the clear, fast rivers and streams at the headwaters of the Columbia and the Missouri where I spent the first 30 years of my life. I lived and worked in Nepal, India, Thailand, Sri Lanka, and on the Indonesian islands of Sumatra, Java, and Bali. Father wrote of fishing in his regular letters. He sent me seasonal reports. When he visited me in Nepal, he brought me a rod, reel, and variety of hooks. So I tried fishing in the rivers of the Nepal terai (lowlands). Jim Corbett had written "The Fish of My Dreams" about fishing for mahseer in a nearby river. I didn't catch a fish and went back to watching birds. My cook was very happy to use the rod and reel. Even though he rarely caught a fish, that didn't matter. He was a fisherman.

I think it was at this point, when my Nepali cook was so happy to get a little time off to go fishing, that I began to realize there is an essential difference between fish and fishing. I began to watch fishermen. When I first saw those tall, slender, very dark men with their nets and baskets, I thought little of them. Sometimes we bought fish from them, a welcome addition to our diet of rice and curried vegetables.

Then, I began to see them as fishermen. These men and their families were a caste living in their own village near our research camp; they used their own language. I would stop and watch them ply their trade: They walked carefully together up a small stream, casting their throw nets together, rushing up, and gathering the net for the next stalk and cast, deftly extracting their small catch from the net and slipping it into the round, small-mouthed basket on their hips, plugging the basket top with a grass stopper. Bigger fish, fish the size my father would keep and larger, came from all-night trips they made up and down the river in their dugouts.

Depending on these fishermen for relief from a vegetarian diet prompted me to take a closer look at what was involved in being a fisherman in the Nepal terai. They were a beautiful people using very old methods to catch fish. They would work all night using their dugouts and torches and small spears to make the catch for our camp. They would spend all day, working in teams of three or four, stalking the small streams to catch a few minnows. These were a people, fishermen, fishing for survival. And the catch was usually poor.

These fishermen, and all the fishermen in the tropics using the old ways, are hunters living with the season and the changes in rains, wind, and tides. There are no wasted casts of the net nor is there wasted movement of any sort. They cannot afford extra effort. This is the way of life for the fishermen of

the tropical seas and rivers, the fishermen using the old ways.

I watched fishermen stalk heavy surf on the south coast of Java and easy surf on the coast of Bali. I watched fishermen fishing while clinging to poles surrounded by crashing surf on the south coast of Sri Lanka. I went to the fishing villages—the

government fisheries official what was to become of the fishermen living and working from the shore, he answered, “They must change.”

It is sad, but the fishermen of Asia that I watched are on the way out; they are as endangered as the tiger and other large



*“Morning on the Missouri”*

still cities where 10,000 and more people live—along the coasts of the Malacca Strait. People there are born, live, and die over the water, always within the smell of drying fish. In the Sundarbans of Bangladesh, I watched fishermen use trained otters to drive fish into their nets. Otter and man lived most of their lives together on small country boats, fishing in the nadis, gangs, and khals of those storm-lashed tidelands.

For a time I lived on the coast of India at Adyar. I walked the beach and watched the fishermen. For the first time, I talked with them. There was an old man with no family and a young man with a family who lived near my house; I met them almost every day for two months. I joined them when the entire fishing village turned out to help pull in a shore seine. The catch was always small relative to the effort. “Why?” I asked my fisherman friends. They pointed out to sea and told me that bigger boats were taking the fish. When I asked a

mammals I have studied. Dams reduce fish stocks up and down rivers by blocking spawning runs; offshore, motorized fishing boats take stocks that support shore-based fishermen; small inland streams are overfished. Fishing the old way is an endangered livelihood; more than their economic survival is at risk. Where will the fishermen go when the fish are gone? I don’t know.

I came home from Asia ready to go fishing with my father. And we did go fishing—it was a fine family trip to Canada. I came down with malaria.

I have not been fishing since. I suspect that one day I will go again, however. Sportfishing, as it has developed and is managed in this country, is a grand example of successful management of a natural resource. I feel the need to participate in this, and not remain apart from it. Consider the fishermen who are not so fortunate. ■