

#### **IV. Because Now We Know**

As they made their way back down the slough, Beth and Will cuddled close in the boat to stay warm. The wind had picked up and the clouds promised a dowsing if they didn't get down the bay soon. Even with his hat pulled down tight over his ears, Will heard the chirping call of the Osprey before anyone saw it. Suddenly, it plunged into the choppy water right in front of the boat and pulled a wriggling fish from the estuary. Pinning the slippery salmon tightly in its talons, the large brown and white bird flapped gently away to a broken topped tree near the shore where it dropped the meal neatly into a nest. Meanwhile, a second Osprey began to hover above the spot where the first hunter had found success. The four tired researchers watched in wrapped amazement as the bird dove into the water, this time coming up without any prize to show for its effort.

After the performance, Will turned to Mary with an angry face and growled something about how the lousy birds were eating all the fish that were benefiting from the marsh restoration. Then he began to grin as he saw the shock on her face. She realized that she had been tricked! Will knew better than most how the Osprey were a sign of the returning health of the estuary. He had fished most of his life and had seen so many changes over the years. He remembered when gill netters were allowed to take as many salmon out of the bay as they could net. He remembered how for a few years they had fished for scallops and then the scallops had disappeared. He knew that some years, the sardines were here and some years they weren't. He had fished salmon until the salmon numbers declined and then he had fished rockfish with everybody else until the rockfish were almost gone. Now he believed firmly that the tool of science, carefully planned, conducted and interpreted by trained scientists with the help of trained volunteers like he and Beth, held the answers. Not all the answers, of course, but perhaps some that would help to bring back the beautiful and rich bay he had spent his entire life on.

Now Mary was laughing at her folly as they continued on down the slough towards the docks by the mouth of the bay. As they got closer to the docks, the boat gently rose and fell on the backs of ocean swells coming in through the mouth of the estuary. The swells were a reminder of the unyielding power of the sea and a late season storm approaching the coast from the south. Winter weather had not yet succumbed to the wind and fog of summer.

Beth and Charlie, the botanists of the group, had been discussing the results of today's work. They were happy to see many different kinds of marsh plants beginning to colonize the restoration site. So far, no invasive, non-native species had shown up. This was a good sign since exotic plants and animals often take advantage of disturbed parts of the ecosystem to gain a place to begin to grow and dominate the native species. Their discussion was interrupted by a shout from one of the docks.

Across the water, sitting in his lawn chair with a cooler by his side, Will's friend Dave yelled a greeting out to the researchers and jokingly asked them how many crabs they had caught today. Then he held up a beautiful, large Dungeness crab for them all to see with a look of pride in his eyes. Will grinned and shouted back that for all his troubles all he'd ended up with was an empty shell, but he knew that big old crab was around somewhere and now he knew where.

By the time they got back to the dock, tied up the boat and unloaded the gear, the sun was low in the sky. As Will, Beth, Mary and Charlie were saying their goodbyes, Will's friend Dave came

walking up to the group to say hello and show them his catch for the day. He was pleased by their compliments and invited them all over for a crab feast at his house that evening.

During dinner, Dave listened intently as Will tried to explain what he and Beth and the scientists had been up to. Finally, Dave asked Will why he would spend so much time doing something that didn't end up putting a crab in the pot or a fish on the table. Will looked into his eyes and didn't say anything for a moment. Then he spoke quietly, but with great conviction, explaining how he felt that because now know so much more than we once did about the estuary, we have an obligation to work to restore that which has been damaged if we expect the estuary to keep providing for us.

Deep down, he truly felt that what had once been hidden from his eyes and the eyes of the other people he had lived and worked with, was now plain as day. The changes that had taken place during his life had made the place he now lived very different from what it had once been. Many of his favorite places and favorite things to do had become more and more difficult to do as poorly planned development, over-fishing, pollution, and forces from other parts of the world seemed to have conspired to change his way of life.

But now he saw a ray of hope, a way to restore the damaged areas with the benefit of knowledge that they had never imagined all those years ago. And he was proud that he and Beth were a part of the important work that was going to help restore the luster to this faded jewel of a place. In fact, the more he thought about it, the more he realized how many other people he knew were getting involved and helping to bring about the kind of changes that would respect the watershed, the estuary and the coast for their beauty and their bounty. As the sun dropped beneath the horizon, he and Beth expressed their thanks for the fine meal, said farewell to their friends and headed back upstream to their cabin in the woods.