



T. White, after Haida designs

## *Drumming Ceremony Invites Salmon to Spawn in Restored Hamm Creek*

John Beal, a scientist based in Seattle, Washington, has spent the last twelve years restoring the area's severely polluted Duwamish river and its tributary, Hamm Creek. He was intrigued when a Choctaw man approached him last winter and offered to conduct a ceremony to call salmon from the ocean to spawn in Hamm Creek, a once-thriving spawning ground. The man—whom Beal identified only as the "Choctaw gentleman"—said that his people have used the ceremony for centuries, noting that in years when they didn't conduct the ceremony, few salmon would return, but when the ceremony was held, salmon would always return in great numbers.

Although some salmon had already returned to the restored Hamm Creek, Beal accepted the offer. In January, the two men went to the mouth of the Duwamish River, where it flows into the Pacific. After praying, the Choctaw man played his flute for a time and then began drumming. Beal watched.

"I was skeptical, but sure enough, I began to see activity," said Beal. "I could see dorsal fins of the fish heading into the river from

the sea." Although salmon sometimes run during the day, Beal noted that they normally prefer to move upstream under cover of darkness and usually try to avoid humans.

A little later, the men headed upstream to Hamm Creek, where the Choctaw gentleman drummed for about twenty minutes. Soon, salmon began swimming toward him. "They would come and circle around, and if he stopped drumming, they would just lie there," said Beal. "When he would start drumming again, they would get all energetic and swim around again."

Beal's disbelief turned to awe as he watched. Before Hamm Creek had been cleaned and restored, it had served as a drainage ditch for the area's heavy industry. Now, salmon were moving up the channel in broad daylight through the middle of an extremely noisy, highly industrialized area. "This Choctaw gentleman [was] drumming, and the fish [were] coming to him. When I saw this, I said to myself, 'This is bigger than I thought.'"

The show wasn't over, however. The two men continued upstream to the spawning grounds, drumming as they went. By this time,

Beal had also acquired a drum. Despite the fact that the fish had to pass through three long culverts under roads, "They followed us like pied pipers. Whenever we stopped drumming, they would just lie there, and when we started drumming, they'd swim around and follow us."

Once they got the fish up to their traditional spawning grounds, the Choctaw man began playing music in order to get them to spawn. Using a hundred-forty-year-old wooden flute, passed down from his father and grandfather, the man "made beautiful, melodious music, and sure enough, as he played, the fish began to spawn right there in front of us." Spawning in broad daylight is very unusual for salmon, said Beal.

Impressed by the first day's results, Beal and his friend repeated the procedure over the next sixteen days to ensure a bountiful spawning run. When Beal asked his friend why the fish come to the drum, the Choctaw man said that his people think that the sound of the drum sounds in the water like the sound of fish spawning, and that they are drawn upriver to that sound. "It could be so," Beal said. "We have much to learn here."

Although salmon had been gradually returning to the stream since it had been cleaned up, the fish that came upriver during the ceremony made a significant impact on the river's salmon population. When Beal and a State Fish and Game official checked on the fish that had hatched since the spawning ceremony, they found the creek full of fry. Beal asked the official if he could estimate roughly how many fish were in the creek. The man said, with a smile, "John, you have more than a million fish in this ditch." John wryly reminded him, "It's not a ditch any more, wouldn't you say?" The official had to agree.

Beal has since related the story of the ceremony to several other Native American men, who have said, "Oh sure, we know about that." Some of them have since started working with Beal in river restora-

tion and watershed reclamation projects in the area.

For over a decade, John Beal has devoted his life to cleaning and reestablishing the ecologic integrity of streams and watersheds. His motivation to do something constructive in his own community grew out of a sense of guilt he felt, as a Vietnam vet, for the damage our country did in Vietnam. He believes that if people could direct the type of energy expended in Vietnam through positive channels, "then we could really make a difference in people's lives."

When Beal first began dragging old refrigerators, tires, and other trash from the Duwamish River and Hamm Creek, and planting the banks with hundreds of trees, locals laughed at him. However, Beal's unassuming and respectful manner gradually began to win friends and influence people, even in an area where logging is an important source of income. Now, neighbors help keep the river clean, and students come to it to learn about stream restoration.

In order to expand his restoration efforts and involve the public—particularly schoolchildren—in similar projects, Beal has now established an organization called I'M A PAL (International Marine Association Protecting Aquatic Life). Recently, fifty-seven government agencies joined Beal to form the Green/Duwamish River Watershed Alliance. The Alliance intends to reclaim 438 miles of an entire watershed, at an estimated cost of \$180 million.

"Our goal is to bring the ecosystem back, step by step—the plants, the fish, the birds, the fox," says Beal. "It's fantastic watching people restore their own resources. It's all about empowerment. Empowerment leads to caring, and caring leads to moral obligation."

For more information, readers can contact I'M A PAL at 742 South Southern, Seattle, WA 98108.

Source: *The Joy Gazette*, June, 1994; and communication with John Beal.