

The Endangered Species Act and the Fisherman

By Del Albright, BlueRibbon Ambassador

Sixty feet under the warm Mexican waters off the coast of San Felipe, the giant creature swam effortlessly, constantly on the prowl for food. Weighing a hundred pounds, he could pretty much eat anything he wanted, so when he saw the Corvina rock fish dangling in his path, not trying to escape, the monster went in for the kill.

On the surface, lulled by the tropical sun, I drifted in and out of a sleepy state as our old boat drifted lazily with the Baja current. The smell of salt air was strong, but the wind was light. We used parachute cord hand-line for fishing in these Mexican waters because the fish were so big, rods and reels were just too slow on the retrieve for meat fishing. I came suddenly awake when the hand-held fishing line began to tighten in my gloved hands.

Strung over my knee, down under my foot, then over the boat gunnels, the hand-line set up was designed to transmit the fight of a fish throughout the lower half of my body. Immediately there was no doubt that I had a big fish on the line. My gloves began to smoke as the line streamed out to sea. I tugged back with all my strength and began to haul the line in hand over hand. I pushed down with my shoe on the hand-line to increase the tension against the big guy on the other end.

“Old Red Wing,” our sixteen foot, fiberglass over wood boat, started moving faster than the ocean current as the big monster pulled me and the boat along. Red Wing got her name from the red wind wings that came off the windshield, on what otherwise was a white boat. It was also the name of my Dad's favorite song that had the words, "Now the moon shines tonight on pretty red wing." I remember that it didn't seem like much boat in that large ocean.

Thirty minutes later, with a little help from my Dad, I had the monster up to the boat. It was right at one hundreds pounds. Not bad for a sixteen year old kid!

Today, when I think back nearly forty years to that fishing trip, I have mixed memories. The fish was called a Totuava (pronounced two-tuava), a Marlin-sized croaker and close relative of the White Sea Bass. They hardly exist any more. At least the big boys are gone. They were fished to near extinction in the late 1960's. Commercial fisherman used everything from dynamite to gill nets to catch these Mexican monsters.

It makes me shake my head over their loss. It almost makes me wish there had been something like the Endangered Species Act (ESA) back then. But the ESA today really makes me shake my head. This is a two-headed serpent.

Had there been some sort of International ESA, maybe the Totuava would still be swimming in the Sea of Cortez. But then again, if you look at today's ESA, you see how ludicrous the current form of the Act really is. Today's ESA is in bad need of reform.

Today's ESA puts third generation ranchers off their land and out of their home. Today's ESA cuts off water to hundreds of farms over some obscure sucker fish that no one likes, eats or cares about. Today's ESA puts the livelihood of an invisible gnat over the needs of people and homes. The list goes on. The ESA needs reform.

We need a version of the ESA to keep wonderful critters like the Totuava from going the way of Klamath farmers or Old Red Wing (who went to the boat grave yard years ago). But we do not need a piece of legislation that completely lacks common sense. We need to protect people and private property rights while still managing our resources with common sense laws.

In fact, if we can find some political candidates who run on a platform of common sense, then I say we get behind them and support them whole heartedly. Further, I would hope that these same candidates (or existing politicians) would put some common sense back in the ESA.

Dad and I were catching Totuava back in the 60's by launching old Red Wing through the surf on a completely undeveloped and nearly deserted beach right outside San Felipe. Now, as you can guess, there is a lot of development and boat docks – but less fishing.

It's the way things go today. It's called growth and change. We just need to manage this growth. But we must put common sense back in politics and government. Hopefully the common sense that President Bush's administration is trying to put back in government will filter down to local National Forests and BLM lands for our recreational needs.

No matter how you look at it, the key is for us to be involved and included in our own future. Even good, common sense politicians can't read your mind and know what you need for your form of recreation. We must tell them. The same goes for our public land managers. We must also be included in their decisions about our land and waters.

Yes, we need to manage and conserve our resources. Yes, we need to be part of national and international efforts to keep wonderful critters like the Totuava from disappearing. But NO, we do not need to sacrifice generations of ranching or recreation or anything else unnecessarily to fulfill some two-bit yuppie's dream of saving the world. The ESA needs to be reformed with a big hunk of common sense thrown in the mix.

Whether you're a fisherman, hunter, motorized recreationist, sand duner, dirt biker, mountain biker, equestrian, atv'er, rock collector/miner, or whatever, don't let your form of recreation go the way of the Totuava.

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