

THE ECONOMICS OF ESTUARY: SHOULD NATURE HAVE A PRICE?¹

Ginger Strand[©]

IN 1915, when my grandmother Mildred was a teenager, her older brother Ray left home and went west to find his fortune. His trail can be traced today by lining up the increasingly dramatic postcards he sent back to the family in Michigan: Illinois, South Dakota, Montana, Idaho. Eventually, he wound up in Washington. He sent a view of a purple sunset over Puget Sound to his father. “Well, what do you think of *this*?” he wrote cockily on the back.

My grandmother kept those postcards all her life. She married my grandfather and they stayed in Michigan on his family farm: eighty acres of flat, hard clay with a tiny woodlot at one end, a wormy orchard at the other, and a foot-deep creek hurrying across the middle. They had dairy cattle, chickens, and pigs; they grew wheat and corn and most of their own food. They raised seven kids, six of whom made it to adulthood. The last of those was my father, who eventually bought the 160 acres next door. I learned the word for the country where I grew up after I left it—*hardscrabble*. By the time I escaped to college, family farms like ours were either sinking into Steinbeckian decrepitude, selling out to agribusiness, or subdividing into postage-stamp lots.

So, the first time I saw Washington’s Skagit River delta, I was as awestruck as my great-uncle Ray. I was on a trip sponsored by the Institutes for Journalism and Natural Resources. Our bus had driven about sixty miles north from Seattle, and there, at the edge of Puget Sound, we clambered out to gaze at peas and deep-green cabbages ripening in hearty rows. Nearby, stocky brown cattle bent square white brows to the grass. Barns were solid, and houses, many of them Victorian beauties, were flanked by lush lawns. I sent a digital photo to my father. “Well, what do you think of *this*?” To someone who grew up where I did, the Skagit delta looked like Shangri-La. It was, we were told as we stood at the field, some of the richest agricultural acreage in the nation. The land at the mouth of the West Coast’s third-largest river was famous for its high-quality vegetables and its valuable seed crops. It was blessed with rich soil and a moderate climate. It was also one of the most contentious places in the Pacific Northwest.

“This is ground zero,” said Kevin Morse of The Nature Conservancy, “for farmers versus salmon.” The Skagit delta has become a flash point in the battle to save the Pacific Northwest’s iconic fish. That’s because this patchwork of prosperous farms is sitting on land “reclaimed” from its delta. Just where the Skagit River should spread out and wander from side to side, where it should slow down and drop its sediment, it has been hemmed in with levees. Where tiny tributaries should be breathing tides in and out, water has been directed into ditches and sluiced through one-way tide gates out to sea. The delta’s marshes are filled, its boundaries are diked, its waters are pumped up off its fields and into the sound. Over the course of a century, the Skagit delta’s tidal wetlands have been almost eradicated. Apparently following them into oblivion are the salmon who depended on that brackish environment to rear their young.

And thus the conflict. Local Indian tribes, whose culture centers on salmon, want the fish back, and over the last couple of decades environmentalists have helped them file lawsuits demanding restrictions on farming to help restore the wetlands. They have demanded buffer zones to shade and protect streams, minimum water flows in tributaries, and an end to new dikes and new

¹ Orion Magazine, September/October 2010 issue

gates that keep the sea out. Indians see this as repairing the damage done over the last century to a priceless estuarine ecosystem. Farmers see it as trampling their property rights to plunge their farms back into the very muck their grandfathers vanquished. The standoff between farmers and Indians is deep, long-standing, and hostile. Each side sees itself as fighting for a way of life. Skirmishes, fought largely in the courts, have occasionally threatened to break out in actual gunplay.

Now, however, Kevin Morse explained to the assembled journalists, folks at The Nature Conservancy have found a way forward. They are trying a new approach: abandoning litigation in favor of using financial incentives to solve conflicts like this one. Years of “regulate then litigate” have failed to halt ecological devastation; the Conservancy thinks it’s time to try a market-based approach: pay, don’t punish. “We have to reinvent conservation,” Morse told us. “We want to connect conservation to the well-being of the community.” He spoke with the steady conviction of someone who has seen the Way.

People get worked up about salmon in the Pacific Northwest. Since chinook’s 1999 listing under the Endangered Species Act, saving salmon has come to symbolize the preservation of Puget Sound. But reversing the fish’s long decline in a place that has been as completely remade as the Skagit delta will require serious and concerted effort. It’s not really a question of conservation anymore, but restoration. The Conservancy seemed to be saying the language of markets might break the logjam of hostility and help farmers, ecologists, and tribal fishermen work together on that thorny problem. Coming from farm country myself, I could see the point. Farmers respect nothing so much as the bottom line. Besides, this place had been shaped not only by ditches and levees, but by decades of mistrust and cultural conflict. In such places, opposing sides have trouble even talking to one another. The cool language of economics might offer a valuable common ground. I decided to return and try to answer a question forming in my mind: what does it mean to change the language of ecology from morals to money? Is this a new, more pragmatic environmentalism—or the twilight of environmentalism’s best ideals?

Economists see nature the way they see everything: in financial terms. The collapse of a resource they call a “tragedy of the commons.” It happens, they say, because individual drive to profit conflicts with society’s interest in conserving a common asset. Fisheries are a common example: in the absence of regulation, a rational fisherman will fish as much as he can. That’s because he personally profits from catching too many fish, whereas everyone suffers equally when the fishery collapses. In other words, the cost of overfishing is “externalized.” How do we encourage people to make long-term decisions about resources that benefit everyone? The traditional approach has been to begin with a moral imperative: you must preserve things that we hold in common and value. Do we value fish? Clean water? Clean air? If so, we pass rules to limit how people may exploit them. This approach led to the raft of environmental regulation passed in the ’60s and ’70s—the Wilderness Act, the Endangered Species Act, the Clean Air Act. The hard part—enforcing those regulations—then began.

Lately, a new breed of prophets—call them eco-capitalists or free-market environmentalists—has begun to tout a new solution to environmental woes: markets. Resource conflicts, they say, are better solved by property rights: give individuals a property interest in something and they will conserve it. For instance, issue transferable licenses to fishermen that they can sell upon retiring, and they will work to conserve the fishery. You have internalized the cost of overfishing. This, they argue, is a more effective approach than a strictly regulatory one because it works with people’s innate tendency to act in their own self-interest. It doesn’t ask us to sacrifice or to think of others—it only asks us to protect what we own. In the end, the free marketeers say,

markets will work better than regulation because individuals won't fight what's good for the environment. They will profit from it instead.

With the help of proselytizers like Thomas Friedman, eco-capitalism is sweeping through environmentalism. Money, it seems, is green too. In Nicaragua, nonprofit Paso Pacífico pays local residents to forgo eating turtle eggs and let turtle hatchlings reach the sea. In Mississippi, USDA Farm Service Agency funds are used to “rent” land from farmers for black bears. In Florida, Plum Creek Timber Company gets state dollars for maintaining a preserve for threatened gopher tortoises. The model is expanding beyond preserving habitat. The most mentioned item in the 2009 UN Copenhagen Accord was UN-REDD, a plan to pay nations for not deforesting their land. The same idea drives “cap and trade” systems for polluters: don't tell people not to do the wrong thing—just pay them to do the right one.

Forget abstract morals and regulatory finger waving—put a market value on the resource. To farmers, this makes a lot of sense. John Muir complained of people who made everything “dollarable,” but farmers make a living yanking profit from the often unyielding ground. If it ain't dollarable, they're not interested—especially if they think someone's trying to tell them what to do with their land. At one point when I was young, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources became interested in wetlands and started encouraging farmers to leave native marsh plants alone. The rumor went around that the state had made it illegal to pick cattails. My grandfather mowed down a swath of them in the ditch that separated his farm from ours. *They can't tell me what to do with my own property.* You wouldn't talk to my grandfather about cattails, about how they filtered the water, or how muskrats ate them, or how their fat sausage shapes—comical, really, once cut—have a kind of dignity when they sway in a light breeze. He would snort and go for his gun. “A muskrat? Where?” God knows you wouldn't tell him it was immoral to cause a species to go extinct: that wasn't a language he spoke. But money: you could talk to my grandfather about that. If you told him that the cattails paid interest, he'd have built a fence around the damn things himself.

I go back to the Skagit delta for the fall harvest. It's October and the clear light falls like a benediction on the place farmers call the “magic Skagit.” Potato loaders are dropping blue and yellow spuds into waiting wagons and truckloads of jewel-red beets are zooming down lot-line roads. A snowcapped Mount Baker presides over fields dotted with orange pumpkins. I get into a pickup driven by The Nature Conservancy's Kevin Morse for another tour. “If you removed those levees that they built forty, eighty, a hundred years ago,” he says, pointing to a field as we pass, “the tide would come in and cover roughly thirty-five to forty thousand acres.” Kevin is manager of The Nature Conservancy's Skagit delta headquarters in Mount Vernon. A stocky, bearded man originally from Seattle, Kevin worked on the delta before joining The Nature Conservancy. His wife grew up in the region, so he knew its history, the endless skirmishes over stream flows, buffer zones, tide gate upgrades. He knows how the Indians mistrusted the farmers and the farmers mistrusted the Indians. He has a calm and unflappable manner that conveys a calculated unwillingness to take sides. He chooses his words carefully, but he gives you the impression he's thoughtful, not politic.

A few years ago, Kevin began to wonder if a market-based approach might help The Nature Conservancy make progress in the Skagit standoff. Environmentalists had mostly been suing the farmers. But what if they could figure out a way for farmers to profit from doing the right thing? The thing is, he knew they couldn't start with salmon. There was too much emotion around that. Any effort to restore salmon habitat on reclaimed delta land was bound to produce howls of protest among farmers. The Conservancy decided to start with something less controversial. They would start with birds. And they would talk about birds in dollars. “I think of providing

outcomes for wildlife as a crop, as a component of the operation. It's something else I can produce," Dave Hedlin says.

He's talking about shorebirds. The idea behind the Conservancy's first program on the delta, Farming for Wildlife, was simple: fallow farm fields provide valuable winter habitat for migrating shorebirds, including snow geese and trumpeter swans, if a little standing water is on them. So why not pay farmers to leave water on their fields in winter? The project could be a turning point in getting farmers to relinquish their century-old battle cry of "get the water off." And if they could get behind creating habitat for shorebirds, they might eventually grow used to the idea of creating habitat for salmon. The Conservancy collected seed money from the EPA, Washington State, nature organizations, and individuals, then put out the word that they were offering market-rate rents—annual rents for Skagit County farmland average around \$250 per acre—plus reimbursement for costs to farmers who created shorebird habitat. Responsibilities would include repairing berms, planting and mowing grass, and managing water levels on the fields. The Conservancy stressed that the program was temporary—three years. Eventually, Dave Hedlin and two other farmers agreed to try it out. In June of 2006, they each stopped operating a drainage system that normally channeled water off one of their fields. Dave's parcel was seventy acres.

Dave is a large man with an open face and an easy smile. He and his wife, Serena Campbell, own four hundred acres of good land edging La Conner, a small town near the mouth of the Skagit. "Grown while you watch by people you know," reads the sign on his farm stand. Dave is a third-generation delta farmer: his grandfather came from Denmark in 1904. He likes to tell jokes about his heritage. Dave: How can you tell an extroverted Scandinavian farmer? You: How? Dave: He stares at your shoes, instead of his, when he's talking to you.

Dave is one of the founders of Skagitonians to Preserve Farmland, the farmers' powerful nonprofit, and he's on the board of directors of the Northwest Farm Credit Services bank. He's a highly respected member of the community. Still, some of his neighbors got nervous when Dave teamed up with the Conservancy. When his field began to fill with water, a steady stream of pickups started cruising by, checking it out. "I predicted to Kevin exactly what would happen," Dave says. "At first, everybody would say, 'This is nuts,' and then about the time my first check came from the research project—it's a small community, everybody knows these things—about that time everybody would start thinking a bit and they'd call up Kevin and say, 'You know that stuff Dave is doing? I could do it cheaper than that.'"

Money was the lure. But there is another issue too, Dave tells me. Farmers are worried about development. On the Skagit delta, especially in the communities close to Interstate 5, farmland is rapidly being lost to sprawl: Mount Vernon has a new Wal-Mart, replacing the old Wal-Mart just across the highway, and Burlington, next door, has a hellish strip of outlet malls, franchise restaurants, and big-box stores. Even in more rural areas, housing developments are cropping up like the one advertising outside Burlington: "Bay Meadows: Estate-sized Lots!" Estate-sized lots net you quicker cash than potatoes, or even the region's valuable seed crops. "We don't have a system of valuing things that makes a lot of sense," Dave tells me. "We haven't answered the question of why a Krispy Kreme on asphalt on a piece of farmland is worth twenty dollars a square foot, but a farm growing food is worth so much less."

I offer to Dave that if the terms are economic, as he proposes, it's simple: the Krispy Kreme makes more money. He protests immediately. "But we don't have any way of tracking the costs of all these things. I would suggest that a good, well-managed farm in the Skagit delta probably produces a staggering value to society, whether it's the vegetable seed, the milk from the dairy,

the fresh-market potatoes, the wildlife benefits, the habitat benefits, the water quality benefits. The guy that does a really good job of stewardship isn't rewarded in the marketplace." People like Dave have a name for really small farmers—the kind with thirty acres, a kitchen garden, and a few alpacas. They call them "earth muffins." At the other end of the scale are agribusinesses like Archer Daniels Midland—corporations farming from the boardroom. Those people—whose staggering use of pesticides and nitrogen fertilizers makes agriculture the number one polluter of the nation's water—are known as "nozzleheads." Between the earth muffins and the nozzleheads are the farmers like Dave, or like my grandfather: family farmers who can maybe eke out a living, or even thrive, without resorting much to industrial practices. Environmentalists agree that family farmers are generally better stewards of the land than nozzleheads. But I suspect that's because they make some decisions based on something other than the bottom line. They are attached to their land—as land. A program that rewards them for ecological benefits to that land might help them make those decisions more often. "Everybody wants to do the right thing," Dave says, "and if there's no fear that you'll be punished for doing the right thing, you'll do it."

But we're not really talking about removing the fear of punishment. We're talking about adding an expectation of profit. Dave speaks with real warmth about his yellowlegs—among the thirty-plus types of birds that flocked to his flooded field. But he and his fellow bird farmers weren't just in it for the birds. They received rent and a small margin on expenses, and they improved their land. Leaving a field fallow helps rid it of soil-borne pathogens. The shorebirds who came left behind a lot of high-quality fertilizer in the form of guano. And Dave Hedlin used the time he was being paid to let yellowlegs stand around on his property to transition those acres to organic production, a normally expensive process, since Washington requires the land to be pesticide free for three years.

All of this sounds like a win-win situation. Except from the perspective of saving salmon—which is, after all, the priority problem on the Skagit delta. Even if a similar program were instituted for the fish—something folks at the Conservancy insist is possible—tribal advocates say it's too small-scale. Washington State's goal is to restore twenty-seven hundred acres of estuarine habitat for salmon. That's a big goal, and it will be hard to meet it with short-term, seventy-acre wetlands that pop up here and there on a voluntary basis. And if those twenty-seven hundred acres have to be rented at market rates, the cost is going to be unthinkably high.

Kevin and Dave admit that Farming for Wildlife alone is insufficient as a solution. Bigger thinking will be required. But they insist that the program's real value was demonstrating a new way of working together. That's how it was sold to donors. But as I'm talking to the two men, a nagging concern starts rattling around my head. With Farming for Wildlife, the Conservancy got farmers to consider wildlife habitat in their decision process. But they did so by redefining habitat. Once a priceless gift of nature, it had now become something one created—for a price. Private donors and public agencies had paid that price. The assumption was that they would be willing—and able—to keep paying it.

It looks like a Catch-22. Get people to throw money at a problem to demonstrate that cooperation is possible. Once everyone is cooperating, what reason do the donors have to keep paying? But what reason do the farmers have to keep cooperating? They have simply been trained to ask—and oh, this is beginning to sound familiar—where's my check? Farming for wildlife made it possible for the Conservancy to make its next project an actual habitat restoration. Kevin takes me to Fisher Slough to see it. Where I come from, a slough is an unbounded marsh, a tricky thing that looks like land, then gobbles your horse to its chin. To be "sloughed up" is to be lost or bogged down. But in Washington, a slough is a river's after-

thought, a blind tidal channel left behind when the river changes course. When Kevin and I climb out of his pickup at Fisher Slough, I'm a little disappointed to see that it's just a lazy greenish channel dividing two fallow fields. My grandfather would call it a "crik."

The Nature Conservancy has purchased sixty acres of private land bounded by Fisher Slough. By setting back levees and relocating a drainage ditch, they are converting that land into the tidal freshwater marsh beloved of young salmon. The project is exactly what farmers fear most: a wetlands restoration on farmland. But the farmers went along with it, Kevin tells me, because the Conservancy explained to them what a working wetland is worth—to farms as well as to fish. As their June 2009 press release puts it, wetlands "provide people and nature with a variety of essential services such as water filtration, protection from the effects of natural disasters and storm surges, and fisheries, as well as economic and recreational opportunities." That came toward the end of the press release: at the top was the fact that the project was creating fifty jobs. And shortly after the jobs came the news that the Conservancy was using some of the project money—again pieced together with grants from the EPA, several state agencies, local and national environmental organizations, and private donors—to upgrade the floodgates near the project on Fisher Slough: the farmers will get the flood protection of a working wetland, but they will also get the flood protection of better infrastructure.

The new floodgates have just been installed, and as soon as we arrive, an orange-vested worker waves us over to admire them. We scramble down the bank to gaze at the large, green squares. They look heavy. Everyone is clearly impressed with them. Somehow it got around that these were the largest or second-largest gates on the West Coast, and that has dialed up enthusiasm for the project among the hard-hat set. Also, the fact that the project received \$5.2 million in federal stimulus funding. Kevin and I leave the gates and walk along the berm that currently keeps Fisher Slough off the adjacent fields. We startle a deer as we scramble up the side of the bank to gaze at the green water. A salmon rolls its thick gray body to the surface and a chocolate-brown mink scampers down the dike. "What's the cost of not having the ability to raise our own food?" Kevin asks. "What's the cost of not having healthy salmon runs?" "What is the cost of not having healthy salmon runs?" I ask. His answer is quick. "Salmon are an indicator species of the health of an entire system. If you don't have the salmon you don't have the eagles upstream. If you don't have salmon you don't have orca. If you don't have salmon you don't have the nutrients from their dead carcasses, which feed all the other wildlife in the system. It might sound simple, but it's far-reaching." Far-reaching, yes. But I can't help but wonder, is it quantifiable? Once you shift the language from higher values to market value, you have to come up with a number. And if the number's too high, you walk.

In the Skagit County Historical Museum in La Conner, wedged between antique farm implements and silver cups awarded for the best sheaf of wheat at the county fair, a display case holds labels from cans of salmon. There's an astonishing variety of elaborate logos, mostly in shades of pink and red. Not long ago, the nozzleheads were making a killing on fish. The brands are all gone today—Lynx, White Rose, Laurel Wreath, Red Star, Gibraltar, Faust. Today, not even the Swinomish Indian tribe—787 enrolled members—can subsist on salmon. They have diversified into crabs, sea urchins, sea cucumbers, and geoducks—giant clams prized in Asia. As a dollarable resource, salmon are already gone. What Washington is facing is not how to conserve a valuable resource, but how much money to spend on getting one back. If you need more than a return of the fish—if, as in any other economic endeavor, you require a return on investment—the price might simply be too high.

Kevin's background is in economic development. He has a degree in business administration. His first job in the region was for the Economic Development Association of Skagit County, who

hired him to mediate a battle between environmental groups and the Port of Skagit County, which wanted to build a rail spur through one of the last remaining forested wetlands in the delta. The Audubon Society and Friends of the Earth had filed suit, but Kevin hammered out a deal before it went to court. There too, he avoided talking about values or preservation, instead putting a monetary value on the wetland. “We’ve always looked at things in terms of very limited values from nature that we knew,” Kevin says, driving me by the preserved wetland. “What’s the real value of a forested wetland system? Here what we learned was that there’s a huge value not just for nature, but all of this holds the water off the farmlands a little. If they mowed over all of this, the farms would be underwater in this drainage district. It was a functional value that no one really thought about.”

I ask him if everything in nature has a functional value that can be expressed in dollar terms. He says yes. But what about some obscure beetle that barely differs from other beetles, I press him, or a skink that plays no discernible role in its ecosystem? What if something like that was locking the potential for huge amounts of economic good? “I don’t know if I could say ubiquitously yes,” he says after a thoughtful pause. “I would say intuitively yes. Somewhere there must be a connection to humans that’s just not understood.” Free-market environmentalists love the idea of putting an actual value on the benefits of a healthy landbase. They call this “environmental services.” There’s almost a sense of relief in the phrase. Not the environment—that huge, nebulous elephant whose whiskery tail we blind folks are holding in one hand, but a service: something tangible, quantifiable, and real. A service has a monetary value.

Values, on the other hand, are a treacherous swamp; they shift, they slough you up. Free-market environmentalists say abstract talk about ideals is why the old mode of regulation has failed: it forces greens to make fuzzy ethical arguments about what people *ought* to do. That makes it possible for Dick Cheney to call energy conservation “a sign of personal virtue.” Quantifiable economic gains are easier to defend than virtues. In a 1998 *Journal of Political Ecology* paper, three economists tried to run the numbers on the Skokomish River, another Puget Sound river where salmon stocks collapsed. Over twenty-two dense pages, the economists try to quantify the loss of this “natural capital” to the Skokomish Indians, who, like the Swinomish, were fishing folk. They divide the loss into two categories: the first, loss of income from the wildlife, is difficult, but not impossible, to calculate. But the second, loss of community through the loss of the natural world around which it organized itself, is much more difficult to quantify. In the end, the authors throw up their hands. They repeat what one Umatilla Indian told them: “How can I tell what the salmon are worth? The salmon define who I am.” It’s my treaty right to protect these salmon,” Brian Cladoosby says. “It’s my treaty right to protect this water.”

Tribal chairman of the Swinomish Indians, who have lived on the delta for eons, Brian is an energetic man with wire-rimmed spectacles and an air of listening hard and speaking quickly, as if he’s reluctant to waste time. The treaty he’s talking about, the 1855 Treaty of Point Elliott, hangs on the walls of the council chamber behind him, each page individually mounted under a black mat with red trim. This is the original document promising the region’s Indians access to their ancient fishing and hunting grounds in exchange for large tracts of land. Brian’s great-great-grandfather put his “X” on the document. The tribe spent the next hundred and twenty years fighting to get what was promised in exchange for that mark. In 1974, Judge George Boldt issued the U.S. District Court resolution giving Washington Indian tribes legal title to half the state’s harvest of fish, shellfish, and game. Intensely controversial at the time, the decision was upheld by the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals and, in 1979, the U.S. Supreme Court. With this right, Indians came to see themselves as co-managers of Washington’s wildlife. Ironically, the Boldt Decision gave tribes exactly what free-market environmentalists say is the solution: a

property right in nature. Yet what Brian is talking about isn't a right to the salmon. He is talking about a right to protect them. He's defending not a property right, but a birthright. And that is much harder to price.

When Indians talk about salmon, they cite numbers and statistics and dollar amounts, but it's usually not very long before their language changes. They talk about the central place of salmon in their culture, about their ancestors, their children, about God. Eventually, they reach a point where words fail. On my first trip to the Skagit delta, at a journalists' meet-and-greet, Billy Frank Jr., a Nisqually tribal elder, spontaneously took my arm and pulled me aside. He wanted to tell me something important. "The baby salmon, he's always looking out for predators," Billy said, hunching himself down and peering up over one shoulder. "He's always swimming and he's got to have food, and he's got to have a place to hide." For a moment he looked like a salmon, half angry, half fearful. Billy is a local legend. He was arrested over forty times at tribal "fish-ins" in the decades before Boldt; today, at seventy-seven, he is chairman of the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission and one of the region's most widely respected Indian leaders. His brief embodiment felt intense. He wasn't talking about fish; the fish was who he was.

It's tempting to see this as the source of the culture clash on the Skagit delta—the Indians value salmon for abstract reasons, the farmers simply see a conflict between resources. But when we were having lunch at a local restaurant called Seeds, I asked Dave Hedlin why he was fighting to preserve farmland, instead of just taking the payout he could get by selling his farm to developers. There was a long silence filled only by light restaurant music and the civilized murmur of diners. I wondered if I'd angered him. "It's complicated," he said at last. "We love what we're doing. I struggle financially, but you don't find vocations that are this rewarding everywhere—to be the third generation on a family farm, to have a strong sense of multigenerational stewardship and soil stewardship . . . Back when we were starting we didn't have a lot of employees—Serena drove the combine and I drove the trucks and we did everything ourselves. But when you scoop up a handful of cabbage seed, it's like black gold, and you know that that handful of seed will be fifty tons of heads of cabbage in Holland or Korea or Africa within a year . . ." He stopped, one palm up in the air, cupping an imaginary handful of black gold. Words failed him. I wasn't sure numbers would be much more help.

The opening of the Endangered Species Act is labeled "Findings." This is what we know to be true:

Various species of fish, wildlife, and plants in the United States have been rendered extinct as a consequence of economic growth and development untempered by adequate concern and conservation.

These species, the Act goes on to say, are of "esthetic, ecological, educational, historical, recreational, and scientific value to the Nation and its people." Financial value is not mentioned: money, the Act assumes, is not what urges us to conservation. Instead our obligation is "safeguarding, for the benefit of all citizens, the Nation's heritage in fish, wildlife, and plants." Not a moral, not a resource: a heritage. To value something means to esteem it, to treasure it. It also means to assign it a dollar worth. The language of finance and the language of ethics are wound around each other like vines.

Economists talk as if replacing values with value will cause us to act in a predictably logical way, but our relationship to property is not so straightforwardly rational. At times we become attached to property; at other times we squander it. Sometimes we grow to hate it. After my grandmother had a stroke and died, my grandfather began dragging their possessions to the

backyard and burning them. Books, pictures, calendars, furniture, clothing: he fed his worldly goods into the bonfires of a grief he could never voice. Relatives went over and snuck things out, to save them from the flames. My grandfather was not unusual: our connection to the stuff of this world waxes and wanes with our stake in it. Do economists never read *King Lear*? Young people care less for things than they do for inventing themselves, and old people grow impatient with their objects, their lands, even, finally, their children and their own accomplishments. Slowly we loosen our grip. The language of economics makes no room for that knowledge: man the market-maker is not a thinker, but a striver and a doer. Eternally promoting his self-interest, he is never lost or bogged down, never howling his anger out on the heath. He is not a giver but a taker of what he can get; he is not a lover, but merely a disseminator of his genes. Is that really who we want to be? Are we completely ready to forgo the language of values—to stop speaking of memory, responsibility, love?

When I drive off the Swinomish reservation, I pass a farmstand with a hand-painted sign: “Remember our peaches?” It fills me instantly with nostalgia for my grandparents’ runty orchard, for the smell of applesauce cooking on the stove, for my grandmother joyfully watching birds out her kitchen window. Economics may be a useful tool, but even in the world of commerce, it doesn’t completely dictate our relationship to the natural world. Right here, at a stand selling peaches, there’s more to a peach than its price.

One evening while I’m still in Washington, my cell phone rings. It’s Kevin. He says he’s been thinking about the question of whether nature is always essential. “At the Conservancy,” he says, “we think the conservation of land, waters, and things that fly and swim and crawl is one of the fundamentals of life. But there will be times in the future where we have to make tough choices.” Understanding the actual value of natural systems, he tells me, can help us do that. You have to make resource decisions,” he says, “and say where you are going to get the most value for your dollar.”

It’s a rational statement. And here, in a place where emotion has led to standoffs and bitterness, rationality is highly prized. But if I’ve learned something on the Skagit delta, it’s that emotion is the only language either farmers or Indians have to set against the inexorable logic of the market. Dave Hedlin knows the market value of a pound of cabbage seed. But even he can’t say what a cabbage is worth. The cabbage defines who he is. Market logic eventually carved up my family’s farm. Land in inland southwestern Michigan is not rich like the Skagit delta, and besides, none of us kids wanted to stay and farm it. My father sold it off in pieces, reserving one five-acre lot for each child. I was living in New York, trying to write a novel, so he sold mine for me and sent me a check for \$5,000. A manufactured home now sits on my birthright. Would a better system of valuing its benefits to nature have saved it? I doubt it. Even factoring in environmental services, the bottom line was not likely to outdo the land’s value to developers. And in the church of economics, the bottom line is the word of God.

The Indians are not of that church; for them the bottom line is just a number. Nor do the farmers bow down to it, or they’d have all sold out to Krispy Kreme by now. And I don’t believe the bottom line is true gospel for Kevin Morse, either. When we were walking along the levee at Fisher Slough, he told me that he went east for a while, to work on the Chesapeake Bay. He saw communities under siege from development; he saw watermen whose livelihood was being destroyed by dead zones. It made him determined to prevent Puget Sound from going the same way. The Skagit delta is the kind of place, he tells me, that he wants his kids to inherit. Actually, what he says is, “That’s just something I want my kids to live into.” Words fail, but I understand. Besides, he has tears in his eyes.