
Etceteras . . .

The Salmon Trap

An Analogy for People's Entrapment by the State

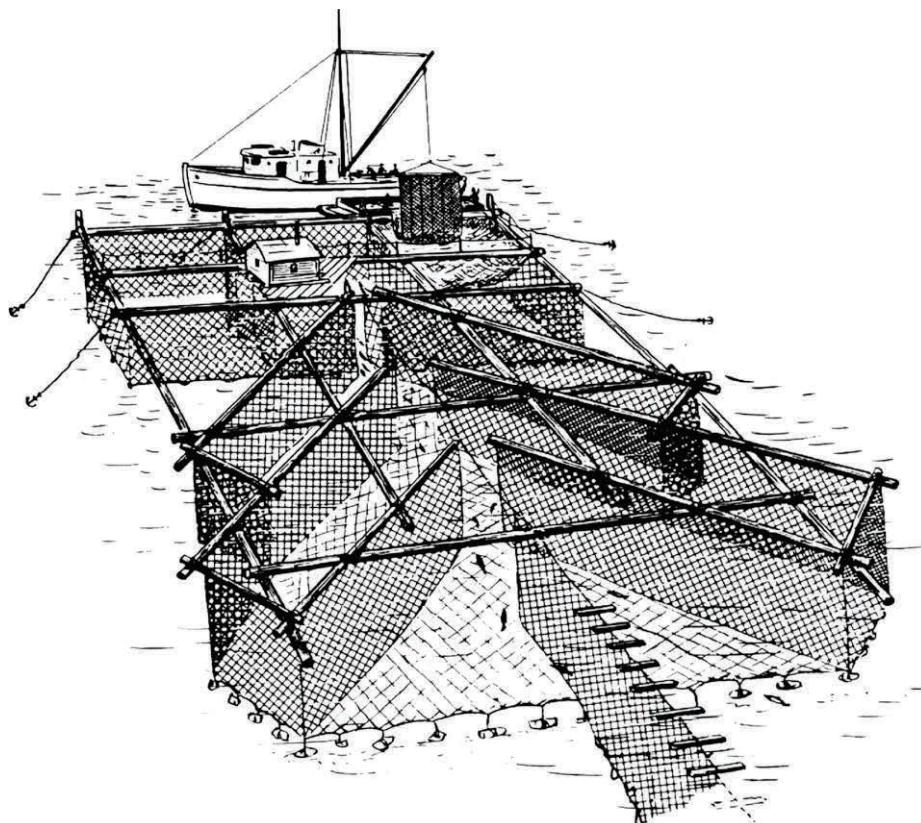
ROBERT HIGGS

A salmon trap (also known as a pound net; figure 1) is a setup for catching salmon as they return to their spawning places in the gravel beds of shallow inland streams. Such traps were used in Washington and Oregon until they were outlawed—by Oregon in 1926 and by Washington in 1934—and in Alaska until they were banned in 1959. They were highly efficient arrangements for harvesting salmon, outlawed only because sportsmen's groups and the operators of competing types of harvesting gear ultimately had more political clout than the trap operators (Higgs 1982).

The traps can be constructed in various ways, but a common type was a carefully shaped arrangement of netting or wire mesh secured to driven piles, usually placed not far from shore along an observed migration path of returning salmon. The “lead” was a straight fence of netting, often several hundred feet long, extending from the bottom of the body of water to the high-water level and running in a direction approximately perpendicular to the shoreline. After encountering the lead, the salmon swam along it toward the shore into the “outer heart,” a V-shaped, semienclosed arrangement of netting. Proceeding through the outer heart toward the shore, they squeezed into the “inner heart,” another V-shaped enclosure from which the only avenue of escape was the narrow passage through which they had entered. (Some traps had no inner heart.) From the inner heart, the determined salmon, whose instinctual reluctance to turn in their own wake made the traps so

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Figure 1
A Salmon Trap



Source: Dumont and Sundstrom 1961, 12.

effective, proceeded through a narrowing tunnel into the “pot,” a shallow holding area from which almost no fish could escape. To facilitate emptying the captured fish into a scow, some traps had a “spiller” adjacent to the pot and connected with it by another tunnel. A few traps, so-called double-enders, had hearts and pots at both ends of the lead (Higgs 1982).

I have often pondered the analogy of the salmon’s being caught in such a trap and a human population’s being caught in the institutional arrangement we call big government. Just as the salmon trap’s lead intercepts the fish in the course of their normal life cycle and directs them into captivity, so various political devices and entreaties intercept people in the course of their normal lives and direct them toward dependence on the state. Salmon instinctively strive to return to their spawning places. Human beings strive to get wealth and security, and if they can get something seemingly for nothing, they may deviate from a normal, self-supporting life and give their support to political programs for plundering their

fellows via the state. Only when it is too late, if ever, do people realize that the plunder masters who have enticed them into supporting the expansion of government's size, scope, and power are, along with the masters' chief cronies in the private sector, the only ones who, all things being considered, truly gain. The masses of duped people find themselves caught in a trap, dependent on the state for everything from food, housing, and medical care to the education of their children and their own economic security in old age.

Like the narrowing opening through which the salmon enter the "hearts" of the traps, the ways out of people's helplessness and dependence on the state are narrow and hard to locate. Moreover, going out as they came in flies in the face of their natural proclivity to live at others' expense and care. As a salmon's "mind" tells it not to turn back, so the human mind, especially when bewitched by government propaganda and statist ideology, tells a typical person not to turn back. Having lost the capacity for assuming individual responsibility, people are fearful of taking on such responsibilities as their forebears did routinely (Higgs 1994).

Ultimately, people find themselves in something like the salmon trap's pot, an enclosure in which they can be disposed of as their captors' decide. All imaginable avenues of escape have been eliminated by design, so that trapped people can only mill about, dreaming perhaps of salvation, but unable to overcome the barriers that the state and their own constricted and distorted thinking place in the way of their true liberation.

People would do well to acquire a keener appreciation of institutional path dependency, especially of the irreversibilities inherent in political and institutional arrangements. It is very often much easier to get into something than to get out of it. To retain what remains of their liberty, self-reliance, and self-respect, people might well ponder the poor trapped salmon and so skirt the leads that political plunderers construct to divert them from their normal, decent ways of life. Having entered the "heart" of the state, people have little chance of escape, even if they should seek to do so.

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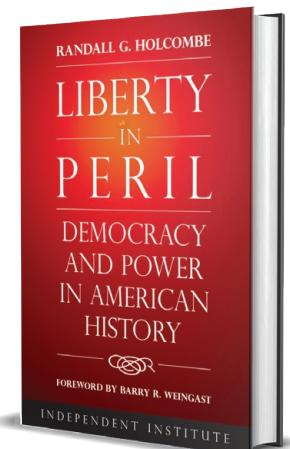
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