Imagining a different world built with different tools

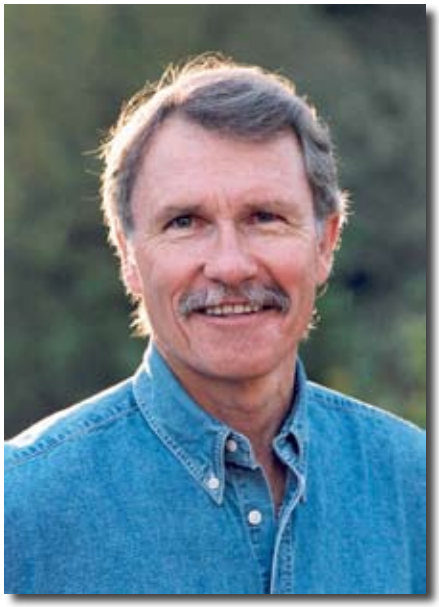
John A. Kitzhaber, M.D.*

Keynote Address, *Pathways to Resilience: Sustaining Pacific Salmon in a Changing World*, April 3, 2007

William Jennings Bryan once said, "Destiny is not a matter of chance, it is a matter of choice; it is not a thing to be waited for, it is a thing to be achieved." I would like you to think about those words during my remarks today, because they capture the message I hope to convey.

Thank you very much for inviting me to participate in this program on Pathways to Resilience. You have asked me to comment on why the established approaches to maintaining stable and healthy salmon populations have not been as effective as we might have hoped. Let me start by saying that I am sure there is a wide range of viewpoints on this topic—many held by people with a far more scientific background than me.

So perhaps the best contribution I can offer to this gathering is to try to put this issue into a somewhat broader context. And to do so, let me start with a personal story—one that I hope will serve as a metaphor for the challenge we are facing here.



Former Oregon Governor John A. Kitzhaber, M.D.

When I was a boy, my father took me camping on the banks of the great rivers of western Oregon—rivers with magical names like Santiam, Umpqua, and Rogue. It was along these rivers that I first met the salmon in its native habitat and developed my lifelong fascination with it and its life cycle. It was here, at a place called Boulder Flats, that I watched these scarred and broken creatures, these brave warriors, planting the seeds of tomorrow.

The life cycle of the salmon is dedicated to the future—to nurturing, sustaining, and giving to that which will follow. The salmon I grew to know when I was a boy were born in the gravel beds of the cold, fast-moving streams that tumble down the west slope of the Cascade Mountains. They migrate down these rivers to the ocean, where they mature and spend their adult lives until some inner voice tells them it is time to come home.

On its final journey, this remarkable creature travels thousands of miles through a gauntlet of predators—struggling up swift emerald rivers, leaping falls, and negotiating obstacles—in a single-minded effort to return to the very gravel where it was born.

Those few that arrive safely then spawn and leave their eggs buried in the gravel, to hatch, to migrate to the sea, to grow to maturity, and to return—continuing the cycle. But even those that never spawn—those that die in the attempt—give their bodies to the river, providing the nutrients essential to the survival of the next generation, fulfilling their promise to the future.

**Former Oregon Governor (1995–2003) John Kitzhaber opened this Sea Grant-hosted conference with this probing, personal, and passionate speech. It was very warmly received by his listeners and is reprinted here, with the Governor's permission, in hopes of reaching a broader audience.*

NOAA National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration U.S. Department of Commerce

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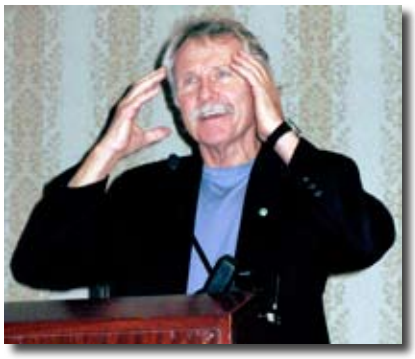
I share this story because it offers such a powerful metaphor not only for the relationship between life and death, but also for the responsibility that each generation owes to the next. And to me, that is the central question we are dealing with at this conference today.

Because I believe that what is at stake here goes far beyond the issue of salmon recovery. To me, it raises the question of whether we have the courage and the will to reconcile the growing contradiction between the world we say we want to leave our children and the one we are actually creating through the decisions we are making today. And it calls into question our capacity to take explicit and intentional action to shape our own future rather than to simply react to circumstances, allowing by default our future to become a matter of chance.

It seems to me that the central question here is not whether we are able to restore healthy and sustainable populations of wild salmon. The real question is much more fundamental: are we, as a region, committed to restoring the health of the Columbia River ecosystem?

Why? Because a functioning ecosystem—one that can provide for the needs of both humans and fish—demonstrates our willingness to live our lives in a sustainable fashion; a willingness to take the legacy we have been handed and to pass it on, intact, to the next generation of westerners.

But if our salmon runs are not healthy, then our watersheds are not healthy. And if our watersheds are not healthy, then we are putting at risk our future and that of our children and grandchildren.



Joe Cone, Oregon Sea Grant

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A highly degraded ecosystem—which is where we are headed today—represents at best an implicit decision to mortgage the legacy with which we have been blessed for our own short-term economic benefit. I believe that we are better than that.

A large part of the problem here is that we have framed the apparent conflict between economic activity and environmental stewardship as a mutually exclusive one, creating an "us versus them" mentality—a sense of separateness and a politics of scarcity, which inevitably creates winners and losers but no pathway to a sustainable solution.

And this politics of scarcity is perpetuated not so much by the people engaged in the debate but rather by the institutions and organizational structures through which they are seeking to resolve their disputes.

Sometimes it is easier to see where we need to go if we take time to reflect on where we have been. So let's review a little history. Remember that the word "politics" derives from the Greek word "polis," meaning "city"—or in more modern terms, "community." That is to say, a group of individuals, functioning together as a whole for their mutual benefit.

However, because any community is composed of individuals whose views and needs do not always coincide, there must be some way by which to arrive at the common good—a way to strike the balance between individual needs and the needs of the larger society—or, in this case, the larger ecosystem on which all of us ultimately depend.

Indeed, a central point of contention in the framing of the U.S. Constitution was the question of how this common good should be arrived at in the new republic. One view was represented by Thomas Jefferson, who espoused what has been called the "politics of engagement," a model in which people work together in a spirit of cooperation to find common ground and solve problems for their mutual benefit.

In this model, people relied on one another rather than on a centralized government.

Jefferson's view was opposed by the Federalists, led by Alexander Hamilton, who espoused a "poli-

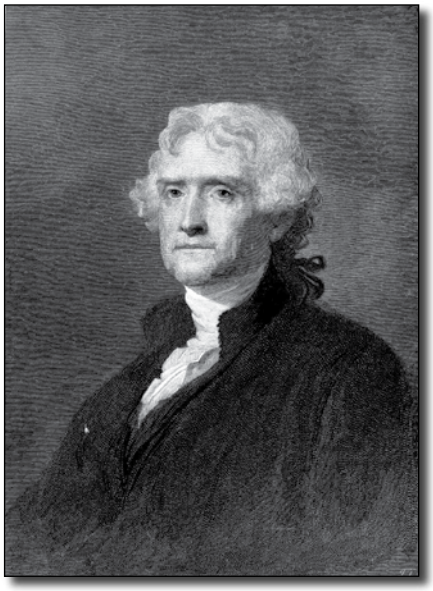
tics of disengagement," wherein social stability is achieved not by cooperation among individuals, but by a strong central government which carefully balanced private interests, one against the other. In this model—*and this is very important*—the common good is not the result of cooperation among individuals but rather the result of external, top-down management.

In the century following this crucial debate, America was preoccupied with the expansion toward its western frontier, an expansion that was actively promoted by the federal government. Indeed, the doctrine of Manifest Destiny was used by politicians in the 1840s as a justification for continental expansion. And in 1862, President Abraham Lincoln signed the Homestead Act, under which some 270 million acres of land were claimed and settled.

The important point to remember here is that the extraction and exploitation of natural resources, and the development of the land west of the hundredth meridian, have been a part of our history and of our western culture for 150 years. There is a reason we came to be here.

During most of the 19th century, Jefferson's politics of engagement prevailed. By the end of the 1800s, however, as the Industrial Revolution overtook America, the Federalist viewpoint eclipsed that of Jefferson. What emerged was a strong central government, which, in many respects, reflected what was happening in the workplace.

It was top down, hierarchical, and embodied the political philosophy of the Federalists. It was designed to manage conflicts among individuals by balancing private interests one against the other.



In Thomas Jefferson's "politics of engagement," people worked together to solve problems for their mutual benefit.

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Although created in response to the Industrial Revolution, the role of a strong central government continued to grow throughout the 20th century, expanding dramatically during Franklin Roosevelt's *New Deal* and reaching its zenith under President Johnson's *Great Society*; the enactment of Medicare and Medicaid in 1965; and the passage of our major national environmental legislation in the 1970s.

And at the same time, as the role of our central government was expanding, the responsibility to solve problems—the responsibility to determine the "common good"—was shifted from individuals to third parties: to legislative bodies, to the bureaucracy and, in more recent times, to the courts.

Now, this change in governance structure, however, did not change the policies which encouraged the development of the West. In the 19th century, the focus was on moving settlers westward, using as the lure the seemingly inexhaustible supply of land and natural resources. In the 20th century, the focus shifted to water, starting with the 1902 Reclamation Act, which set the stage for the huge federal water projects, one of the first of which was the Klamath Irrigation Project, developed by the Bureau of Reclamation in 1905.

In 1928, Congress authorized the Boulder Canyon Project, which resulted in Hoover Dam. Between 1938 and 1976, no fewer than 29 dams were constructed in the Columbia River basin—25 on the main stem and 4 on the lower Snake.

At the time these policies were put into place, they made sense; they were defensible; they helped to advance a larger national purpose. It was a time of perceived abundance and of expanding horizons. It seemed unimaginable that the resources of this vast nation could possibly be exhausted

or that there could be a dark side to the significant economic benefits that these activities brought to the region and to its people.

But these policies made sense *only* if viewed in isolation—only as long as they could be disengaged from their consequences on other values, only as long as they did not have to be integrated into a larger whole. And for many years, this fiction of disengagement guided our efforts.

By the 1970s, however, it was becoming increasingly apparent that the benefits of economic development and natural resource extraction came at a price: these activities were having a detrimental impact on the environment. There was a growing public concern, and this collision of legitimate values led to an escalating conflict. The primary battlegrounds for this conflict were the U.S. Congress, state legislatures, and the courts.

Our governance structure responded in exactly the way it had been designed to respond—by trying to manage this conflict through a framework of federal statutes and regulations. Among them were the Clean Air Act, passed in 1970; the Clean Water Act, passed in 1972; and the Endangered Species Act, passed in 1973.

Now, over 30 years later, it is worth noting that the objective of these laws was not to resolve the underlying conflict, but rather to manage it by attempting to balance the competing interests. The politics of disengagement. And precisely because the objective was to manage rather than to resolve the conflict, conflict has, not surprisingly, continued.

Environmental interests sue the natural resource industries and governmental agencies for failing to meet federal standards and regulations. They strive to strengthen environmental laws through legislative action. In return, economic interests subject to federal regulation challenge these regulations in the courts and seek to repeal or weaken them through legislative action.

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Each side tends to look for opportunities to advance their agenda when the administration in Washington, D.C. is in their favor, while the other side relies on the courts to form a defensive front against changes that might imperil their interests. What is increasingly clear is that this approach only perpetuates the problem but does nothing to move us toward long-term resolution.

First, our dependence on third-party decision-makers has taken individuals and communities out of the problem-solving loop. We have abdicated our responsibility to the federal bureaucracy and to the courts, leaving us at the mercy of decisions made by someone else. This, of course, gives us license as stakeholders—regardless of which side of the debate we are on—to pursue our own narrow interests at the expense of the larger community.

And this is what fosters the "us versus them" mentality—the sense of separateness and the politics of scarcity.

Second, the primary tools of this third-party governance structure—law, regulation, and enforcement—are simply incapable of solving the problems they are being asked to solve. They were designed to address a different set of challenges in an era of perceived abundance. They were designed to manage problems by compelling behavior.

What they were not designed to do is to bring people together to actually solve problems; they were not designed to operate in an era of limits which create a tension between environmental, economic, and community values; they were not designed to respond to complex problems which cannot be resolved without the participation of many people.

The listing of the Oregon coastal coho salmon under the Endangered Species Act during my first term as governor offers an illustration of this point. Nearly 70 percent of the habitat of this species lies on private land. And while the ESA is intended to prevent landowners from engaging in activities that result in an intentional or unintentional kill, or "take," of a listed species—it cannot easily compel them to do more.

Yet, recovery of this species, and the watersheds on which they depend, requires that private landowners undertake restoration activities that go well beyond

what can be compelled under the ESA. To put it bluntly, we cannot recover coastal coho by relying solely on the old model of regulation and enforcement to which we have been wed since its inception.

It is this difference between *preventing* behavior harmful to the coho and *inducing action to benefit* the coho that exemplifies the limits of regulation to accomplish the stated goal of recovering these native fish runs.

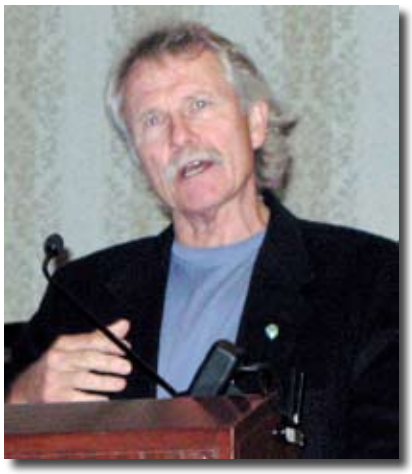
Another example is the effort to recover the salmon in the Columbia River Basin. The federal government writes plans, in the form of biologic opinions, for management of the Columbia River and its dams. The environmental community sues the federal government, claiming that the biologic opinion is inadequate to recover the endangered species on the river.

The courts agree and overturn the opinion. The federal agencies go back and write a new opinion, and the process starts all over again.

This has been going on since the early 1990s, and yet nothing has changed on the ground. The environmentalists have won every round, and yet 15 years after the first listings on the Snake River, we still have neither a legal biologic opinion nor a recovery plan for these embattled fish—although another 12 species of salmon, steelhead, and bull trout have been listed. What should we conclude from this charade?

To me, the answer is clear: the tools, the institutions, and the organizational structures through which we are seeking to resolve this dispute are simply incapable of producing the kind of sustainable solution that is desperately needed.

The debate over dam removal, for example, has acquired a life of its own and,—and to some extent, has become a debate more about symbols than about solutions.



Joe Cone, Oregon Sea Grant

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On the environmental side, the dams are symbols of man's subjugation of the mighty Columbia River and of the ecological degradation that has flowed from that subjugation. And thus, removal of the dams has become an end in itself—set apart from the effect on overall salmon recovery or watershed health.

On the other side, dams are symbols of the very real economic benefits which have flowed from the taming of the Columbia River. And thus, their removal threatens the economic interests because it legitimizes a discussion of the environmental cost with which these economic benefits have been purchased.

The point here is not dam breaching. The point is whether we as a region are willing to *either* make the financial and political investments necessary to aggressively deal not just with fish passage but with habit, harvest, and hatchery policies, *or* to admit that we are not really willing to restore this ecosystem to health.

I could accept the latter decision—as disappointing as it might be—if it were a conscious choice. If we had thoughtfully weighed the economic risks against the environmental risks and concluded that we were simply not willing to pay the price. But that is not what we are doing here. What we are doing is deciding by not deciding.

Which brings us back to the question I posed at the start of my remarks: Do we, in fact, still have the capacity to take explicit and intentional action to shape our own future—or have we simply resigned ourselves to allowing it by default to become a matter of chance?

This question is not limited just to the issue of restoring the health of the Columbia River ecosystem. Deciding by not deciding has become a default position which allows us to avoid confronting many of the serious challenges we face today. We see it playing out all around us.

We see it in our stubborn refusal to seriously look beyond an economy built around fossil fuel to one based on clean, renewable sources of energy—thus steadily increasing our dependence on one of the most politically unstable parts of the world—even as the economic, human, and environmental cost of producing a barrel of oil continues to grow.

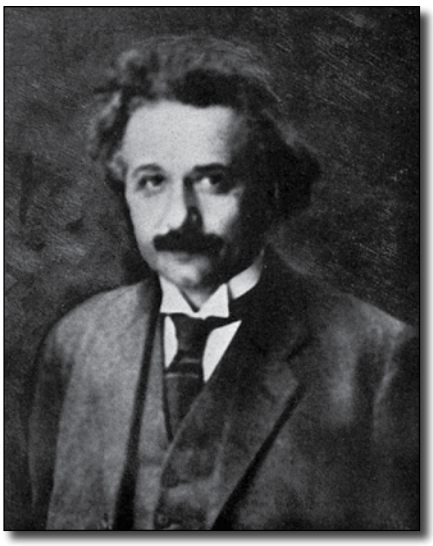
And we see it in the growing crisis in our health care system, through our unwillingness to challenge its fundamental structure—a structure based on assumptions that are no longer valid—thus shackling us to a point in the middle of the last century.

What do all of these things have in common? They are all problems that flow from decisions made in the last century—decisions which at the time made sense and which were made in an effort to make the world a better place for us. And, in many ways they did.

The Columbia River hydroelectric system brought enormous benefits to the people of the Pacific Northwest. Fossil fuel and the internal combustion engine gave us an economy and a standard of living unparalleled in the world. Medicare, Medicaid, and employment-based health insurance coverage gave access to needed medical care to millions of Americans. But ironically, these policies and programs—enacted to make the world a better place for us—now actually threaten our future and that of our children.

Albert Einstein once said: "You should not use an old map to explore a new world." And he was right, because each new generation faces a new world with new challenges—challenges that cannot be met by clinging to the past but only by imagining a different world and a different set of tools through which to build it.

My grandmother was born in 1895—before the Industrial Revolution and eight years before Orville and Wilbur Wright proved that man could fly—in itself a huge leap of imagination. Yet before she died in 1974, she had watched Neil Armstrong step into history and onto the surface of the moon.



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How could her own parents have possibly prepared her for changes of this magnitude?

The lesson here is that the tools our parents used to create a better world for us are not always up to the challenges faced by a new generation. It is crucial, therefore, that we give ourselves permission to ask: "If anything were possible, what would we do to solve our challenges—what new tools and structures would we need to be successful—and how much would it cost?"

Our inability to make any progress in the Columbia River Basin over the past 15 years is due largely to our inability to imagine a different future and a different way to get there. Every stakeholder in the region has been an advocate or an opponent of any given recovery plan based on how they think it will impact them economically.

These competing economic interests have thus managed to effectively block any serious consideration of a solution, out of fear that if a particular strategy is even *discussed*, it will increase the likelihood that it might actually be adopted. We can do better.

To move forward, we must be willing to explicitly answer three questions.

First, what are the elements of a plan that gives us the best possible chance to restore and maintain the ecologic health of this region?

Second, what are the costs involved to mitigate the very real impact that implementation of such a plan would have on the economic stakeholders in the region?

And, finally, are we willing to pay those costs?

At the end of the day, we may say "No"—we may say that the cost of leaving a healthy, functioning ecosystem to our children and grandchildren is simply not worth the price. I would like to think that is not the case. But in any event, we would have made a choice.

And so is what we are doing right now. Delay is not some benign and prudent placeholder. It is a choice to abandon the Columbia River ecosystem—it is a choice to abandon the responsibility we owe to the next generation—it is a choice to fail the future.

To quote Theodore Roosevelt, one of the greatest environmental stewards to serve as president of

the United States: "In any moment of decision, the best thing you can do is the right thing. The worst thing you can do is nothing."

I will close this speech today as I often do, with the words of Oregon poet Kim Stafford, who eloquently defines the challenge, the opportunity—and, indeed, the responsibility—that lies before us, in what he calls "Lloyd's Story."

> *Lloyd Reynolds, the international citizen of Portland, spent his last days in pain, silent, unable to speak or to write, lying in his hospital bed. On his last day at home, as his wife scurried to pack his suitcase for the hospital, Lloyd made his way outside to the garden and there she found him on his knees, with a spoon, awkwardly planting flower bulbs.*
>
> *"Lloyd," she said, "you will never see these flowers bloom."*
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> *He smiled at her. "They are not for me," he said, "they are for you. The salmon coming home? They are for you. The calls of the wild geese? They are for you. The last old trees? They are for you and your children, to the seventh generation and beyond. They are all blooming into being for you."*

That is our challenge today. To plant the seeds of tomorrow; to change the context and the parameters of this debate—by giving ourselves permission to imagine; by personally reengaging in this struggle—not as victims of the status quo, not as captives of the past, but as the proud architects of a new future.

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Washington Public Power Supply System

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