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THE HERRING, THE WHALE AND THE MINING EXECUTIVE

Shannon Kelly Donahue

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The herring came in on Tuesday, pulsing into Mud Bay with the tide, heralded by flocks of gulls and roaring sea lions. The run occurs in a flash, like their iridescent bodies catching sunlight as the school shifts in unison to evade a predator. Herring run when the water temperature is just right. Females seek the shelter of eelgrass to lay their eggs. Males follow and fertilize, leaving milky blankets of milt to settle and create more life, more herring. The herring bring the first real pulse of spring to Southeast Alaska, a few weeks after the birch sap starts running, but before the alders burst their brilliant green along the shorelines. Years ago, herring ran all along this coast. Mining impacts, coastal development, and warming ocean temperatures threaten the last runs of Lynn Canal herring.

The road to town follows Chilkat Inlet, across the peninsula from Mud Bay. When the herring arrive, we know the saak — the Lingít name for an oil-rich smelt that’s also known as eulachon or candlefish — will soon flood Chilkat and Chilkoot Inlets, swarming both sides of the peninsula to spawn in the rivers. When the saak arrive, it’s on: hundreds of thousands of gulls form perpetual murmurations over the water, diving for silvery slithers of protein. Otters patrol riverbanks, sea lions splash, and humpback and orca whales follow, scooping fish by the mouthful.

I drive slowly, scanning Chilkat Inlet for sea life. A spout emerges from the water, and I pull over. I kill the engine and roll my window down. For the first time this year, the sun is strong enough to warm my face. I am taking a break from analyzing hard-rock mine permitting documents. I need this sunshine, this sea air, this pulse of life that brings the raucous change of seasons after winter’s chilly stillness.

The bellows-sound of whale breath cuts through the cacophony of gulls. The smooth, arched back of a humpback whale breaks the glassy surface, the small triangle of her dorsal fin cutting through the water as she submerges again, following the first saak — the scouts of the species — toward the river mouth. Beside her, a smaller version — her calf — mimics her, experiencing spring in Chilkat Inlet for the first time, learning to navigate the waters, to follow the fish, to avoid entanglement in fishing nets. The whales seem to bask in the stillness of the Chilkat estuary. I remember working for the Chilkoot Tribe on their saak survey a few years ago and being instructed not to capture these first fish — they are vital to the success of the run.



Wednesday morning, I sit in a hotel conference room on Main Street, where the vice president of a Canadian mining company explains his plan to drill and blast the steep, glaciated mountains at the headwaters of the Chilkat Watershed, looking for minerals. He dangles the carrot of jobs and prosperity. He mentions another town that got funding for its swimming pool, but he makes no commitments. He says the mine jobs won’t last forever, so we should take advantage of the prosperity while it’s on offer.