

Terra-Culture

Daniel O'Shea | Cli-Fi Thinker 12.9.2025

95673 awoke from the smell of fresh feed pellets dropping from the ceiling. He had to move fast; a smolt was never guaranteed a meal. If he missed his feed this morning, then he would have to walk all day with the hunger pains. At least not having hunger pains made the skin lesions easier to bear.

The whole compound swarmed the scattering of feed pellets as normal until they were all gone. 95673 managed to get a handful of pellets, which would satiate his hunger until the evening. He licked his fingers to savor the pellet dust. Hundreds of smaller, more sickly smolts were left unfed that morning, their sunken eyes revealing their starvation. Like clockwork, the engines turned on, stimulating the large smolt exercisers. The thousand or so identical beings living in the cell slowly began walking in their daily circular orbit around their pen, prodded by a pole if they lagged.

95673 found his walking mate, 56739 to discuss their dreams from the night before as they did day after day.

"Good morning, Chum." 56739 said to 95673.

"Morning, King." said Chum "Any dreams from last night? These sores are really starting to mess with my lucidity."

"We've all been here for 4 hot seasons, Chum. Now's always when its the worst. Maybe we'll get used to it before we are taken..."

King tripped over a smolt flailing on the ground. With the temperatures rising, there were always a few smolts found in their last gasping moments. They would soon be pushed aside by the smolt exerciser into the output, never to be seen again.

"I had a dream about getting out of this place, of great migrations of smolts through mountains and valleys. Routes followed by thousands headed to worship something greater than all of us."

"Ha! You really are a dreamer. There's nothing else. We were put in our pen to do what all have done forever: eat, sleep, and breed." King dismissed.

They walked until it became dark, and more feed pellets fell from the ceiling. These were always the best feedings. If you could find the off-yellow pellets, it was believed to help with the lice. The lice bites made it nearly impossible to sleep — and to dream.

The smolt exerciser shut off. It was time for bed. Chum lay down where he was and closed his eyes, hoping something would fill his mind to keep him going. Chum normally did dream. Most of the other thousand or so smolt in his pen dreamed as well. But none of the dreams made any sense to any of them.

Some of them were about large free-roaming settlements of smolts eating all sorts of colorful, oddly shaped foods. Some about when the Earth became too hot and unpredictable. Some dreams about when chemicals were dumped into the ocean to help protect humanity. Some about when the first smolts were ushered into pens. Most of them

were about what happened when they were taken. The knowledge of who was responsible for all of this and what a smolt's purpose in this world was lost to all.

"Wake up, Chum! It's happening!..." yelled King. Loud alarms blasted through the early morning silence, and everything was red from the lights above them. Some smolts looked up in reverence while others ran hysterically around their small pen as the ceiling opened up for the first time in their lives. "...Finally, we are being taken!"

The smolt exerciser ushered the humans into a small caged lift in the middle of the pen. Water filled the bottom, floating those who had not survived the night down chutes alongside feces, old feed pellets and dead lice. Screams and laughter joined the alarms as the caged lift left the pen and into the cold sky.

Chum managed to weasel through the packed cage and find King.

"King! Where are we going?!"

"I think that this is our migration, Chum! Just like what we have all dreamed about for so long!"

Chum wasn't so easily convinced that they were going to their salvation. Why would something that cared about them so much allow for them to be covered in lice and open wounds? Sweep their dead down chutes with no ceremony for the life that they once had.

The cage stopped in a small slough surrounded by walls and dropped 4 feet into the water, bringing the smolts up to their waists. Another chute inscribed with an alien language that Chum didn't recognize opened up. The chute lit up, and feed pellets shot out all around them. It was a feeding frenzy driven by stress. The smolts ran into the chute to get what they had been trained to seek out every morning. King was one of the first in and was gone before Chum could say a word.

Chum ran in the opposite direction of the chute, desperate to get away from the obvious trap. Out of nowhere, a smack of electricity jolted through his bones, knocking him on his back. A slimy arm dragged him into the chute as he fell unconscious.

This dream was different than the other ones. Chum dreamed of when his kind were first driven into their pens for the rest of eternity. A hundred years after the chemicals had appeared to do their job and reverse the changing planet, the coastal zone started to experience large waves that interfered with all aspects of life. Soon, the coast was uninhabitable, and the ocean crept its way into creeks, rivers, and lakes, threatening his people's fresh water reserves. It was almost as if Chum's ancestors were telling him of a dying people that were once free.


Before he could learn more, Chum jolted awake at the sound of whirring blades, conveyor belts, and jets of water. He flipped off the belt and took a cautious look at his surroundings. Machines splayed out smolt after smolt as they entered into a large metallic box. Chum could hear a loud snap echo as the smolt exited without head, hands, or feet and went into another section of machinery operated manually by squat figures in white robes.

Chum gagged at the nightmare that now beheld him. He needed to know what was really happening to him and his people. As he ran to the final section of the room, he opened a neat white box labeled in the same alien language as before — "Human Filets". Uniform meat cuts lined each box, ready for consumption. Before he could even close the box, a suction cup spun him around. A large eight-armed ball of jelly in a white robe eyed him up and down before gurgling something unintelligible.

Finally, Chum knew his purpose.

To feed his captors.



 Dan O'Shea is currently a masters student at the Bren School of Environmental Science and Management at the University of California, Santa Barbara. His interests center around fisheries, sustainable seafood, and coastal resource management. O'Shea enjoys writing about complex futures that are extensions of contemporary approaches to sustaining life on Earth.