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Mac Huff [00:00:11] Yeah, you know, I thought, I read and reread that question. And to come up with a story that was sort of a pinnacle or anything like that, um, I don't. But there's been so many wonderful things that have been available to me, when I was on a stream or a river. And my dad had me fishing, at least by the time I was 5, maybe 4, I doubt of 3. But it's been part of my life for, you know, for man, ever, you know, like almost 65 years now. And there were some periods, college and things like that, that I didn't do as much fishing. But boy, as soon as I got freed up again it became, you know, an important part of my life. And then when I, when I started getting into Steelhead, um... There was a bunch of years I fished 150 days a year. I said that, and I remember saying that, "wow, you fished 150 days a year, wait that's like half a year. When did you work?" And I kind of did the math and, yeah. The math came out. It was like, every weekend. And then some days, and parts of days, you know, during the week. So, you know, that was like 10 or 15 years, that I did that. To, just before, and as I was getting started guiding, was kind of the focus of that. So it just, it's a real important part of my life. And it's a need that I need to fulfill on a regular basis. So.

Mac Huff [00:02:13] Dad did. Yeah. He was a great dad. He had me out hunting with him, I know, when I was 5.

James Thull [00:02:20] And about where was this?

Mac Huff [00:02:22] It was in Central Oregon, in Sisters. That's, I was born on the coast and then they migrated to Ontario, with his job change, and when he quit working for the state, then he went to work for a logging company in Sisters, and I moved there maybe when I was 4; 3 or 4.

James Thull [00:02:45] So that would have been in the 19-.

[00:02:46] Early '50s. Yeah like, '53. And then he would just get me up and take me, and I went with him well, pretty much through college. And then we got to go elk hunting, one time was all, because he went elk hunting a lot when I was a high school, and stuff, and then we got one trip together, and that was kind of it. And just, he was getting to the point that he wasn't going. And I'm not sure why. But I was also busy, college and stuff like that. So, yeah. Just, um. But growing up in Sisters, you know, the forest and wilderness was literally out my back door and that's where I lived. You know, so I've had a lot of good experiences, just doing things in the woods. Observing wildlife and things like that. And, oh gosh, when I was probably nine, ten, eleven, twelve, I remember when I took Forage Forestry, the deal was tying flies, so I learned to tie flies, and then, I remember fishing the creek that runs through the edge of Sisters there. I'd just grab my rod and go down there fish for a couple, three hours. You know, during the day, and Mom would just turned me loose. Wasn't worried, because Sisters was way OK then. And I just go fish along that creek, next day I'd go catch the same fish again. So I was doing catch and release then. Yeah.

James Thull [00:04:31] Nice.

Mac Huff [00:04:41] I guess things that I know about, but was not necessarily, specifically there, uh, you know, to observe, um. You know, I, it seems like possibly, I remember a conversation about, but I don't even know if this was the case, but when they closed the Dalles Dam, and drowned Celilo Falls, it's kind of like I recal, I maybe my dad thought about

driving from Sisters down there, to see that. And so I missed that opportunity. But things that, you know, I'm aware of that have been lost, have been like the June Hogs. Those huge Chinook, that used to go up into Nevada to spawn. And I don't know how far they travel, they, the fish that come up to Enterprise, in the area where I live now, travel 600 miles. So those guys were probably going 1200 miles, at least, to get up to their spawning ground. Those things were massive fish and um... Hell's Canyon Dam was put in, you know, in my early lifetime. And then as these additional dams were put in, the anadromous fish were greatly affected by those dams. They were built to bring fish up, but they forgot that the little guys had to go down, and that was where their huge mortality was. So that progression of events is what took me up to Northeast Oregon. I got hired on about an eleven month appointment with ODF&W to do a physical and biological survey. On, basically, all the unsurveyed streams in Molalla County, prior to closing the gates on Lower Granite Dam, which was the fourth dam on the Snake. So I got to survey streams down in Hell's Canyon, tributaries on the Oregon side, places I knew I'd never get back to, that I was a once in a lifetime opportunity. And then up into the Eagle Cap Wilderness, and all of the other tributaries that drain out of the county. You know, got to see country, and experience things, and see things, and do things that were pretty special. And that was in '76. So about ten years later, I was working in a hardware store, and started hearing about people catching Steelhead in the Grand Ronde. So from the time that I arrived, which, my understanding was, that there was no Steelhead season. But I wrote a story about that, and published it in one of the monthly magazines, fishing magazines, and there were several people that sent letters to the editor saying they had fished during those years that I talked about, and had caught fish, caught Steelhead. So, you know, what actually was the case? Obviously it wasn't what I was aware of. Even through ODF&W. I don't know, maybe they were down there trout fishing, and knew how to catch Steelhead. Anyway, so '86 along in there, I heard about Steelhead being in there. Went down and caught one, and that started me on my journey to, you know, for my Steelhead career. But by that time, they had tried some things, and they were starting to barge The Smoltz, for all the anadromous fish. Like in the Snake System, from Lower Granite down below Bonneville, and then turn 'em loose and then it would come back. And so that turned out to be, appears to me, a very workable solution to what was going on. To get the fish downstream for the downstream migration. They make the return upstream okay, but, uh, that seemed to have worked okay. But this year, and last year, our Steelhead run is just hideous. It's, it, the total numbers might actually be lower than in '76. And I, ODF&W tells me that they think that it's ocean conditions, where our Steelhead are going. And there's enough Chinook coming back, that they've got some Chinook seasons going on, in the county. So uh, so those are some of the changes that I've seen go bad and come back. You know, actually, and pretty pretty viable. You know, equitable conditions.

Mac Huff [00:09:51] Well, if I had more time I could come out with a pretty good list of concerns, I think. It's the barging and all, you know, the anadromous fish aspect is regional. So Idaho, Oregon, and Washington work with the Feds, and that barging is, it's actually, that's a federal project, of which Oregon, Washington, and Idaho participate in. So. The salmonids, you know, is maybe a little more peripheral. Definitely cooperative, with the surrounding states. Um. Yeah, I just.

James Thull [00:10:45] Nothing coming to you?

Mac Huff [00:10:46] Yeah, at this point, maybe.

James Thull [00:10:50] That's okay!

Mac Huff [00:10:50] Maybe something will come back, a little bit later in this talk, that you know, it'll spur an answer to that. But at this point, um... The trout there, you know, when I go trout fishing. The numbers seem decent. Bull Trout is a fish that we could not target, I don't know, 15 years ago, maybe. And then 10 year, five or 10 years ago, they said we could target them now, but they had to be released. So. Maybe that little reprieve got their numbers back enough so now we can at least catch and release them, and they're, they're fun enough to catch. They're very fun to fish for, and some of the tributaries going up into the Wallowas do not allow bait. So it's flies or spinners, you know. So based on allowing us to fish for Bull Trout now, kind of indicates that they've done well there.

Mac Huff [00:12:02] I don't think that there's anything on the ground in Oregon, Washington, or Idaho that's changed, that's caused that. So, one story that I've heard, from several sources, it's consistent, but it's also consistently denied by the bureaucrats, is that the federal agency did not get their barge to Lower Granite, prior to the fish arriving. That they looked at their calendar, "Well they're not supposed to be here till such and such date." By the time they got their barge there, the fish had gone through that, through Lower Granite. Now, with this having a second year, with the, with a dismal return, I am now a little bit more accepting of their story of --the state story--that ocean conditions are bad, where the steelhead are going, because it's not everywhere, because our Chinook did OK. And those guys, you know, the ocean is a big pasture, and one's for the sheep, one's for the cows, one's for the goats. So the Chinook go to some place, the Steelhead go to another place. You know, so hopefully that cycle will, well a cycle will, it is a cycle, and the condition will change, and then it will be better for the steelhead again.

Mac Huff [00:13:50] There honestly isn't anything huge. The bigger picture, honestly, the Forest Service up there is doing everything it can to lock the public out of their land. "Oh, whoops, I'm sorry that was public property public land, right?" Uh-huh. Yeah. They're doing everything they can to close any kind of roads that they possibly can. They're not allowing any logging. And I guarantee you the fuel loads are building up, horrendously. There's a pristine wilderness river, 40 miles north of Enterprise, the Wenaha River, and it burned two or three years ago. And it just cleaned the whole water drainage. So, stuff like that, on a bigger picture, and a more diverse picture, is a concern. But, you know, specific things of changing something in streams or creeks or whatever, I don't really, I don't really know. On the other hand, you know, I only kind of go to two or three rivers, and that's, that's, where I go and fish and they're good. And I keep going back. [Laughter]

Mac Huff [00:15:20] Well, The Grand Ronde is where I do, like, 90% of my fishing. And it's got a variety of fish, um, you know, it's got Steelhead its got Small Mouth Bass, it's got Rainbow Trout. So summer, you got trout and bass, and in the fall, from sometime in late, late September depending on the year to October. Until about the first, you know early, first week in March, I can go down, and most years catch, catch Steelhead there. So, um, and I guess what makes that special to me is, that I know that river intimately. I mean, I guided on it, as well as fish it personally. And, uh, sometimes I really feel bad for my clients that come to fish with me, because I'll put him into a run and, you know, I've got some things that I know about it, and they don't know, and I've had a number of them, like they would hook a fish, and we get landed and stuff, and I'd say to him "You didnt even think there was a fish in there did ya?" and he's like "well, no." So, you know, they miss out on that kind of knowledge and that's what I love.

James Thull [00:16:38] Yeah.

Mac Huff [00:16:39] I know. You know, I know the river, I know places that are better than others, but I know spots that I can go do if it gets crowded and find myself a little reprieve.

Mac Huff [00:16:57] You know, to start with, it was part of the learning for me. And, you know, the angler isn't the only one learning. Because, it's always teaching, okay? But, you know, I would turn people loose and they would do something that I wouldn't have necessarily done. And they make it work. 'Oh, very interesting.' You know, just pick up on that. And some of it, I apply, but I just catalog it, um, and get, uh, add it to my repertoire. And information base. But now, I don't know, I think it's about 28 years I've been guiding, now. The thing that, the only thing, that keeps me coming back to guiding, is the teaching. My goal, every day, is for the angler to leave with a higher skill set than they arrive with, if he's receptive. And some people, you know, just they're not receptive. They do not want to put in the effort to learn. They're there to get away from the mental stuff. And so we just turn them loose, and I try to pick water that works for what I see them doing and, uh, but. You know, I'd say 90% of the people that fish with me are receptive to some, you know, some feedback to help them. Make them better elsewhere, yeah.

Mac Huff [00:18:28] Yeah. Give me a lady, any day. They, they're not muscle bound between the ears. You know, you get a guy and the first thing he's doing is casting, essentially, as hard as he can. A lady listens to you, and, you know, works harder to mimic what you're doing. And they, I think they progress, in my experience. And over at the fair yesterday, I went by, and there were they had some, I don't know if it was a workshop, or just, like, some one on one stuff. But there were several ladies there, that it didn't, well just the way they were casting, I didn't have any reason to think they were real experienced, but they were casting very well. You know. It just, textbook 25-30 foot casts, you know? And, uh, if they had just basically started, an hour or two before that. There were several ladies, and they were all pretty consistently, casting pretty well. I wouldn't've expected that percentage of men to be doing equivalently well. You know, it just, we're, we like our muscles. We like our biceps, and we use them. [Laughter]

Mac Huff [00:19:55] Well, are we talking five fly fishing specifically, or just fishing?

James Thull [00:20:00] Somebody who wants to know how to fish? What do you, what do you tell them?

Mac Huff [00:20:03] Well, and just to start off here; if you start out with a spinning rod and stuff, that's got applications to your fly fishing. So first of all, fishing is fishing. You gotta be where the fish are, OK. But for someone starting out, you know, get a little help. Get some skills, kind of learn what you need, for how you want fish. Flies or spinning rods, say. And then fish! Get on the water! Hours pay huge dividends, and that's the secret. You know, like I said, I don't know, I've estimated over 20 years, that I fished close to two thousand days. And, um, you know, that absolutely helped. Well, I don't have a network where I am at, say, so I've got to discover and invent stuff myself. And those hours paid huge dividends. You know, in my first five years, after I caught, I may have only caught one fish, that first year, you know? But then for about five years, I caught about a dozen fish a year. And I remember on my sixth year, down there in the fall, whether it was the very first day that I fished that fall or not, I don't know, but it was very early. And I felt a miss, I felt a fish come up, tug on my fly, and let go. And what that is, that it changed, I had adjusted my technique enough that I could detect that. And the door swung open, and I caught about 75 fish then, a year, for the next four or five years. And I've had, you know, a lot of years since then, that are way over 100 fish a year, for sure. And that was just, like I say, pretty much fishing on my own. And things come together. You just learn stuff. The hours, if

you've got a passion for it, and that's a desire, those hours, and they're fun hours. That's the, that's the best school you'll ever attend.

Mac Huff [00:22:28] Well, I think it's definitely that we get people recruiting in, like at a younger age. And I don't know that FFF isn't necessarily the avenue, because I'm not seeing young families and stuff, coming to that. A River Runs Through It, that movie, gave the fly fishing industry a real bubble. And so, because it was in theaters, it was very grassroots. And we had a lot of people show up, but then, I suspect most of those people have fly rods sitting in their closets they have not used. It has not seen sunlight, you know, in 20 years, whatever it go, whatever it was that River Runs Through It was in the theaters. And I'm not a marketing guy, so I don't know. But something, you've got to get to, to the grassroots. And even clubs don't seem to get into the grassroots. A lot of them are good ole boy clubs, you know? There's Southern Oregon Fly Fishers in Grant's Pass, is one of the best clubs that I have been affiliated with. And they really do bring in their members, and the members, they've got, you know, they're buddies with the elites but, they spend their time with family stuff and make opportunities to nurture them, and get them out on the water, and fishing, and having fun, and progressing. Um, so, uh, it's, I don't know, for that, for that grassroots level point, I don't know. The FFF, um, I think gives a good opportunity for women. They've got a women's university, where they spend multi-days, and they start them on the grass, if that's where they need to be, and take them to the water, you know, and give them a good introduction. The, um, minorities, um, I guess, yeah, I was thinking about that, and I think it's great but those minorities in America need to assimilate to our ethics, because orientals, Filipinos, do not know catch and release. They bring everything home that they catch. So that's my experience with people I've known, I've got a really good Filipino friend there in Enterprise. And if she knows I'm going fishing, she says "Bring me some fish." And, you know, I don't think I've kept any kind of a fish in 15 years. I've even got where I don't keep any of the Steelhead it just, and I finally wised up, and quit keeping trout that I didn't eat. So um.

Mac Huff [00:25:34] When I saw that, uh, you know, on the email that you sent me, you know, I hadn't seen it, so I didn't really have an answer. And when you're asking that question, I had a chill run through me. Because. I think it's that cool. Um, the stuff you have in there. I think it is invaluable. You know, at my level, 'cause, now I just don't read fast enough to go through all those volumes, I wish I could, because there are some awesome stuff in there. But, like, just having all the different regulations through the decades. I used to kind of keep regulations there in Oregon, when I was growing up, grade school and high school, and look back at them, and stuff. And kind of compare the changes there, you know, so. Having that continuity, and as you stated, and I absolutely agree, the literature reflects the values of the time. You know, it uh, the way people think and feel about stuff, finds it's way into books, magazines, etc. And it's reflected in those volumes. And if you've got the reading ability to go through such a volume of material, well, you come up with invaluable information and patterns and, yeah. So I think it's really, really a fine thing, and it's definitely got to be a work of passion for you, to put in that much effort to track all that stuff down that you've found.

Mac Huff [00:27:37] Yeah, I hadn't really thought of that, um, yeah. Go out, fish, enjoy it, observe. You know, there's a lot of what I'm doing, when I'm out fishing, is observing lots of other things going on, and whether it's just a mass of swallows over the river picking up a hatch that's going on, and you know, at the moment and, you know, things like that being. In a snow storm, on the Mollala River, in maybe October, early November would be my memory for some of those events, and the swallows are darting around between these

big puffy flakes, grabbing bugs that are coming up off the water, you know? It's just, you got to be there to see that stuff. And uh, so there's, there's more to it than catching fish.