

Segment 19: Loose in the Candy Shop of Marine Life

By the 1970s, the city of Monterey was going through the classic five stages of grief over the death of its past: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance.

Denial was common at the end of the sardine era, of course. Fishermen and canners alike declared, “The sardine is inexhaustible,” while the fishery scientists logged statistic after statistic that painted the fishery’s doom.

Anger flowed as the canneries closed, and thousands of people lost their jobs. “What would Monterey be like without a fishing industry?” demanded Hovden Cannery manager W. O. Lunde.

The bargaining phase began with the first Monterey tourism development plan, in 1963, when the idea emerged to turn Cannery Row into a sort of nostalgic tourist attraction, full of the warm glow that Steinbeck’s *Cannery Row* had bequeathed to the region. Hovden Cannery’s W. O. Lunde reasoned that the canneries should not be continued for their own value, but they “need to stay open because visitors wanted to see a working waterfront.” The idea faltered when tourists showed up wanting to see the places in Steinbeck’s fictional world, not the real Monterey. They were looking “for Lee Ching’s grocery, for Doc’s Western Biological Laboratory, . . . and the girls of the Bear Flag Restaurant.” But those places never existed, and the reality was a mess of moldering wood and steel, plagued by fires and stripped of human activity.

But Steinbeck had had the right idea all along, having prophesied in his remarks during the christening ceremonies for the street Cannery Row that a reborn Cannery Row could not grow from the bones of the old but only from a real transformation. Bold new architects and visionaries were at large in the world, he said; “I suggest that these creators be allowed to look at the lovely coastline, and to design something new in the world.”

The fifth stage, acceptance, did not come until the “something new” was born.

Four Friends in Monterey

The sunset was always behind them, casting the long afternoon shadow of a ruined cannery in front of four close friends on the Monterey waterfront. With the lights of the small city of Monterey in the near distance, Chuck Baxter, Steve Webster, and Nancy and Robin Burnett held court in the derelict Hovden cannery building. Just another Friday night party.

They were teachers and students of ecology and conservation, and they were the first generation at the Hopkins Marine Station to think that the recovery of the life of the bay was normal. For the first time in a century, the ocean environment in front of the marine station was beginning to thrive, and the students of marine biology who worked there were in a golden moment of nature discovery. The wonder and beauty of the life of Monterey Bay had come back, and Steve and his friends were let loose in this candy shop. They relished this discovery and wanted everyone—*everyone*—to share their enthusiasm.

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The giant Hovden cannery, ruined and vacant next door to the Hopkins Marine Station, crumbled bit by bit into the sea. “We knew it pretty well,” Steve Webster remembers. “It was abandoned, and Hopkins owned it by then. For Friday night parties we’d break in.”

Steve Webster and Robin Burnett were recent Stanford Ph.D. graduates. Nancy Burnett, married to Robin, was a daughter of Palo Alto industrial giant David Packard and had just finished graduate work at the California State University marine lab in Moss Landing, 20 miles away. Chuck Baxter taught the kelp forest ecology class at the Marine Station. The four had a deep love of Monterey Bay and the creatures in it, and they had the evangelical drive of the truly committed.

Nancy recounted a second connection to the cannery, as viewed from her office at Hopkins in Agassiz Hall. “Robin and I shared an office in the middle of the top floor of Agassiz and we looked at Hovden cannery all the time, worrying about what was to become of it.”

Built long before building codes, Hovden’s cannery had been added to, burnt down, built back, and let rot from 1911 onward. The pilings meant to prop the building up over the rocky shore were nothing but old railroad rails.

“They were rusted out so much,” Steve recalls, “that I remember one that had corroded in the middle, down to about an inch thickness, barely holding up that building. Some had rusted all the way through and the stalactites and stalagmites of the iron rail met with a foot of air in between.”

Graduate student parties wheeled around on top of an old sardine tank, situated at the back of the building, with a good view through the wrecked walls to the bay beyond. “It was about where the Portola Cafe is now at the Aquarium,” Steve recounted. “We knew the whole ghost cannery. The old cutting rooms, the fish meal reduction ovens—all wrecked, all falling into the ocean.”

One night, Robin Burnett proposed building a restaurant there, with an aquarium in it, like one on Monterey’s Fisherman’s Wharf. Nobody liked that idea. But these four friends tried on the clothes of other dreams and spent so much time imagining the future that exactly when it was born is no longer clear.

Loose in the Candy Shop of Marine Life

“The real idea of an Aquarium, I don’t really remember who said it first.”

Steve Webster is a teacher. When we met to talk, it was after a long session he had just run for the volunteers at the Monterey Bay Aquarium, something he did weekly, for fun, after retiring from the post of education director there.

“It’s what I like, what I really am,” he said. “I could’ve been perfectly happy in my standard college job at San Jose State University. But I got tenure and almost immediately quit to help build the aquarium idea.” That was in the late 1970s, a decision that launched him on a lifelong relationship with the aquarium and with marine education in Monterey.

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“There is just so much here in Monterey. The underwater habitats, and the animals, and plants in them. We thought we should share it with those poor people who didn’t dive.” Steve said.

“Almost immediately after we started thinking about an Aquarium, we knew it had to be about the habitats of Monterey Bay,” Steve recalls. “And the life in them. What was there? Why was it there? What did these species do?”

The idea was both traditional and revolutionary. The tradition grew from Ed Ricketts’s single strongest legacy: his book *Between Pacific Tides*. Ed had written it in the 1930s about the different habitats of Monterey Bay and of the Pacific coast. The new aquarium would not be an overt monument to Ed or his book, but his thinking would be built into the very walls and pipes.

At the same time, this was also a revolutionary idea because the only two existing grand aquaria in the country at the time, the New England Aquarium in Boston and the National Aquarium in Baltimore, included few displays of local marine life, concentrating instead on magnificent coral reef exhibits or big sharks.

Monterey Reinvents Itself

The year the aquarium was born in the minds of Nancy, Robin, Steve, and Chuck, the same year they regularly snuck into the old Hovden Cannery for Friday night parties, the State of California reported a total income from sardine fishing of \$580. During the 7-year period between the conception of the aquarium, in 1977, and the day its doors opened, in 1984, the state recorded landing about 50 tons of sardines, a catch that would have taken approximately an hour at the rates seen in the heyday of Cannery Row.

Clearly, the ocean was a different place than in the past.

By 1977, the city of Monterey had finally accepted the loss of its sardine industry. The air smelled sweet without the canneries belching burnt sardine, the water did not harbor swirls of fish heads and guts, the rocks were not covered by the fish scales and flies that Steinbeck complained about. Sardines were nowhere to be found, but fishermen had learned to live a leaner life on other species. The United States started to declare its exclusive right to the fish resources all the way out to 200 miles off the coast. Kicked out of the area from 12 to 200 miles offshore, international fleets sailed away. Local fishing incomes were high again as the local boats mined the offshore seas for fish.

In 1977, tuna were the hot fishing commodity. The State of California brought in nearly \$200 million in fishing revenue that year, half in tuna, more than any year since 1950. And fishing climbed in value almost every year until 1980 (Figure 11.2). Some of that climb included fish of the kelp forests and invertebrates of the coast, species that began to thrive in Monterey with the return of its native eco-systems. Even the kelp itself served as a resource, bringing in almost as much value each year of the late 1970s as fishing for the rockfish that inhabited its groves.

But success lined the pockets of fishermen for only a short time. By 1984, the statewide take had collapsed by 50 percent, mostly because offshore tuna fishing slid

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disastrously. The fishing industry brought only about \$150 million in the 1990s and \$100 million in the 2000s. In Monterey, the local catch topped out above \$10 million in 1981, when the statewide fishing picture was rosy, but as the fishing industry of coastal California waned between 1980 and 2008 (Figure 11.3), the local catch dropped to \$4 million, then \$2 million a year.

In the face of lackluster fishing, the entrepreneurs of Monterey finally admitted that future economic development would not just swim up to the dock. They turned instead to other industries, especially tourism, because across the United States tourism revenues had built a reputation for strong annual gains.

Of course, a focus on tourism echoed the efforts of Samuel F. B. Morse, operator of the Del Monte Hotel, and compatriots from 60 years earlier. But this new tourism was different. Instead of an industry built on grand resort hotels catering to tycoons and presidents, the new tourism of Monterey would center on families arriving for the day in packed station wagons. These middle-class visitors might stay a night in a motel, or they might just cruise up and down Cannery Row and stop for a meal at a seafood restaurant on Fisherman's Wharf.

Here was born a new relationship between marine industries. Previously, tourism and fishing had been bitter foes. But fishing in the 1980s would not be allowed to obviously damage tourism, and the fishing lifestyle morphed into a cultural icon that was required to coexist with visitors who wanted to breathe the air and touch the water.