

Fish Pimping

A SEASONED GUIDE REFLECTS ON THE CONTRADICTIONS OF THE TRADE



*Guides spend long days
in small boats with
people they don't always
see eye to eye with.*

It's late July in Livingston, Montana, and I've just picked up my clients.

We're heading out of town, my raft trailer rumbling behind my truck, a plume of dust rising from the gravel. It's the final day of a four-day run with this group — Texas oil and gas millionaires, a legitimate billionaire or two in the mix, no doubt. The two men assigned to me for the day are clutching their coffees, admiring the scenery. It's good scenery, and I've seen it countless times, but I'm admiring it, too.

"It's going to be 103 in Dallas today," one of the guys says, and we all shake our heads in disbelief. I roll down my windows, and I can see them in the rearview, noses tilted up slightly, breathing in the cool air.

I'm midseason sore, with a low-level vodka hangover piggybacking on shoulders tight from sev-

eral days of hard rowing on a rushing, boulder-packed river. I'd met a girl at the Murray Bar the night before, and there'd been dancing. A long night that turned over into early morning — I hadn't been sore at all then, of course.

The clients are talking among themselves, and I'm only half listening, thinking of the girl and her tan lines. She worked on an organic farm outside Bozeman; some of her skin was burned to walnut, other areas were a shocking white.



*The guide-client relationship
is a delicate balance.*

My reverie breaks when one of the clients starts showing the other his wading boots.

They're made by a well-known outdoor apparel company — the one that famously donates 1 percent of its profits to environmental causes, the one that recently devoted itself to making and selling fewer products while repairing more items to cut back on additions to landfills, the one with an outspoken founder whose mission statement includes an unabashed dedication to environmental awareness. "Those look like good boots," one client says. "But I haven't bought anything from that company in 20 years because I can't stand the way they support radical environmental groups."

I can't totally suppress my snort, and he looks at me sidelong. I fiddle with the radio and ask if they remembered to bring their fishing licenses.

Among fishing guides, there's the generally adhered to maxim that conversations of politics and religion have no place in the boat. I find religion easy enough to avoid, but this year especially, something about our country's

political climate has made it increasingly difficult for me to keep my mouth shut on issues that hit close to home.

I can't speak for everyone, but I'd say the majority of fishing guides I know think progressively when it comes to environmental topics. We really have no choice because, when it comes down to it, we rely on a rather delicate natural resource to make a living. For example, a couple of years ago my home river, the Yellowstone, was closed to all recreation because of fish die-offs caused in part by low, warm water. Call it global warming or climate change or impending ecological disaster — I don't really care. The fact is that these late-summer closures are becoming a yearly occurrence, and the reality is that it is affecting my chosen way of life. In other words, as a guide, I can't afford not to be an environmentalist. What I've been grappling with lately is the awareness that, in a weird bit of cosmic irony, many of the individuals who can afford to pay me to float them down these delicate natural resources are some of the same people who drive the industries that threaten them.

We get to the river, and I launch my raft. The river is small and cold, boulder-filled and beautiful, and my two clients are properly appreciative. We get a few tangles and catch a few feisty rainbow trout, and after a while we stop for lunch on a nice, shaded bank. One of the clients begins waxing poetic about the matching Winston fly rods he purchased for each of his grandsons to commemorate their births, and the poignant moment he's anticipating when he takes them fishing for the first time. I commend him for starting a great tradition, and because I'm a smart ass and can't resist, I remark that, hopefully, people of his grandson's generation will still be able to enjoy trout streams the way we do. He catches my drift and chews his sandwich for a few moments, swallows and launches into a rambling diatribe about the greenies' climate-change hoax.

There is something near desperate in this man's contempt for environmentalism in any form, and if I'm feeling expansive and sympathetic, I can make myself realize that what I'm dealing with is a rich, old man in a world

that seems suddenly unsteady. There are cars on the road that don't run on the substance he's amassed a fortune peddling. No doubt his grandkids would rather play on their phones than go fishing with him.

When the diatribe is over, I do what a good fishing guide does — I bite my tongue. I pack up lunch and change the subject by asking him about his jet. Over the years, I've noticed that clients consistently refer to the river and its environs as an office. As in, *Mighty nice office you got here, pal*. I see in this statement their unacknowledged process of comparison, a sort of ledger balance — their life path held up next to mine. Also, by referring to the river as an office, they feel they are reaching a place of common ground with me, aligning our professions and pursuit of gainful employment in some fundamental way. As much as this annoys me, at times I definitely feel like I'm punching the clock, doing my job, pointing out likely looking spots, undoing tangles, keeping the banter flowing, trying not to dwell on the fact that guiding fishermen is somewhat of an affront to the near-spiritual act of fishing done well.

I finish out the day without ruffling any feathers but with my mind elsewhere. I'm thinking about my late good friend and fishing mentor, Chester Marion. Chester was one of a handful of first-generation fishing guides on the Yellowstone, and he spent a lifetime on the water around Livingston. He was something of a local legend, a big-trout specialist, a self-acknowledged curmudgeon with a generous heart, especially toward stray animals. On one particular day several years ago, while rowing this very stretch of river, he came across a tree down in a small channel. No one knows for sure what happened, but Chester and one of his clients ended up in the water, and both of them drowned.

If one is so inclined, it's easy to hear the voices of those lives a river has claimed — cold current on rock, a cutthroat rising against the bank, wind in the cottonwoods. There's the old saying that a man can't step into the same river twice. That's wise, I suppose, but more and more I've been thinking the exact opposite might also be true: Maybe the river remains the same, but the man it wets is constantly changing. This explains our need to return again and again to the water, to assess our own personal transformation against a force that's endlessly variable but essentially timeless.



Guides introduce clients to waters they hold dear.



For many who guide for a living, conservation is not a choice but a necessity.

In more measured moments, I know it's wrongheaded and arrogant of me to consider the possibility that some individuals don't deserve a particular day on a particular river. Sometimes I can even convince myself that by exposing the rape-and-pillage crowd to a fabulous wild trout stream, I'm somehow striking a sneaky blow for conservationists everywhere. Because, of course, I see, even in these cagey, old Texas oil barons, a hunger for wild places far removed from the superheated concrete expanses of Dallas or Houston. In my somewhat rare optimistic moments, I consider the possibility that this mutual love for a trout stream could be a simple starting point, a small bridge over the great ideological gap that separates me from the majority of my clients.

On this day, I load up my Texans, and we truck on back to town for the inevitable Murray Bar happy hour and hundred-dollar-bill handshake. They ask me the usual questions about real estate prices around here, and I

can see visions of streamside fishing cabins and retirement ranches and "no trespassing" signs floating in front of their eyes. I continue to be amazed at the way a float trip's worth of exposure to beauty and solitude can inspire such lust for ownership.

I put down the windows for the rush of air and to discourage conversation. I'm thinking of one of the last times Chester and I ever fished together. We had a remarkable day of catching, and he turned to me as he winched the boat onto the trailer. He had a giant cigar clamped between his teeth, and a large grin. "Those are the kind of days that keep you young, son," he said, and then he cranked the winch handle like a man half his age.

Around these parts, fishing guides are sometimes derogatorily referred to as "fish pimps." And as much as I love introducing people to amazing rivers, I can't deny that there are times when I feel like I'm prostituting something I hold dear. After guiding for more than

10 years, I'm starting to think I'll never be extremely good at it. My main problem exists in my inability to completely overlook some of the inherent hypocrisies of the trade. The great unspoken reality of this profession is that we frequently entertain people we disagree with on a fundamental level, and sometimes outright dislike, in order to continue doing what we love or, perhaps more accurately, to continue being near what we once loved.

We get by, telling one another we are blessed to live in a place where other people take their vacations. We chase the tan lines in all their iterations, dim the end of our days with vodka. Each one bleeds into the next, and we wake up in October wondering just what the hell actually happened, feeling a little bit soiled.

At this point, I don't think you necessarily have to sell your soul to become a good fishing guide. I am, however, starting to worry about the accrued cost of consistently leasing it out for the summer.