

The Day The Mountain Blew

By

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Figure 1. Mt. St Helens 1978

Forty years ago, I was newly appointed Game Department Regional Fish Biologist in Vancouver, Washington, following the retirement of Fred Holm. It was 1979. My new regional “back yard” included Mt. St. Helens, which was important both personally and professionally.

Back in 1977, I had summited the mountain with fellow biologist Steve Leider. In 1979, I lived only 30 miles away from the mountain, in the small town of LaCenter. 1979 was a milestone year because my daughter was born on May 19. One of her first outings was a picnic trip to Spirit Lake and to Harry Truman’s lodge. Mt. St. Helens was our playground and our place to enjoy the wild things of SW Washington.



I was also connected deeply to the mountain in my professional work. In the summer of 1979, I went to Spirit Lake at the base of Mt. St Helens and evaluated the lake and its tributaries. The lake was so pristine that a secchi disc could still be seen in 100 feet of water which was comparable to Lake Tahoe and Crater Lake. Steelhead and coho salmon accessed the lake through the Toutle River. The lake was stocked with rainbow trout legals for the Fourth of July each year. I walked all of the streams entering the lake and did not know at the time that I would be the last biologist to have that pleasure before the eruption. It was magnificent with its shoreline covered with old growth Douglas fir, cedar and hemlock.

In March of 1980, I was visiting Dory Lavier in Kelso who had been the regional fish biologist for many years when we both heard a huge boom which we thought was a passing aircraft. We later that day found

out it was the first explosion which opened a hole at the summit. We all watched the mountain change from a beautiful snow cone into an ash covered menace as the north side began to bulge over the coming two months. Governor Dixie Lee Ray created the Red Zone around the mountain. From March on I was involved with the evaluation of the progress of the volcano and its potential effects upon the fish in the Kalama and Lewis Rivers.

My family had been preparing for church on Sunday morning May 18th 1980, when a friend called to say that the mountain had exploded. We ran outside at 830 am and the sky over the house was dominated by a huge billowing cloud of volcanic ash that shot straight up in the air. It was totally quiet. No explosive noises or sound reached us but we could see lightning flashing in the cloud apparently caused by the friction of the ash particles striking each other. Everyone rushed out of their homes and many drove to a high point to see the volcano better.



I had been on the flanks of the mountain on Friday May 16th testing the temperature and pH of streams and small mudflows flowing into the headwaters of the Kalama River. It was a good thing for me that it did not erupt on Friday.

In the coming weeks and months Bob Lucas and I traveled into many of the lakes in the blast zone to evaluate the condition of the fish and other aquatic life. Mike Kuttel also found an entire elk herd that were killed in place bedded down in the blast zone.



I could go on because there were many adventures and tough fights to keep the Army Corps of Engineers from building a huge dam near the mouth of the Toutle River or diverting Spirit Lake water into the Lewis River. We won and there are still salmon and steelhead in the Toutle and Green Rivers.

Recently I led my grandchildren on a ten-mile hike from the Johnson Ridge Visitor Center over the pumice plane to Windy Ridge. We saw an elk herd and a mountain goat and drank from a stream that originated from snow melt within the caldera of the mountain. Life has quickly returned to the area, and I'm grateful that we will be able to continue the legacy of our long-term connection with Mt. St. Helens and its precious natural resources.