

The Fable of the Farmer and the Fish



by Jan McCleery



Once in a land far away lived a happy people. They lived on a bounteous land surrounded by large, fresh flowing rivers. They worked hard during the week, building their homes and using the river's water for their drinking water. They planted crops. On weekends they enjoyed swimming and boating on the wide quiet waterways. The river teemed with beautiful salmon which they revered as an important part of the web of life and important food source for their village.



One day a visitor arrived. He said “You are a very lucky people. My people are not so fortunate. I work hard and farm my plot of land but our area is desert and it is difficult to grow enough to feed my family. You have more than enough water. Would you be so kind as to share some with your neighbors in the desert?”

“Why, of course,” said the mayor of the River People.

So they worked to build a canal from the river to the desert and built pumps to pump the water into the canal.



The farmer planted corn for his family to eat.



The desert farms bloomed. Soon more farmers came to the desert and soon the desert farms were producing many fruits and vegetables. This took even more water so they added more pumps from the river to the canal.

Some rich farmers from other lands heard about the blooming desert and bought many acres far out in the desert to plant and took more water from the river to irrigate with. They produced more fine fruits and nuts than their kingdom could eat so started sending their fine nuts to distant lands.

The farmers became very wealthy.



The River People became worried. Their river was getting sick without enough fresh water. The salt water from the sea was mixing into their towns' drinking water.

The River People said, "You need to cut back on the amount of water you are taking from our river. Our drinking water is getting salty."

But the rich Desert Farmers said, "You have plenty of places you can get your water from – just take your water from further upstream where there is no salt."

The River People said, "You need to cut back on the amount of water you are taking from our river. Our farmlands are getting salt from our irrigation water!"

But the Desert Farmers said, "Your crops are looking fine. A little salt won't hurt them."



The River People said, "You need to cut back on the amount of water you are taking from our river. Our salmon are dying."

The Desert Farmers had a lot of money so they hired a scientist to find out how to save the salmon.



The scientist went north and returned with her report. She said, “There’s not enough fresh water flowing out to keep the sea from flowing in. Salmon need strong flows to make them healthy and strong and show them the direction to the sea. Lack of fresh water is what is killing the salmon.”

The Desert Farmers became angry. They did not want to give up their water and their profits. “No, that can’t be the right answer.” So they fired the scientist and hired another.



The second scientist went north and returned with his report. He said, “There are many factors that are affecting the salmon. When the salmon went out to the ocean last year the ocean temperatures were higher than normal and that killed many salmon. The Orca population is higher in the Northwest and they eat many salmon. The fishermen kill salmon. The striped bass that live in the river probably eat salmon. The farm runoff has pesticides that could harm salmon. The River People probably pollute the river.”

The Desert Farmers told the River People, “We can’t do anything about the ocean temperature. You should kill Orcas and the bass and stop the salmon fishermen who are killing the salmon. Stop farming by the river and move out of your villages. That is what you need to do to save the salmon.”

But the River People said, “Our river, the fish, the bass, the farms have all been here for hundreds of years and everything thrived, including the salmon. The salmon need more fresh water. You need to stop taking so much water from our river. Our salmon are dying. All fish in the river including the bass are dying. Even the littlest fish in our river, the smelt are dying.”



So the River People went to the pumps and made them stop pumping.

The Desert Farmers said, “What? You think a little fish like the smelt is more important than farmers?”



The farmers sent out town criers to all of the villages and neighboring lands saying “The River People think fish are more important than farmers. They worry more about a little tiny smelt than hard working farmers who put food on your table. They are keeping our water from us.”

The king of the land who lived on a hilltop heard the news. “What? People are keeping water from the good farmers? They care more about a tiny smelt than putting food on the table for all the people in my kingdom?”



The wise king decided it was time to come to their lands. The king traveled to see the River People to ask them why they cared more about a tiny fish than putting food on his people's table.

The River People said, "We were happy to share our water with the Desert Farmers. But they kept taking more and more water. Now our fish are sick, our farms and drinking water are salty."



The king traveled to the Desert Farmers who showed him their parched lands waiting for water from the river. As he looked about the land he remarked, “This is truly amazing. You have made this desert bloom. When I was here before there were just a few family farms and now look – there are orchards as far as the eye can see.”

“Oh yes”, said the proud farmers.

“If you had all of the water the river holds, could you plant even more orchards and send even more fruits and nuts to distant lands?”

“Oh yes”, said the proud farmers.



He told the Desert Farmers, “This is not a fight of fish or farmers. The River People were kind to share their water with you. But you have not shared well.

My new scientist will decide how much water the river needs and then the extra can be used for your farms. But there isn’t enough for all of these orchards. The farmers who have farmed here the longest will still get their water. Those who came last should sell their lands and buy lands in wetter regions.”

The rich farmers who had planted far out into the desert sold their land and bought land in far-away regions with an abundance of rain. They continued to make their profits from selling nuts to distant lands.

There was still an abundance of fresh farm produce from the Desert Farmers for the kingdom.



The River became healthy and the fish thrived. The River People were happy once again.

The End