

Romancing the Estuary

by Kenn Oberrecht

One day during the summer of 1991, the mail brought an intriguing invitation from the South Slough National Estuarine Research Reserve in Charleston, Oregon: a request for proposals "from qualified contractors to research, write, and produce 52 newspaper feature articles." The project would entail writing about estuaries--those special places where river and ocean waters meet and mingle--and how these complex environments fit and function in nature's grand scheme. The successful bidder would have approximately six months to finish the job.

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Nevertheless, I realized the proportions of the task could prove overwhelming, especially in light of my already busy freelance schedule. It could be like hugging an elephant--not impossible, but something requiring careful planning and a big reach.

A few weeks after I submitted my proposal, Marty Giles, Education Coordinator at the South Slough, phoned to tell me I had been awarded the contract. Within days I was busy listing chores, setting up files, and planning my research.

I was interested not only in Oregon estuaries, but also others along the Pacific, Atlantic, and Gulf coasts. So I set to work writing letters to the fish-and-game agencies, Cooperative Extension Services, and Sea Grant College Programs in each of our coastal states. Next, I wrote to various federal agencies, such as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

The National Wildlife Federation Conservation Directory provided most of the addresses and phone numbers I needed. From the same volume, I also gathered information about various local, regional,

and national organizations concerned with conservation and management of coastal and estuarine resources.

I'm a writer, not a scientist, but over the years, I have interviewed and corresponded with hundreds of scientists around the world, on topics ranging from astronomy to zoology. They have been willing subjects, often eager to share their knowledge, so I might pass it on to my readers. The estuary project was no exception. Soon, teetering stacks of estuary-related literature covered nearly every square inch of horizontal surface in my office.

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I spent hours at the North Bend and Coos Bay libraries, punching keys at computer terminals and later poring over the dozens of volumes my search turned up. I also increased the size of my own library by about 50 books and book-length reports. More than 100 new files now crowd two drawers of my file cabinets, and I'm about to assign another drawer to the task of housing the ever-growing body of literature.

This has been much more than a job of research and writing that might have ended with the submission of my 52nd article. It was, from the beginning, a labor of love and a commitment to our estuaries: an on-going project that may well occupy a sizeable portion of the rest of my life.

