

Burlington's Depths

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Any self-respecting Freudian would have a field day with this one: I am walking deep in a forest with my husband and young son. Our feet are silent as we cross a bed of pine needles. We come upon a shallow pool carved into the earth. In it, hundreds of gray fish hang suspended in the water like prehistoric fossils captured in an ice floe. The fish are motionless; not one fin wavers. All snouts point north.

But then my son adjusts his baseball cap, throwing a sudden shadow across the pool. The mute army snaps into a perfect drill formation. Gray bodies turn east. Inexplicably, they move clockwise again, and face south. My son claps his hands, and the fish turn again, to the west. They eye us suspiciously. Then the water begins to ripple violently. As we turn to leave, I see we are surrounded by identical pools of silent, suspicious fish.

Freud or no, this scene happens to be true.

Although not a fisherman, my husband enjoys a contemplative setting. So on Father's Day we decided to take a trip to the Burlington Fish Hatchery, where we had gone many years before with our three oldest boys. We pulled slowly off Route 4 into the rutted road past banks of mountain laurel just gone by. On this road, 250 years earlier, Algonquians stalked deer and wild turkey. As we turned into the driveway of the fish hatchery, a handmade sign greeted us just as it did on our last trip more than a decade earlier. The sign's brown board was grooved with yellow letters, as if carved by a child with his first wood-burning set.

Down a small hill lay the same troughs and bubbling pools that had so fascinated our older boys. Now, as then, a delicate network of filters kept the water circulating. A small farmhouse on the grounds hinted at human life, but there was no one in sight - no one taking tickets or charging admission to what is surely one of the most fascinating "attractions" in the state. We were amazed to discover that in the intervening decade, absolutely nothing had changed. (Then again, things move slowly here. Burlington is a town that chose to name itself after an English earl three decades after America gained independence from Britain.)

The hatchery, one of three in the state, was built in 1923 and is now operated by the Department of Environmental Protection. There, in 60 concrete pools, more than 200,000 trout (about 90,000 pounds) are stocked each year. Despite the dream-state atmosphere of the place, it is, in fact, ably staffed by State of Connecticut biologists, one of whom eventually drove by in a green DEP truck, actually tipped his broad-brimmed hat at us and, no questions asked, disappeared up the road in a dust cloud.

At the hatchery, he and his colleagues raise brook trout, brown trout, rainbow trout and Koanee salmon. In the fall, they fertilize the fish eggs and move the offspring, known as "fingerlings," into a small, one-story building that is essentially a fish factory. In this building, which another brown sign tells us is open daily from 8 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., is a rustic stone fireplace. Near it hangs a row

of black rubber boots that would come up to an ordinary person's armpit. I imagined some legion of giant Santas unloading tissue-wrapped fish beneath a perplexed family's tree. Pamphlets on a table entreat visitors to "Catch Fishing Fever," explain the mysteries of the Palomar knot, describe "final touches for fillets" and tell how to differentiate between a bobber and a dropper when baiting your line.

A slight, not unpleasant whiff of chlorine hangs in the air. Water rushes and roars in dozens of narrow troughs. In these long raceways, the fingerlings swim all day until they are big enough to be moved into one of the pools outside. Here, things get a bit complicated. It seems a legion of herons caught on to this fabulous al fresco dining experience and staged regular dive-bombing raids on the pools, making off with about 64,000 fish annually. So a year ago, the hatchery's supervisor rigged up a propane-powered cannon to scare the birds away. It worked, but it also drove the sleep-deprived Burlington residents nuts. Eventually, he rigged up some netting, but he says he can't cover everything and he has a permit to use the cannon again.

Eventually, the fish are put in tanks, driven to any one of the state's hundreds of ponds, lakes or rivers, and set free. Each fishing season, about 80 percent of these factory-raised critters will be caught, ogled, eaten, photographed, stuffed and mounted, sometimes tortured or, if they're lucky, thrown back. Like all babies, they soon learn that life is a lot harder once you leave home. Looking into the troughs, I noticed the dead giveaway of one silver motionless belly, which the other fish maneuvered around as New Yorkers do a homeless man on cardboard.

For reasons I cannot explain, fish always fill me with questions. I wondered whether the females ever try to locate their young in the frantic water. I looked up to see my own youngster's hand in the hand of his father, who allowed him to lean just far enough over the trough to feel a fine mist on his face. I wondered exactly where, at that moment, my other children were.

I wondered about the kind, but mostly invisible men who care for the fish each day. I asked myself how many places are like this - both unguarded and safe? Where else is such stillness surrounded by wild motion? How often do nature, commerce and recreation converge so seamlessly? Why do so few people know about this eerie anachronism and its haunting beauty? And finally, as I watched my son walk deeper into the pine forest, I wondered what will happen to him in a few years, when he leaves the only pool he's known.

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