The Wisdom of Fishermen

The Work of Paying Attention

By Professor Bruce Lanphear, Plagues, Pollution & Poverty Substack, 5 July 2026, reprinted from https://blanphear.substack.com/p/the-wisdom-of-fishermen where anyone can subscribe to receive weekly free emails from the world's most well-respected lead pediatrician researcher [LID 29858]



Three days of salmon fishing in the Alberni Inlet left me with an unexpected lesson: good fishermen don't simply catch fish, they learn to read the sea.

Brent O'Malley's newly christened boat, *Forager*, lived up to its name. We spent three days foraging for salmon. The water was unusually warm. Sockeye were arriving in waves rather than a steady stream. Purse seiners, large boats that catch salmon in nets, had just swept entire schools from the inlet before we reached them. Every fisherman had another theory. Black hooks. Underwood Cove. China Creek. Fish at fifty feet. Fish at eighty. Get out before sunrise. Wait for the next wave.

I learned to watch the sonar, troll at different depths, experiment with flashers and hoochies, and pay close attention to tides and water temperature.

We didn't catch any sockeye salmon.

Oddly enough, it didn't feel like failure.

Instead, I came away with a deeper appreciation for the quiet knowledge experienced fishermen accumulate over a lifetime. Their wisdom isn't a collection of tricks. It's an understanding of tides, currents, weather, water temperature, and fish behavior, subtle patterns that most of us never notice.



That realization brought me back to my grandfather, Harold Lanphear.

Growing up, he thought of himself as a failed businessman. He had inherited the family chauffeur service in 1929, just as the Great Depression began and automobiles were becoming affordable enough that fewer people needed chauffeurs. The business slowly disappeared.

But that wasn't the whole story.

For forty years Harold earned his living on the waters off Watch Hill and Avondale, hauling lobster pots and fishing from a modest wooden boat named the *Ella L.* There was no GPS, sonar, chart plotter, hydraulic hauler, survival suit, or emergency beacon. Much of what kept him alive, and made him successful, existed only in his memory, experience, and judgment.

Years later, my father captured those skills beautifully in two stories.

In one, he described watching Harold pull lobster pots "like a dancer on a rocking stage," every movement perfectly timed to the rise and fall of the sea.

In another, he recalled a trip to Raggy Ledge, a reef between Atlantic Beach and Weekapaug. Harold found it not with electronics but by lining up a flagpole with a single distant tree, landmarks invisible to anyone else but permanently etched into his memory. Once anchored, the fishing was extraordinary. Blackfish, cod, and even an occasional blowfish filled two fifty-gallon barrels in only a couple of hours.

Those stories read differently after spending time on the Alberni Inlet.

What once sounded like ordinary fishing tales now strike me as accounts of extraordinary skill.

The best fishermen don't conquer nature. They pay attention to it.

They notice what others overlook. They form hypotheses, test them, discard the ones that fail, and quietly build on those that do. They understand that yesterday's answer may not work tomorrow because the sea is always changing.

But fishermen also inherit lore: black hooks, a certain tide, a favored cove, the lucky lure. Some of these traditions capture genuine patterns born of long experience; others survive simply because they have been repeated for generations. Good fishermen learn to distinguish between the two.

Scientists like to imagine we are different. In reality, we have our own versions of fishing lore. We become attached to favored hypotheses, familiar methods, and the latest technology. We measure what our instruments can detect, sometimes forgetting to ask whether we're measuring the most important thing. Expertise can sharpen our vision, but it can also narrow it, making it easier to mistake convention for truth.

Curiosity, patience, humility, and a willingness to learn from failure are what separate the best fishermen from the rest. They are also what separate the best scientists.

In that sense, *Forager* is more than a boat's name. It's a way of approaching the world.

Good fishermen are, above all, foragers. They search. They observe. They adapt. Every trip, whether successful or not, leaves them a little wiser than the one before.

We returned with only a few dozen spot prawns and a couple of spectacularly slimy hagfish.

A week earlier, I would have called that a failure. Now it feels different.

My father once wrote that some of my grandfather's lobster pots came up empty while others held three or four lobsters. "It wasn't lucrative," he said, "but it was a living. More than that, it was where Dad truly belonged, on the water."

I don't know that my grandfather ever considered himself successful. He measured himself by the chauffeur business he lost. I think he underestimated what he had gained instead: a lifetime of learning how to observe, adapt, and live with uncertainty.

The older I get, the more I realize that the wisest fishermen and the best scientists have something in common. Neither tries to master nature. Both spend a lifetime learning how to pay attention.

This work exists because of readers like you. Paid subscriptions let me keep it independent, ad-free and unafraid to take on powerful interests. If you find value here, consider joining as a supporter—it makes all the difference.

Upgrade to paid
