

The view from a purple kayak

The evening fog had slipped in unannounced, following us back from Lover's Point in Pacific Grove. As we turned to paddle into Monterey's harbor, the great setting sun's diffused wash created silhouettes from a thousand naked masts. We landed that evening, moments before sunset, in a world of orange undulations and whispering water. Such are the special moments in a kayak when one finds himself both the subject and object of immense kinetic art.

Even a trip as simple as a Friday evening group paddle can become magic on a planet that has an artist's soul. I'd taken that Friday evening trip a dozen times, each a memorable experience.

Water has always fascinated humankind. From the misty depths of prehistory, people have ventured out on the water to explore, to earn a living, and to experience the tranquility and mystic insights it affords. Even those left on the shore have felt the seductive pull. Our species has an infinity for flowing rivers and sunsets over the ocean. Water has been a source of mythology and poetry, daydreams and speculation.

This hypnotic fluidity, to my mind, more closely resembles the underlying nature of reality, this sea of energy, resplendent with waves of awareness, always in motion. The human thought patterns, when not occupied with some problem to be solved, drift like the current from eddy to eddy, flowing in, around, and out of little coves of emotion and experience. Sine waves, ocean waves, air waves, permanent waves dancing over the topography of the collective psyche!

Fluidity is the nature of mind, of creation, of the interaction of all existence. Everything flows: the galaxies, empty space, evolution, and seemingly very solid rocks. Unfortunately, most of these flow at a rate that human senses can't recognize. If we could watch the Earth's upheavals and erosions in some fast motion film, its motions would likely resemble ocean waves or currents in a stream.

Whatever the primal pull, I felt its power the first time I crawled into a kayak. I never felt it sailing. There were too many little chores to do with sails and lines, too much exchange of information. Alone in a small boat, arms and shoulders soon revert to automatic action, and the mind is free to follow the currents to uncharted country. There are no trails or paths upon the water nor upon the imagination.

One early December morning two or three years ago, the rains came and went and came again, and so it also was with the wind. I loaded my surfboard and my kayak on the car and headed toward Monterey.

At Marina, there was a howling on shore wind, but by Monterey it had subsided to a whisper.

The bay off Monterey and Pacific Grove was remarkably calm, given the intermittent rain storms. I pulled up at Lover's Point and put my kayak in the water under a spritzing rain.

My goal was to whale watch, as they were running the coast that time of year. To that end, I angled out from the shore and out toward the open waters beyond the point. About a mile out the rain stopped, and a soft, golden light flooded in as the window shades of cloud rolled up a little. The hills and mountains that ring Monterey Bay were lit from a low angle, causing a partial backlight and deep contrasts between ridges and

valleys. The clouds rose slowly, like sticky taffy mist being pulled by unseen fingers. The land features were so clear as to totally confound the senses of distance and depth. I wondered then what some whale would think if it suddenly rose up and looked landward. Fremont Peak looked like a massive ragged tooth snapping at the glowing sky.

I paddled out into an almost smooth, gun barrel colored sea. As I passed boats, I asked the boaters if they'd seen whales. I kept moving west by north until I was even with Point Pinos and about a mile and a half out. There on the edge of Monterey Bay the sea became a bit choppy. That close to the water, and with added chop, it was hard to see features at water level, such as whales, which are about the color of the winter ocean. I pulled closer in to talk to some scuba divers in kayaks, and then I pulled out again, angling back along the wall of the submerged canyon. The buildings along the shore were doll houses, and there was a quiet and peace in the empty spaces around me. Little sea birds floated around me, and I looked out in all directions to a view unobstructed.

Suddenly I heard the sound of water being blown out under pressure, and I turned just in time to see a whale's tail wave gracefully in the air before disappearing with a splash under the water. Then I headed back toward shore, warmed by the feeling that I'd gotten close to something real and vital, and that I was more than some distant observer.

The world looks different and may well be different from a few inches above the surface of the water. Perhaps the radically different points of view from land and water account for why two highly intelligent creatures, dolphins and humans, don't share a common ground of understanding. We communicate with each other superficially, but the wisdom of each species is lost on the other.

For several summers I've traveled to the Mendocino coast, a place of wondrous water and few people. It has almost the feel of an island, with narrow, winding roads the only access from California's population centers and freeways. I'd follow Highway 128 down the Anderson Valley to Boonville and the first class brew pub. North of Boonville the road enters the forest and follows the Navarro River to the coast.

Along the Mendocino coast there is no clear border between ocean and river. Coves become inlets and then rivers, in which currents move up or down river, depending on the tides. The Navarro is one of several of these, and even though it is only a few dozen yards from a highway, it can feel almost like a wilderness kayak experience. There are places where the road is unseen and unheard and one can watch the breeze lightly skip over green water from a beach shaded by a stand of birch. There are miles of flat water, and other boaters are rare. It's a lazy, dreamy river where one can launch almost a mile from the mouth, right along the highway. It's an impulse paddle. If the day is warm and there's little breeze, one need only pull over.

Going down the Navarro, past the mouth, can be interesting as well. Returning home in late August of '99, the sun broke through the damp overcast, and the wind almost stopped as I reached the Navarro. On impulse, I stopped and looked down toward the sunny beach and the off shore rocks. The boat was quickly untied and in the water, and within fifteen minutes I'd reached the mouth and the few day trippers sunning on the beach.

The tide was dropping, and the water was running out the ten foot wide opening at the mouth, past a large rock and into the waves that broke on the ubiquitous sand bar that always forms at river mouths. I aimed straight out and paddled into the break.

The surf was small, but I hit it as a set came through. Several waves broke over

the bow, and that coupled with the wind took my straw hat off my head and set it free on the current. I paddled toward the jumble of rocks by the point just north of the river. Then I saw that one of the rocks had a tunnel through it, and going through sea tunnels is one of the things kayakers like to do, so into the shaded green room I went, coming out into a carpet of kelp. After wandering around the rocks for a bit and cruising along the inviting summer beach, I decided to head back. I caught a wave that almost took me to the rock at the river mouth. Paddling hard, I bucked the current and entered the river, pulling into a beach for a look around.

Starting to miss my hat, I looked out to sea, and saw it floating out beyond the surf near that sea tunnel, looking lost and abandoned. Did I want to bother going back out? Hell, it was a damn good seven buck hat, so I jumped back in the boat and shot out through the mouth, through the breaking waves, and out to the hat, which seemed to be holding up quite nicely in spite of the salt water. I pulled the wet straw over my head and headed back to shore.

This time, the wave I caught brought me right next to the rock, and the current was moving faster. I almost crashed and had to push off and paddle like mad to inch my way against the current. Paddling into a river against a dropping tide is like running on a fast moving treadmill: great exercise without much headway. Soon I gained the flat water and the smooth water paddle to the car, and as I headed up the hill on the south side of the river, bound for possible surf at Point Arena, I thought of the previous day and of finally exploring the Albion River.

There is something primal and compelling about looking down on the Albion. The bridge towers hundreds of feet, seemingly miles, above the river at its mouth. The river ends at a steeply walled inlet bay, which always seems to be gray and misty. The buoy on the rock in the middle of the cove is constantly sounding its mournful cry against the foggy sea spirits that haunt the bay. The Albion itself is the color of a molten forest.

I arrived mid-afternoon, much too late for ideal paddling in Mendocino. The wind usually picks up in the afternoon. I pulled up to the combination cafe and campground office and turned up my windbreaker collar against the blowing fog. Kayaks launch for half the price of regular boats, which was good news for a guy who travels with little more than pocket change and boundless optimism.

Within minutes I was past the boat docks, the fog, and the upstream camping area, with the kids and dogs and the hum of power equipment. Silence descended like a tropical night, and I was alone with only the half sunken remains of abandoned boats.

Then an old two story house loomed up in front of me. This was a houseboat as bizarre as anything from the golden days of Sausalito's floating shanty town. A great assortment of rotting logs and timbers held up this piece of livable art. The sides were shingle on the first floor, many missing and revealing insulation. The second floor was mostly a collection of old wooden windows nailed together. Clothes were hung on racks in the upstairs rooms, and a small, vociferous herd of hostile terriers patrolled the place. The house rode so low that the entrance was only inches above the water line. Yet people lived there and were very protective of it. Besides the dogs, there was a bumper sticker on the wall: "I'm the NRA, and I vote."

Further up river there were a couple more odd dwellings. Two tiny buildings floated a few yards apart. One looked like an igloo and was apparently for storage. The other was just big enough for a single bed and a place to sit and read. Privacy comes in all

shapes and sizes.

Then all signs of civilization ended, except for a sign a mile or so up river that warned against trespassers. How absurd! There wasn't a building or even a road in sight. Were these owners afraid that someone might land and pick a flower or put down their sleeping bag and spend the night? There is something wrong with a society that treats land like personal property. Beyond your home and garden or perhaps a tract you are farming, you have no right to tell others they can't walk through the woods or relax in the meadow. The whole concept of private property needs drastic revision. Your right to a piece of land should derive from you living on it and caring for it. Some little piece of paper with the word "deed" written on it shouldn't give anyone the right to lock up land they neither live on or use.

Passing the upright bones of some long gone pier or dock, I saw the tender green of fresh life that had taken root in the rotting top of one of the old pilings. As I passed, the entire green expanse around me seemed to arrange itself in some elegant order around the tiny plant, the way the mind arranges reality around a semantic concept. Nature makes profound statements about the ability of life to persevere and flourish.

The river narrowed and started to actually flow, and I had to work to get over the shallow, fast moving water. I thought I'd nearly reached the end, but then it narrowed again and deepened, and I paddled through a lush meadow that I could almost reach out and touch.

The river ran into a thicket of dense brush, and it was time to turn around and head back against the afternoon wind toward civilization.

I couldn't pull the boat out without exploring the bay at the mouth of the river. Paddling under the huge, metal bridge, I could hear it singing as the cars and trucks rolled along way above me. And then I was out in the chill fog and steady wind. The little breakers felt like ice water. The buoy sang its cold and lonely song as I passed below it and around the rock. A thick bed of dull golden kelp made paddling difficult. And there, at the edge of open water, shivering in my windbreaker and trunks, I turned back to find food and warmth.

Looking down at the Noyo River in Fort Bragg some years back, I wondered where it wandered. I had my kayak on the car, as I always do when traveling the coast. Not knowing where the boat ramp was, I drove down past the gift shops and sea food restaurants and out to the cove at the river mouth. As is typical in summer, the beach was gray and cold. I rode the plump, slow swells between the breakwaters and into the marina area.

There is a quality of rust and decay and submerged worlds at water level along a marina. The underside of docks and piers have an art and history of their own. Remnants of metal and wooden structures hang down, and each surface is covered with the assortment of sea creatures that cling and wait. Unidentifiable items bob in the dark green water, and various swimming creatures leave tiny wakes in the shadows. Life organizes itself in the under shadows just as it does on the docks above.

Beyond the old town with the tap and stomp of tourists above me, I came upon rural river life. Fences and spots of cultivation marked the territories of humans. The pop of a small bore rifle revealed the presence of teenagers shooting at anything that scurried. Once-used structures were slowly being consumed by the relentless river. A couple of miles upstream a trailer park hugged the bank. This was not a mobile home park, but a

trailer park in the true sense of the term. Old single-wides were settling in the grass and mud, and ancient cars without wheels were slowly becoming art objects. People sat around with fishing poles and cans of beer. Suspicious glances and broad smiles darted my way from under faded hats. There was no sense of hurry, of the compulsion to build and expand. The fevered tempo of urban life was nowhere to be seen. I passed as silently as a ghost.

Just below the proudly perched, pastel village of Mendocino, a different kind of river breathes in and out with the daily tides. The Big River flows past no homes or marinas or trailer parks. Were it not for the occasional thundering of the logging trucks on the unseen dirt road, a paddler might well think he was in the wilderness. A wide beach affords parking and launching, and directly across the river there are kayak rentals available. The tide flows swiftly by this beach, close to the river's mouth, but a short way up river, the current almost disappears. Open, marshy areas quickly give way to a deep forest, a forest that leans over the river and seems to draw the world into a narrow, liquid space. The silence is so profound that the ripples from each paddle stroke softly echo away. As the river narrows and the thick stands of evergreens crowd the shore, there's a sensation of being in a green tunnel, a verdant worm hole to the domain of woodland spirits.

Along the way there are small, damp beaches where one can lie quietly and watch the subtle interplay of light and leaves, or where one can have a quiet picnic. There are even places where you can climb the bank and venture out in the woods.

It's hard to say how far one could navigate this river, but about eight miles up a giant redwood had fallen, completely blocking the river and yards on either side. It would take ropes to get a kayak over this eight foot thick log. This is, perhaps, nature's way of saving the native creatures from the onslaught of tourists.

As with all the rivers on the Mendocino coast, the return trip is less joy and more work, as the inevitable afternoon wind marches an army of chop along the water. With aching shoulders and back, I ended my first and finest trip on the Big River.

A couple of years later, scarcely half way to the fallen tree, my mind drift was shattered by mechanical booming and crashing. It sounded like a broadcast from the bowels of hell, and it was getting closer. Rounding a turn, I saw a clearing to my right, and less than a half mile from the river, in plain view, was a cable logging operation. From where I sat, stunned, on the river, the monster looked like a nightmare ski lift. On a mountain far too steep for vehicles, trees were being dragged, still in their death throws and silent sobs of pain through a swath of devastation.

The scene hit me like the rape of an innocent child. I don't know if I'll ever kayak the Big River again, and if I do, something special about the experience will be gone.

One can also go out the mouth of the Big River. With an outgoing tide, you slide quickly into the oncoming surf that breaks over the sandbar, surf that is good enough to ride at times. Once you punch through the surf or avoid it by skirting the rock wall of the southern bluff, you are in an expansive bay. On the north the headlands go straight out to sea past the beaches, rocks and caves below the village of Mendocino. People strolling along the bluff look down and wave.

Near the point there is an interesting cave, one that has a hole in the top from which hikers can look down and watch the rhythmic surges moving up and back. I paddled into the dark of the cave and then under the light of the hole. Looking, up I saw

faces smiling down. And then I was in the cave again before coming out at the edge of the point and the rough chop of open ocean. Around the point there's the labyrinth of rock and water called the Mendocino headland, a place to venture on days with small surf, a place where artists line the bluffs on any given day.

Every place where a river, creek, gulch or gully reaches the ocean, there's a cove or bay. Each one has its own charm. Russian Gulch has a quiet beach and a small lagoon that must be crossed to launch. Out past the steep walled bluffs the rocks open up into something resembling an asteroid belt, complete with passages to other coves. Caspar Cove is more open, ending with a pile of low rocks that create a wonderland of mini waterfalls after each breaking wave. Beyond the cove, one can go south to another cove, isolated by vertical walls. One must skirt a break to enter this secluded cove, and with big waves, that probably wouldn't be possible. But from that bay you can wander south to the Caspar light, sending its tireless beacon out to sea.

Of all the coves and bay that have been carved from that coast, the finest is at the mouth of Little River, about two miles south of Mendocino. Little River is aptly named. It's a river to wade in, not to kayak. From the parking lot at the beach this bay looks much like the one at Big River, the north side bluffs heading straight out to sea, and the south twisting and arching away for miles. Directly ahead and even with the end of the headland is a rock bathed in white water, while the rest of the bay, at least in the morning, is lake-calm.

The headland looks like a solid rock wall until you paddle up close. It's a series of arches and ebony-sided tunnels and caves that lead you, like the white rabbit, into wonderland. It's like moving through a stone sponge or the neural pathways of a mad artist.

And to the south this same effect seems almost endless, extending perhaps to the Navarro River and beyond. It is like exploring some ancient ruin, crumbling doorways lead from room to watery room. One in-and-out passage brought me so close to the cliff that I bounced off from the surge and almost capsized. And then I saw this tall, slender arch and had to paddle through it, finding myself in a tiny cove with a cobble stone beach, surrounded by straight, gray-green, slick walls, another spot hidden from the hand of man. I enjoyed the raw, quiet energy of the place for a few moments before turning to go.

And around the end of the north headland, wearing only swim trunks and following the passages between the rocks, I rode a wave that almost pushed me into a wide cave. I followed the inside passage until it narrowed so that I knew I was coming to a dead end. I should have backed out, but I tried to turn around in a spot slightly too narrow. A surge raised my boat, and when I came down, my bow and tail were hung up on the rocks above the water. I tried to wiggle loose and only succeeded in dumping myself into the freezing water. The rocks were too slick with algae or moss to get a foothold, and soon I started thinking about hypothermia. Using the sea lion on the rocks technique, I bellied up on the boat and crawled in. Chattering and blue, I headed back to the warm beach, realizing that this little lesson in caution would be forgotten before my next paddle.

Visions of peril come in quantum packets of momentary panic. But after they pass by, a realization returns to me. There is nothing to fear out on the water or deep in the forest. Everything surrounding me out to the edge of creation is alive and part of the same

life that flows through me. Everywhere I wander I'm enveloped by a diffuse love born of intense intimacy. I'm always where I'm supposed to be, a stitch in the fabric of space-time. Naturally, I can choose to throw away my life by trying to surf huge waves in impossible conditions or by paddling my kayak out into a wide open winter ocean, clad only in shorts. But as long as I'm grounded in my sense of relationship with my world, the spirits of the infinite watch over my every move.

The Mendocino coast is a cornucopia for the paddler. Its bounty is endless, and if I kayak it a thousand times, I will still find surprises and secret coves to match the secret coves in my mind. There are, however, closer places to kayak, places with their own particular charm.

Driving through Sausalito one Sunday with my kayak on the car, I looked over at Richardson Bay, sunny and smooth as glass. Without thinking about it, I pulled off and parked in the empty parking lot of a bayside business complex. Five minutes later I was sliding the boat down the bank and into the water.

It was like paddling the uptown suburbs. I cut through the water under the watchful eyes of the very wealthy. I saw mile after mile of huge, quiet homes, all the way out to the end of Tiburon. I saw no one, heard nothing. I wondered what these people were doing while I enjoyed the luxury they'd paid dearly for. I also wondered how often they enjoyed the multimillion dollar view, or if they'd gotten so caught up in the small routines of life that they had forgotten to attend to the small pleasures.

These bay front houses seemed to never end. Houses that would seem castles in my neighborhood became routine tracts when lined up like stucco bricks.

And then there was Angel Island, a ten-minute ferry ride from the tip of Tiburon, and I was in the choppy, current-cursed channel. Landing on a remote beach, I hiked along the trails and dirt paths to the main beach where the ferry made its hourly visit, and people sat in the sun or embarked on bike or hike explorations of the island. I started to realize that I was the only person there who had not ridden the ferry, and when hunger struck, I also realized I was the only person there who hadn't brought a wallet.

On the return trip the wind kicked up like the rantings of a madman, and I had to lean hard and relentlessly on the paddle to make the slightest headway. Exhausted at reaching my parking spot, I saw that the tide had dropped, leaving twenty feet of bay mud between me and the parking lot. Filthy legs, ruined shorts, and a lost sports sandal later, I dragged the boat up on the pavement.

I must not be too bright, as the same thing happened to me on Bolinas Lagoon. I'd put in at the mouth of the lagoon and had to paddle hard against the tide heading out. That should have been a warning. I headed up the north side, along the narrow channel where the houses hung from pilings and each had a boat dangling in the water. Soon I was away from dwellings and among the shore birds. The open water was narrowing into channels, and I picked one that looked like the main one.

I was heading further back toward the shallows of the lagoon, the part that's all mud flats at low tide. Suddenly there was just a thin layer of water ahead of me for dozens of yards. In the distance it seemed to be deep again, so I decided to go for it, trying to stay to the deeper spaces between the ridges. Again and again I bumped over the mud, poling myself loose. Finally, I came to a stop. I was sitting in the mud in a dropping tide. Open water looked about as far ahead as behind, so I decided to keep going. I got out of the boat and again sank into knee deep mud. Again I pulled a bare foot up. I made

a mental note that I could ill afford to go through expensive sport sandals like this. I also caught a quick mental image of me stuck out there for six hours, until the evening tide lifted me up again.

I pulled off the other sandal and slogged with all my might through the mud, hoping to gain on the open water faster than the tide was dropping.

This is the kind of mud that is both natural and man made. There is peat and petroleum and bird shit and weeds, all mixed with soft soil and sand. Everything I was wearing was ruined. This stuff does not wash out. Still, I didn't have time to be dainty, and on I went until I felt the boat once again float free of the mud.

I followed the highway almost back to Stinson Beach before angling once again, and against the wind, back toward Bolinas. At the mouth the tide was flowing out even faster, and this time I was on the opposite side from my car. I stroked out into the water and underestimated the flow, shooting past my target. I had to turn around in the surf and paddle like a mad man back to the car.

To kayak the Bolinas surf is a treat and a joy, even if it's against the wind or through the mud or in the face of nuclear annihilation. Going out in those long, rolling waves is a unique trip. Kayaks and surfboards cluster together, sharing waves and behaving with some mutual civility. One can catch waves to the point of exhaustion, and then wander over toward Duxbury reef to explore. I wouldn't trade any day at Bolinas in a kayak or on a surfboard for the best day of earning a living.

Even the many times I've driven all the way to Bolinas to find lousy conditions haven't been wasted. There is a special quality of life out there, an energy that is almost unknown in cities. One gets the feeling of being in a natural community, a habitat, a human ecosystem.

Out in your car, coffee balanced on your knee, morning news blaring out of the radio, hours of appointments cycling through your head, your natural rhythms tend to be overrun by the hectic rhythms of society's machine. Then you stand on a corner in a town that vibrates to your primal inner tempos, and you exhale, and waves of discordant energy fly from your body. The muscles in your neck relax and you understand the reason why heart attacks are so common these days.

Months later, exploring Morro Bay after launching in the almost hidden community of Baywood Park, I took care not to paddle too far into the backwaters of the bay, into the mud flats, covered by only inches of water. That area is best left to the wading birds that scoop along the bottom for the delights hidden there. And I always hope that we haven't dumped too many toxic byproducts in the bay, that the birds come up with food that doesn't contain a poisonous time bomb.

After landing on and wandering about the long outer sand bar, a huge, empty no man's land of burning dunes, I paddled lazily toward the magnificent landmark rock. Morro Rock, the docks and the fishing boats seemed to be elements in a harmonious composition, as if they were placed simply for their aesthetic value. The sky was diffused by a subtle haze, and the sounds of the city were way out of earshot. Sea birds circled and landed in formation, and the only other paddler was almost a mile away. Some obscure tune started running through my head, and I suddenly realized that I was at peace with my world. I wasn't at odds with anything, nor did I fear anything. I wasn't angry, frustrated, or sad about any negative events. The world was a big place, filled with billions of people, and I was just one insignificant individual, and there was no need for

me to get stressed out about anything or to take anything personally. I was only there to paddle, to observe, and to be one small purple element in an artistic composition too complex for my understanding.

No matter the time of day or night or the weather, Elkhorn Slough, standing at the mid-point of Monterey Bay, is always an inviting paddle. I've paddled it in a howling wind, in the rain, on sunny days and moonlit nights. I've paddled from the easternmost mud flats out through the channel to the open ocean. I've paddled alone and with large groups, but the best experience I've ever had on the slough happens just once a year. In late summer the Sierra Club and some other local organizations hold a clean-up day. People gather early in the morning, set up the booths and exhibits, sign people in and prepare to get rid of a year's worth of the junk that thoughtless people leave behind. Many folks pick up a bag and walk the shore. I lead the kayak and canoe clean-up group.

I've followed the shore, dragging in cans, tires, bags, and things so long in the water as to be unrecognizable. With a boat so full that it could scarcely float, I've returned with a feeling of pride. You cannot get the full measure of joy from any area until you've given something back, and there is nothing so lovely in a natural area than the absence of trash.

I've prowled among the playful otters in Elkhorn, and one day I watched some people observing one. It was a young animal that had been abandoned by its mother and raised by the Monterey Bay Aquarium. Two biologists had recently turned it loose in the wild and were observing it, worried that it wasn't getting enough to eat or learning to socialize with its kind.

A couple of years later I paddled with a group. One young woman had worked as a volunteer at the aquarium. As we glided by an otter sunning on the bank, it slid into the water, swam up to her boat, and tried to climb in. The same animal, perhaps, saying hello to an old friend? I guess I'll never know for sure.

When I look down at the water, there are the dolphins, otters, seals and sea lions sharing my travels and adventures. But when I look up, everywhere along the coast there are gulls. Thank goodness they are hardy and tenacious. Without the constant motion of gulls, the shore, the docks, the bays and sloughs could not exist as dynamic reality systems. The gulls animate a peaceful and quiet seascape. Without them, it would seem a photograph. They fly overhead on white wings against the glazed sky. They force you to stop and watch. They connect you, like filaments of light, to the scene around you. By their bold and brazen ways, they give you access to the subtle beauty of sand and water and rustic piers. On the docks and wharves the gulls fuss and fight and stare you right in the eye, moving only grudgingly as you push into their space. Sometimes on a lazy morning before the people arrive, the gulls are the only movement in the still, pink dawn air.

And as if harmony to the melody of the gulls, the pelicans arise out of some primordial vision. They sit, wild-eyed and huge-beaked, on pilings and sand bars, watching with their subdued manic expression, and looking like a link to the ancient pterodactyl. But they are at their best in flight when a V formation of them comes straight at your boat, only a foot or so above the water, looking wild and wonderful and half-crazed before banking away at the last moment.

The cormorants also fly in formation, low and dark on the water, necks extended in anticipation of what's to come. They glide on outstretched wings just over the water

like a hang glider on an eternal updraft. But they are the most dramatic when standing on a rock, wings draped out to each side, drying in the sun. And when a motion below catches their eye, they dive straight down, returning to the surface with a wiggling fish.

There are patterns in the actions and interactions of these birds that conjure up some biological music, a symphony of all the insignificant daily actions of various creatures combined into intricate strings of harmony and melody. And if you pause for a moment to catch the beat, you find that your actions become the counterpoint to some avian aria or some sea lion syncopation.

Of all the places to kayak along the greater Monterey Bay, the most dramatic is Point Lobos. This is where California extends its anxious fingers to clutch the elusive sea. This is the transition from the mellow and seductive shores of Monterey Bay to the wild and aloof bluffs of Big Sur.

That Point Lobos was placed there to remind mortals off a unifying intelligence at work in the world is undeniable. Point Lobos has the topography of a wonderful dream, its coastal contours the cutting edge of imagination. It juts out just south of Carmel with rugged, stony-faced force, complete with rocky mazes and arches, and coves that end in sheer rock walls. It prepares the mind for the coast of Big Sur, a coast that can scarcely be imagined, even after being seen.

In mid-summer of 1999 I was invited to paddle Point Lobos from Stillwater Cove in Pebble Beach. Stillwater hung, as if suspended between ticks of a second hand, against the hard horizon. The water seemed to burst open as our kayaks fractured the mirror stillness.

There was a long stretch of open water between Carmel and Point Lobos, but the paddle over the wide bay was laced with formations of pelicans and cormorants. The surface was a liquid sky, and as the birds skimmed above it, almost touching the water with outstretched wings that were reflected in the mirror surface.

The surface of the mind is like the surface of the ocean. It reflects whatever meets it. Yet, below the surface is a vastness of realms beneath realms, until at the bottom is a dark still place, illuminated by sudden bursts of insights that flash like the bioluminescence of some translucent deep water fish.

We could see the whites of the pelicans' wild eyes as they flashed by us. And the white sand of Carmel shimmered in the distance. Point Lobos seemed to close in imperceptibly at first, until we were almost there, and then it rose up like the jumbled, multicolored monolith it is, an immense field of earth energy flowing out into another field of energy, a flow caught for a moment in geological time, a snapshot, a sudden and poignant image.

And then we rounded the point and entered the bump and wobble where swells and currents cross and interference waves abound. The small waves slapped the rocks, and broke over the low reefs off the point. Rock island homes of sea lions were alive with the roar and bark of a thousand social animals engaged in primal politics.

The rock walls looked to be the work of some odd stonemason, like blocks stacked and crammed together in some complex organic pattern. The walls rose almost straight up, and climbing them would be difficult if not impossible, which is something to consider when paddling into narrow coves during dicey conditions.

We turned into a cove between those high walls, sliding into a green and gray calm. There was a large floating object ahead, a bloated carcass of some sea mammal,

probably a seal. Then continuing south from the cove, we passed between rocks and shore, riding up over the swell that breaks on both sides of the rocks and reforms again from two directions.

The next cove was the big one, ending in a sandy beach. At the opening of this cove there is a jagged point, and it is there the huge winter storm waves build up and pound the shore with thunderous booms. It's where I stood out on the rocks a few months earlier, watching the waves rise and build until it looked like they'd roll all the way up on shore to take me and the trail out to sea. I'd watched them rise up and throw out, showering me with spray thirty yards inland.

But this summer day the knee-high waves spit against the rocks like angry kittens. Looking up at the ever rising landscape was qualitatively different than looking down at the endless, subtly changing sea. Coves and water interlock, like the yin and yang of this profoundly philosophical planet.

We rounded the last part of the point and started to move into what might be called a beach. We had to pause between some rocks to wait for the right time to enter the short channel, as larger waves would break between the rocks and could possibly capsize the kayaks. On the ocean, one must keep time to its rhythms and tempo.

Then we hit the kelp bed and had to pole our way, rather than paddle. It was a great floating jungle, an underwater Amazon forest. We finally stopped in front of a low rock, where the surge rose, submerging it, and fell again in a hundred white and sea mist green waterfalls. And there we lingered to talk the place into terms our minds could hold.

Returning toward Carmel I swung wide to avoid the widest part of the kelp bed, pushing instead out near the outer sea lion islands, and the great show put on by the dominant males, fighting to hold a bit of rocky turf as if it were a seat on the board of some international company. One huge bull, looking well over half a ton, sat with his head pointing skyward, only occasionally turning to lunge menacingly at some foolish challenger who had the audacity to attempt to climb his rock. The sounds were almost deafening, like a downtown tenement neighborhood on a Sunday afternoon.

I'd found the experience so rich I wanted to do it again, this time going around the entire Point Lobos State Park. A couple of weeks later, after returning from my ill-fated excursion north, I decided it was time.

This was to be a solitary trip, with all the special qualities implied therein. An experience can have breadth and depth. One can incorporate a world of activities and relationships into one experience. It can be a social, recreational, political, environmental, artistic, and even spiritual experience. Or it can operate on levels that peel away layers of being as if they were layers of an onion. There are places in the psyche where definitions and terminology are simply trappings or gimmicks of consciousness.

It was a gray and chilly morning, but as soon as I neared Point Lobos, the overcast started to break up, and the sun threw splatters of color over the water. I decided to launch from Monastery Beach, at the northern foot of Point Lobos. When there isn't a big swell, the steep beach has only a small shore break, which can be pushed through between waves. Beyond that there are only kelp beds and clear sailing around or between the rocks that line the north side of the point.

Beyond the first kelp forest, I passed the entrance to Whaler's Cove, where one can launch from a ramp inside the park for about five bucks. Past the cove there were groups of jagged rocks to ride the wave surges between and hidden coves to explore.

Watching Point Lobos as I passed, I thought it resembled a wall of an ancient city of giants, a big, jumbled, dark stone wall, drenched in the colors of the ages. Stands of pines clustered along the top. Dark indentations, illuminated by zipper bursts of waves, lined the mile trip to the end of the point.

Again I rounded the point, out where fingers of land blend with fingers of vast, undersea canyons. Rather than stay in close and explore for dead marine mammals, I swung wide, getting closer to the mass of bellowing life on the sea lion rocks. I also wanted to make a shorter run through that mat of kelp.

I was further from shore than on the previous trip, and I could see the panorama of Point Lobos, with the tide pools, forest, and beautiful uplifted rock formations. Massive layers of sediment had been laid down on the sea floor and pressed into rock over eons. Then a few million years ago, an incredible uplifting had created the coast range and had tilted these rocks skyward. Wind and water had stripped away the covering of soil, exposing nature's raw and passionate art. In the background the mountains bolted upright, still young and almost vertical. I watched a momentary act in a drama that reaches forward and backward in time, beyond the limits of human imagination, as I angled slowly toward China Cove.

Just off China Cove and looking into it toward the secluded beach, I decided not to paddle into the cove, but rather to head straight between Bird Island and the shore. Bird Island is actually several islands, all almost totally white from bird droppings, as are the rocky cliffs of the shore. There is a narrow gap between islands and shore, and I paddled into it, looking up at hundreds, perhaps thousands of gulls, cormorants, pelicans, and assorted other kinds of shore birds.

Apparently not many kayaks come through that gap, as the birds got in an uproar over my presence in their sanctuary. They shrieked and called and dove into the water or took to the air by the dozens. I felt like a spoiler and a criminal causing such panic and forcing them from their homes, even for a few minutes. My plan to linger and watch changed to paddling straight through as quickly as possible.

And then I emerged on the south side of Point Lobos and turned back toward shore. Looking to my left, I saw the calm cove of Gibson Beach, with its glistening water and simple heartbreaking beauty. I remember how touched I was when I'd hiked in to that beach for the first time and walked alone on the sand, with only the sound of water rattling over the steep, beach gravel.

From the water beyond Point Lobos, looking up at Carmel Highlands, the explosive topography appeared far more extreme and radical than from the land. Steep, wooded domes were the shoreward facades of the ridges that extended back into the mountains, and between each of these was a stream gorge deep in a narrow canyon. Looking at the homes clinging to the dome hills and looking at the pelicans, gulls, and cormorants clinging to bird rock, I was struck by the similarity. The human rookery has larger and more ornate nests, but we share the love of high places, overlooking the ocean with our avian cousins. Each rounded mound was perfect as if carved by a machine. Each deep valley in between was darkly wooded and coolly damp. Homes seemed to be glued to the almost vertical sides of the mounds. The shore was majestic, beachless rocky points and coves, perfect scuba diving spots. The homes that lined the shore seemed to be designed to draw from the natural majesty.

Then I turned back, and as I paddled through the dense mat of kelp, I saw a tiny

fish, eyes wide with surprise and panic, stranded on its side on a leaf of kelp. As I flicked him free with the tip of my paddle and pushed the last few feet to open water, a string of connections snapped into place. Looking down into the ever-changing surface of the water and watching the reflected images ripple in the wind, I felt the solid world start to drift away like morning fog. Then the dip of my paddle shattered the rippling image like the crystal face of God, and I knew that I was hopelessly caught between the worlds. Soon I'd be back in the reality of monumental metaphors, constructed from endless strings of semantic bricks, but for just a moment, as that crystal face of God broke into a million ripples, I was riding gently down the currents of creation, listening to the subtle song of raw energy, and slipping into the loving arms of unbroken wholeness.