



MARTY SHEPHERD PHOTO

CATCHING UP WITH JASON A. ATKINSON

A NON-APOLOGETIC STEELHEAD FISHERMAN, Jason Atkinson grew up in Southern Oregon where he had a 14-year political career serving in the Oregon Legislature from 1998 to 2013.

In 1998 he was elected as an Oregon State Representative (51st District) and in 2000 he ran for State Senator (2nd District) and won. Atkinson ran unsuccessfully for Governor in 2006, but retained his Republican Senate seat until 2013 when he took a sabbatical from pol-

itics to focus his energy on family, writing and producing a documentary film titled, “A River Between Us.”

Centered around restoring the Klamath Basin, the film is more than a documentary. Atkinson calls it, “a cinematic call to action on behalf of the largest restoration project in American history.”

“A River Between Us” is set to be released this spring.

PAT HOGLUND

SSJ Explain your history — family, personal and professional — with the Klamath River?

JA My 12-year-old boy is the 5th generation on the river. I grew up with an understanding and appreciation for native culture, steelhead, and agriculture in no specific order. I was one of the few white guys who knew all the native leaders in Northern California while being elected to office in Southern Oregon. I can't remember not knowing it was my responsibility to restore what we call “our” river.

SSJ Is it true that your grandparents' dying wish was for you to save the Klamath River?

JA It was more of a command, a directive, than a wish. One was a liberal Reagan-hating Democrat and the other an Eisenhower — leave me alone — Republican. The only thing they really agreed on was the river. Atkinsons have

been there before the last three dams were built and lived through steelheading nearly ending in the 1970s. I learned to cast, tie flies, and sit with all the old-timers who would fill my head with stories of what was once on the Klamath. Like a lot of folks, the Klamath pulses through my veins.

SSJ Your goal is to restore the Klamath River. How do you propose doing that?

JA Finish the implementation of the Klamath Basin Restoration Agreement, which will provide liability protection for the utility, a floor of water for farmers, and remove four aging dams, restoring what was the third-largest salmon producing river on the West Coast. The Klamath project is the largest restoration project in American history.

SSJ Explain the motivation behind producing, “A River Between Us”

JA Film is the best way to change culture. Politics follows culture. I didn't want to make another predictable river movie that preaches to the choir. My direction was always: Make this matter to someone who rides a subway to work. The Klamath is a metaphor for all that is right and all that is wrong in our country. If the East Coast gets that, culture will change, and politics will follow. We did something very unusual: We wrote a film that believes the audience is smart and able to draw their conclusions. We simply tell the truth, and the truth changes people.

SSJ How many man-hours went into making the movie?

JA We are starting our fifth year. Three years in production. Two years filming in every season. It's done and now the real work starts.

SSJ I'm told there is footage of the entire river from its source to the mouth. How did you go about

getting that?

JA Unscrewed a door off a friend's Helios Courier monster airplane, strapped Portland's Dean of Photography Jim Standridge and our best lense in the back, and flew twice from Crater Lake, Oregon to the Pacific Redwoods in Northern California less than a 1,000 feet above the river. Jimmy then smoothed out the footage in post. Believe me, it's nothing that's ever been seen before. Simply beautiful cinematography.

SSJ It's been published that you raised over \$400,000 to produce the film. Who were your primary backers and what kind of effort did it require to get them on board?

JA I started with nothing. Just a well-thought-out idea on a napkin and the guts to do it. No one believed in the project or its ability to change culture and therefore politics. Once I got Jeff Martin on board, everything changed. We crowdsourced the first \$50,000 from friends, then begged everyone I've ever met for “go away” money. Then I got traction on the East Coast. The Orvis Company jumped in, then the Turner Foundation, and then Murdock Trust in Vancouver. Most of our help has been smaller donations and the fundraising has been never-ending. I'm still working away at it now. Fortunately, we organized the project under a 501c3 the Klamath Basin Rangeland Trust, which was a tremendous help.

SSJ Interestingly, you don't have any companies from the West Coast supporting the film. Why is that?

JA I don't know, and frankly, it was personally very demeaning and frustrating. I think once you've been in public service there is a residue stuck on you that makes your motivations suspect. On this issue, being who I am and doing what I see needs to happen, has been a very hard sell here at home. I'm forever loyal to the friends, foundations, and people who believed me and could see how important this is to the entire country. But I'll tell you, the list of people who blew me off is long.

SSJ As someone who's been intimately involved in politics it might appear that you'd better serve the Klamath Basin by trying to affect change with the political system.

JA That's something I continue

to wrestle with. I think public service is noble and very personal to me, but regarding the Klamath, politics have failed. When someone says the word 'Klamath' the first thought people have is something negative and political. The truth I'm able to tell with film is what is really happening. People have laid down generations of bad blood and been way out in front of their politicians. Dams have been removed before, but never four, in two states, while still protecting agriculture and small communities. The Klamath story is the way forward for conflict resolution and conservation all over the globe.

SSJ You've been quoted as saying our society, in relation to conservation, is stuck in Conservation 3.0 and we need to move to Conservation 4.0. Can you explain that?

JA Well it's a big topic I've been spending a lot of time on. I hope it becomes a book this year. The basic thought is this: American culture goes through phases. In conservation we'd have three: Lewis and Clark and the development of the west (1.0), President Teddy Roosevelt and wise use (2.0), and the Endangered Species Act passed by Republicans in 1973 (3.0). Ten years later the ESA became a declaration of war in the Northwest and, I would argue, the first time conservation became partisan. It was perceived, rightfully so, the federal government put a higher priority on species than people and small communities. Lines were drawn and industries were created. Loggers, farmers, people in small communities who hunt and fish and care deeply about the outdoors were now left out. Industries of groups raising money to sue to protect species grew. Urban and rural divided. That's the model we have today, and frankly, I believe it's run its course. There are few incentives under this model (3.0) to create victories for fish and people. I think American needs a new path forward. Instead of endangered species and the lawsuit model of conservation, I want to move us to endangered habitats where small communities are part of habitat. If we do that, make small places, valuing the fishing and hunting heritage and devotion to the land as part of the decisions, partisanship and lawsuits have little oxygen to breath. That's 4.0

and the story of the Klamath, and why what is happening is so revolutionary. Make that disruptive.

SSJ Explain your thinking, or reasoning, behind using a documentary film to bring about change?

JA People consume the news they most agree with. Film, if done correctly, can influence a wide swath of culture. Few people on the East Coast know where their salmon dinner comes from, and perhaps know less about western cowboys, farmers, and Indians. If Americans know little about the politics of the West, they care even less about government reports. Government reports told us super-sized fast food would kill us, but not until a man made a documentary to that effect did McDonald's remove it from their menu. Government didn't lead, culture did. Government reports have warned us for years that these dams, which don't store one single drop for irrigation or agriculture, have ruined the Klamath. No one pays attention but everyone takes sides politically. I want to change all that.

SSJ It seems as though there's a sense of urgency in restoring the Klamath Basin. How realistic is it to expect any real change to happen soon?

JA Soon. We've been working on this for decades. The KBRA took over ten years to negotiate after the twin disasters of 2001 and 2002. Forty-six groups signed on. Three tribes, two states, and a lot of independent farmers. I've worked behind the scenes for what seems like a lifetime and my project is going on its fifth year, but for the first time I'm taking it public. But, it's all about timing and using the right tool. Believe me, 2015 is the year of the Klamath.

SSJ Explain what you mean when you say the film is about people.

JA People like me, fishermen, watch fish movies. I love them, but we're the choir. Political people watch political movies. Both are such small audiences. This is a national story and I got really lucky Jeff Martin directed it. He is not a fish or political guy. He is a people person devoted to telling stories that allow the audience to experience people's suffering and triumph. Test audiences fall in love with my friend the cowboy poet, the fact that a farmer laid down a racist past, the Native American who reached out his hand in friendship. About a year ago I realized we were making a story about the beatitudes: blessed



JASON ATKINSON PHOTO

are the peacemakers, those who show mercy, those who mourn. People who know nothing about cowboys, Indians, rivers, fish, watch this film get it. Allow people to heal, and they'll heal the river. And in this case, it's my river and it happens to be the biggest restoration project in history, but it's a people story through and through, which is why audiences connect so strongly with it.

SSJ The major parties involved (Native Americans, farmers and fishermen) all have their own

agendas when it comes to the Klamath River. Is it realistic to appease all of them?

JA No. Not at all, but they did it anyway. This is the longest running water war in American history, wrapped in racial injustice, abandonment from governments, and the worst partisanship anger that divided communities and led to suicides. Citizen leaders, real people, decided to lay down generational suffering and forge a painful peace. I'm telling you, the people along this forgotten river are the very type of people who founded this country. Simply the best.

SSJ When was the last time you

fished the Klamath River?

JA A couple hours ago.

SSJ What is the last steelhead trip you've taken?

JA I'd never say to be printed.

SSJ What is your biggest steelhead?

JA On the Klamath or elsewhere? I've got some memories that stand out. I'm a long-time devoted two-hander and love to swing classic flies in the company of well-behaved dogs. I've caught of a lot of fish; some bigger than others, and that, my friend, is the political answer of the afternoon.

SSJ If you had one day to fish for steelhead where would you go?

JA The exact same piece of water my great grandfather, my grandpa Big Tom, my Dad and now my son fish. Holy ground to my tribe, we call it the home riffle.

SSJ What is the one thing you want viewers to take away from the film?

JA The Klamath River represents who we all are as Americans. Will we live in the past, or can we be great again? The film shows us how. **SSJ**

AGE

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RESIDENCE

Central Point & Portland, Oregon

OCCUPATION

Filmmaker, author, speaker, true believer, public servant, consultant

PUBLISHED WORKS

Inside Out (*Loyal Art*, 2015)

What We All Wished Politicians Understood (*Loyal Publishing*, 2006)

Contributor to Huffington Post

MORE INFORMATION: WWW.ARIVERBETWEENUS.COM