



PETROGLYPHS, SHAD AND THE PENNSYLVANIA FISH & BOAT COMMISSION

by *WCO Vance Dunbar*
photos by the author



The Susquehanna River has always been a part of me. I was raised near its banks, just downstream and west of Harrisburg, Dauphin County. I was a river rat with a mile-wide playground, and I spent my summers exploring its secrets. I'd fix up old boats, washed down from the floods, and paddle out to the islands where I'd always catch small-mouth bass and sometimes channel catfish. I would never find any arrowheads but not for lack of trying.

The Native American exhibit at The State Museum of Pennsylvania fueled my imagination and enthusiasm for ancient artifacts. The exhibit featured dioramas of Indian villages with natives netting and smoking fish on islands in the Susquehanna River— islands like mine. I was further teased by cross sections of dig sites, which showed soda bottles unearthed just below the surface and Indian pottery and beads being discovered at depths of five to ten feet. I must have dug a dozen holes on my islands and found nothing but sand, shells and junk. What intrigued me most was the petroglyph exhibit. I was fascinated by the ancient doodles and was determined to find some of my own. I explored rocks up and down the river and along its tributaries, as far as my bike and legs would take me. I never found any Indian drawings while growing up but was rewarded with finding limestone caves, jumpable cliffs and the occasional white-man etchings (some with dates from the 1700s). My quests kept me out of trouble, for the most part, and I never tired of searching for treasures.

My time on the river influenced my decision to become a Waterways Conservation Officer (WCO) for the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission (PFBC), an agency formed to restore the American shad fishery to the Susquehanna River. Shad—that's

what the Native Americans were catching and smoking in those museum dioramas. I'd never seen any shad growing up, because there were several large hydroelectric dams impeding their migration from the Chesapeake Bay to my stretch of the river. Fortunately, I was stationed in Bucks County as a WCO for several years and got the opportunity to witness the shad run up the Delaware River, which has no dams and therefore has tremendous runs of migratory fish. In the Delaware River, I saw a glimmer of the Susquehanna River as it had been and could better appreciate its potential. To me, spring on the Delaware River was riotous. I would watch alewife, gizzard shad and American shad working their way up the Delaware River and into its tributaries, at times filling the smaller streams from bank to bank. The predators were close behind.

I loved watching the shad but hated eating them. Eels were a different story. On Friday nights, my boy and I would fish the Delaware River and catch 2- to 3-foot silver (American) eels. Saturday mornings, we'd have eels and eggs. In the late summer, we'd watch the young eels climb up the face of the dam at Nockamixon on their epic upstream journey.

I moved from Bucks County to Clearfield County and explored the West Branch Susquehanna River from its headwaters to its mouth. I canoed and kayaked it, dove and snorkeled it, fished in it and hunted on it. I shot deer, caught trout, found hellbenders and unearthed sunken logs from the lumber era. I never saw a shad and only once, on the Sinnemahoning Creek, found an eel. After my experiences on the Delaware River, I knew the river's potential and longed for the return of shad and eels that it once knew.

My dad sent me a newspaper clipping about the petroglyphs on the Susquehanna River and challenged me to find them. We made it a summer project. I started by reading a book by Donald Cadzow called "Petroglyphs in the Susquehanna River near Safe Harbor, Pennsylvania." I learned that the exhibits in The State Museum of Pennsylvania were taken from Walnut Island and Crewell Rock, prior to the area being flooded for use by the Safe Harbor Hydroelectric Dam. I also learned that some other glyphs were still intact and above the water line, downstream of the dam near Shenks Ferry.

While scouting the area for a place to launch, we found a unique place called the Indian Steps Museum. The museum is located a few miles downstream of the Safe Harbor Dam on the York County side of the river. It is literally made of Native American artifacts, with over 10,000 pieces cemented into and protruding from the walls. We found a place to launch, just upriver of the museum at the York Furnace boat launch.

My dad, my son and I made a day of it and launched our kayaks—three generations of Dunbars, all river rats. Upon seeing this piece of river, I realized it was special and thought of what a great fishery it could be. This stretch of river cuts through a gorge of sorts in York and Lancaster counties, where the river narrows to nearly half of its width in Harrisburg, Dauphin County. It didn't take long to find our target—Big Indian Rock. This rock is located in the mid-channel of the Susquehanna River adjacent to the mouth of Conestoga Creek, in the shadow of the Safe Harbor Dam.

The Conestoga valley was once widely populated by Native Americans, probably because of the rich soil and the relation of the Conestoga Creek to this tactically sound fishery location. I could envision the Native Americans and subsequent commercial fishermen spending weeks on end at this rock and on the neighboring islands while the shad and eels were running.

We explored Big Indian Rock and found petroglyphs of shamans, spirit guides and other ancient doodles that held meaning to the natives and to the settlers. I then started looking around and was floored when I found the rock, which held the most significance to me—a rock with a clearly defined etching of a shad. It connected me, as an angler, to those who came before me. And, based on the symbol and its location, it held special significance to me as a PFBC employee in our mission to restore shad to the Susquehanna River for the benefit of all Pennsylvanians. ☐

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