



INTERVIEW



# Photography Interview with Todd Pearsons

Please tell us a little about yourself. Why did you become a photographer and how long have you been a photographer? Do you have a fisheries background?

I grew up watching the captivating underwater photography of Jacques Cousteau and his team. I was amazed at the beauty and bounty of life below the water surface and I knew that I wanted to work underwater. I became SCUBA certified in high school and studied aquatic biology at the University of California at Santa Barbara (B.A.) and then fisheries science at Oregon State University (M.S. and Ph.D.). During my studies and research, I found that I needed photographs to enhance my scientific presentations and publications. This took me on an underwater photography quest beginning in 1986 when options to purchase underwater cameras were limited and the quality of my images was mediocre at best. Somewhere along the way, photography became more of an art and adventure to me than a tool to be used exclusively for scientific purposes. The older I have become, the more enjoyment I have pursuing images underwater.

What is your approach in trying to get the perfect shot?

I am still trying to figure that out, but my current approach to get publishable images is fourfold. First, I try to take pictures

in places that have the essential elements of a great shot: clear water, good light, and a great subject. Second, I try to understand the behavior of my subjects and approach them in a way that will allow me to photograph them. Sometimes this will take all day, and I only get a good shot when the sun is going down and the fish begin to cooperate. Third, I get in the water a lot and take massive numbers of pictures. Fourth, I sift through the pictures and pick out the best ones. It is rare for all of the essential elements to come together at one time, but this is one of the things that keeps me going back to the water with my camera.

Do you have any recent images you can share with us and can you explain a little about the images and the challenges of getting them?

Here are a few images and some short information about them. The steelhead trout *Oncorhynchus mykiss* image (above) was lucky. Adult steelhead are very difficult to photograph, and I was fortunate to have two fish fighting upstream of me. One of the fish bit onto the peduncle of the other, and they drifted right into my view, more concerned with each other than me. I was stoked when I got home and checked out the image.





Oregon Chub *Oregonichthys crameri* live in waters that are not clear, and water clarity can be easily disrupted during a shoot by touching or stirring the bottom, which can be covered with detritus. To capture the image above, I had to be very still and not touch the bottom. Oregon Chub are also in perpetual motion making it a constant challenge to capture good images. This fish species was the subject of my first scientific publication and was also the first fish to be delisted from the endangered species list as a result of recovery.

Sockeye Salmon *O. nerka* were long extirpated from their native range in the Yakima Watershed due to the construction of irrigation dams without fish passage provisions. Below is an image of Sockeye Salmon that were part of a reintroduction effort, where adult fish were collected at Priest Rapids Dam on the Columbia River, transported, and released into the Yakima Watershed. Don't let the tropical looking water fool you; it was cold.







Pumpkinseed *Lepomis gibbosus* (above image) and Largemouth Bass *Micropterus salmoides* are not native to the Columbia Watershed and yet have flourished following their introduction. I took these images from a pond near my house, where introduced species are rapidly replacing native ones. You can see in the image below the next generation of Largemouth Bass (eggs) under the watchful eye of the adult bass.





Coho Salmon *O. kisutch* were extirpated from the interior Columbia Watershed. This picture above is of a fish that was reintroduced to help restore Coho to their native range. It represents the hope of future generations.

#### Do you have any goals for your photography?

I am trying to capture underwater pictures of as many freshwater fish species in the Pacific states as possible, particularly those that have not been photographed underwater, and also attempting to continually improve the images that I take of certain species that are dear to my heart (e.g., Oregon Chub, Olympic Mudminnow *Novumbra hubbsi*). I am working on a few books that will include these images. My hope is that the images will help bring awareness, appreciation, and stewardship to native species and the water bodies they inhabit. I am also working on an artistic photo project to capture the beauty of water beneath the surface.

#### What do you enjoy most in your job?

Being in the water, flying with fish, and getting great shots. It is like treasure hunting, art, and adventure in one activity. It is also such an odd thing—cameras weren't originally designed to go below the water surface and now thanks to Jacques Cousteau and others it is so easy to do it. I also get excited sharing my images with others and seeing others enjoy them.

#### What is the hardest part of your job?

Getting good images of fish that are rare, highly secretive, constantly moving, or live in challenging environments (e.g., dirty water, too many bubbles, low natural light, deep water). Certain species are easy, whereas others are near impossible. Cold water can also interrupt a productive shoot. I have had to get out of the water many times because my cold hands could not press the shutter button and because of hypothermia setting in. I suppose these challenges are some of the reasons why more people do not do it.

#### Why do you do it?

Because I love being in the water, being with interesting creatures, and capturing moments that can influence people's thinking about natural environments and animals. I also love to learn and I am always learning new subsurface things when I am in the water such as animal behavior, ecosystem dynamics, and improved picture making.

#### Where can we find or purchase your work?

Many of my images can be viewed in the Todd Pearsons' gallery at [www.underwaterfishphotos.com](http://www.underwaterfishphotos.com) and inquiries about purchases can be made by contacting my sales agent: Eric Engbretson ([eric@underwaterfishphotos.com](mailto:eric@underwaterfishphotos.com)). Underwater videos can be found on the Todd Pearsons YouTube channel. Questions about my photography can be sent to [divinenature120@gmail.com](mailto:divinenature120@gmail.com). I plan to publish some picture books and field guides in the future. [AFS](#)