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CYCLE OF LIFE

Renewal and hope
on planet *Salar*

BY DONALD CHRIST

A CIRCLE UNBROKEN



Mitch Campbell with camera, the circle fish and the Moment sculpture (facing page). By enlarging the photo the sculptor discovered that the fish performed a feat reserved for Olympic divers. As it somersaults it twists almost 180°, which is borne out by the fact that its adipose fin is no longer in line with the dorsal fin.

MITCH CAMPBELL





COURTESY OF DONALD CHEST

A MAN, A MOMENT, AND A MEMORABLE FISH COME BACK TO LIFE.

LAST FALL, THOSE TAKING HIGH TEA AT THE PALM COURT in The Plaza, the venerable Hotel on Fifth Avenue in New York City, may have noticed a young woman toting a silver, circular sculpture through the front lobby. Jill Alcott had just taken a taxi cross town to deliver an item for the live auction at a dinner to celebrate the Atlantic Salmon Federation's 60th year of conserving wild Atlantic salmon.

Of course the sculpture may easily have gone unnoticed against the flurry and fuss of the arrival of many well-dressed, distinguished guests. ASF's New York Dinner is always a classy affair, but this year's event, which honored Paul A. Volcker, the former head of the U.S. Federal Reserve and now a valued economic advisor to President Obama, had an extra dollop of glamour and glitz. Yes, even as the crowd of prominent, some famous, ASF supporters gathered in the Centennial Foyer to talk excitedly about the excellent runs of salmon in 2008, the silver bronze by artist Gordon Gund seemed to take centre stage. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that, even among the all-star cast and the other expensive auction items, it stood out like a shining beacon of hope and promise for wild salmon and the rivers in which they swim.

No, it wouldn't be an exaggeration because the stunning work by Moisie Salmon Camp member Gund, is not only beautiful, but has its own impressive history.



Mitch Campbell captured a remarkable moment. Angler Gordon Gund later had his own memorable moment with a leaping Moisie fish, which also formed a perfect circle. He is fishing with guide Larry Wright (in stern of canoe) who released the original circle fish.



COURTESY OF DONALD CHRIST

The sculpture is of a large, hooked salmon forming a circle, nose to tail, frozen in time, as it attempts to free itself. To many in the crowd who stopped to admire it, the salmon may have struck them as an abstract work. Far from it, it is almost a perfect rendition in size, shape, and form of a leaping fish. In fact its model is a very real salmon.

The work was inspired by a Mitch Campbell photograph. Campbell, who passed away in 2003, lived at the Moisie Salmon Camp, virtually year round from 1931 until his death, except for his service in World War II. As a young man, he was an avid fisherman, but as he aged he began to root more and more for the salmon. After a while he gave up fishing entirely and took to photography. Mitch Campbell was truly a friend of Atlantic salmon. He will always be remembered as someone who fought hard and long to conserve and protect *Salmo salar*.

In 1987, to honor his outstanding contributions to Atlantic salmon conservation, Campbell received the T.B. "Happy" Fraser Award and was inducted into the Atlantic Salmon Federation Hall of Fame. Even then his skills as a photographer did not go unnoticed.

"His classic images of leaping salmon," the award inscription read, "capture the majesty of the Atlantic salmon on its homeward journey and reveal the artist's sensitivity and sportsman's passion and wonder for the natural world."

In addition to the health of the Moisie River, which in no small way stands as a testament to Campbell's conservation legacy, the former Moisie Salmon Camp manager left a treasure trove of photographs. His unique ability to capture wildness incarnate was recognized internationally and his work is still published in many books and magazines, including the *Atlantic Salmon Journal*.

To many, including Mitch Campbell, his best photograph is one of a series taken early morning in 2000. If not his best, it is without a doubt the most famous among Moisie anglers.

That fateful morning, Campbell had gone out on the river with another longtime camp employee, Larry Wright, to fish the Georges Miville Pool. The pool is named after a legendary Moisie River guide who, in his time, was the camp's master gaffer. He worked at the camp every year from 1903 until his death in 1956. As Wright cast, Mitch stood by, camera at the ready. Larry hooked a salmon, estimated by both men to weigh 30 pounds. He proceeded to fight the fish, land it, and release it. Mitch later told me that the fish jumped 12 times and that he captured it in the air 10 times. The series of photographs that Campbell took that day are truly extraordinary. This photograph of that large salmon in the air, and in an almost full circle, is the best of the series Campbell shot that day but according to the man behind the lens, it was also the best photograph that he ever took.

A bronze plaque on the banks of the Moisie, not far from the historic dining room reads:

IN MEMORY OF
MITCHELL CAMPBELL
1914-2003
LIKE HIS BELOVED
MOISIE RIVER
HIS SPIRIT AND
DEVOTION TO THE
RIVER WILL FLOW
ON FOREVER



From the moment that Gordon Gund became aware of the photograph he began to think of memorializing it in a sculpture.

He had the photograph enlarged and discovered that the fish in trying to escape, had not only twisted its body into a perfect circle, but had also contorted itself so the top of its tail almost touched under its chin.

Gund made an armature and began to develop a clay model. His wife, Lulie, bought a small salmon at a fish market and Gordon manipulated it to form the shape he wanted. Several times he froze the test fish and thawed it out to massage it and twist it again. After several such sessions, he announced to Lulie that he had learned what he needed to know and that they could now eat the clay-stained fish. She decided to decline the offer.

As he set to work on his clay model, he found that it took so much clay that he had to reinforce the armature on which the model rested. Finally satisfied with his effort, he took the model to a mold-maker in Roosevelt, New Jersey, and from there to a foundry in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, to see about casting the model in bronze. Someone at the foundry commented that the sculpture was a nice "stylized" representation of a fish. Campbell's photograph showed that this was not an imaginary fish, but the real thing.

The bronze casting completed, the sculpture was treated with silver nitrate to obtain the proper, natural shading for the darker back and silver sides of a salmon fresh from the sea. It is possible, although unlikely, that Campbell's salmon, released in the Moisie to spawn by Larry Wright, eight years back, is still alive. What is certain, however, is that the magnificent 50-pound sculpture made its own final migration in the arms of Jill Alcott to be sold at the auction at the ASF dinner.

There, it caught the attention of the crowd and brought a wonderful price. Mitchell Campbell's prized photograph of a released, beautiful, 30-pound, wild Atlantic salmon came back to life through the skill and imagination of sculptor Gordon Gund. And through the funds raised, it continues to contribute to the safeguarding of wild Atlantic salmon.

The circle is closed, a moment is preserved; but there is much more. The cherished memory of a dedicated conservationist and photographer springs back



Mitch Campbell's spirit lives on, in and around the river he loved. Gordon Gund's skill as a sculptor (above with a bronze whale tail) helped bring one of Mitch's most memorable moments to life.

to life for all who view the circle fish sculpture. Even then, the story of the circle fish is not in itself complete. As magical as the bronze fish is in the way it inspires all of us, it is all the more miraculous and an even greater inspiration when you learn that Gordon Gund is blind. Yes, the sculptor lost his sight many years ago as a result of *retinitis pigmentosa*.

Lifelong friendships are forged in the pursuit of *Salmo salar*. When one special fish and moment can be preserved forever, it makes such bonds eternal. Perhaps that is the true magic of the circle fish sculpture. It keeps alive the spirit of a man who saw and understood the true value of wild Atlantic salmon and free-flowing rivers. And it came to do all this through the hands and heart of a blind, but not unseeing, angler and friend.

Donald Christ is a member of the board of ASF U.S. and the president of the Moisie Salmon Club.