Moss Landing Evolves as a Center for Marine Sciences

The challenges weren’t completely over for the somewhat sleepy little fishing port of Moss Landing with the withdrawal of the Humboldt Oil Refinery proposal in 1966. Renowned photographer Ansel Adams, then a Carmel resident, spoke, “It is not just the Humble Oil refinery we’re fighting at Moss Landing, its is the whole industrial complex, which will inevitably follow and change the whole complexion of the region”.

In 1973, just nine years later, another industrial project was proposed for the center of Monterey Bay. The projections of the energy companies at that time were for continuing dependence on oil and an increase in the demand by the western states. The solution at that time was to find the best location along the west coast for a supertanker port that could handle the very large tankers that were being built to reduce oil transport costs. The larger the tankers, however, the deeper water they required.

There were 11 sites analyzed between Puget Sound, Washington, and southern California, with Moss Landing being one of those due to the presence of the deep waters of the head of Monterey Submarine Canyon very close to the shoreline. This would have allowed supertankers to get very close to the coast, but also involve significant environmental risks in the event of a spill due to presence of California sea otters, other marine mammals, as well as the fishing fleet.

An Environmental Impact Assessment was prepared for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers study The Monterey Bay site would have also necessitated a large pipeline extending from Moss Landing to the refineries in the San Francisco Bay area. The local chapter of the Sierra Club assembled a group to critique the report, and the Moss Landing site in particular, based on the risks of the site. I was part of that group. Fortunately, the Moss Landing site wasn’t selected for the port.

A few years earlier, however, the earliest facility at what was to become a center for marine research and education was breaking ground at Moss Landing. In 1964 the Baudette Foundation for Biological Research was renovating a former sardine cannery on the sand spit in order to begin “environmental studies of offshore areas to enable fuller use of marine nutritional, medicinal and mineral resources” according to the founder and president of the foundation, Palmer Thayer Baudette.

It is believed that Palmer Baudette was an heir to a family fortune in the mid-west and had a keen interest in marine life. He soon hired two marine biologists – Yale Dawson, a botanist, and J. Laurens Barnard, an invertebrate zoologist, and launched his new facility, which was very short lived. But there is more to this story.
In 1941 Palmer Baudette had married Cobina Wright, who came from a wealthy aristocratic New York City family, and who was pushed into a show business career as a model, singer and actress. She became friends with Bob Hope and his wife Dolores and appeared on his show many times. Cobina began a successful radio career and also appeared in a dozen movies during the early 1940s.

With the collapse of the Baudette Foundation Biological Laboratory a group of California State Universities purchased the property and building and founded the Moss Landing Marine Laboratories in 1966. The industrial corridor, the refinery, and the deep-water port were all defeated and the sand spit became a center for marine research and education.

In 1987, another major institution was founded out on the spit due to the efforts of David Packard. The Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute (MBARI) was developed as an advanced center for ocean research and technology development to fill a niche not occupied by any other institutions at the time.

In the words of David Packard: “The mission of MBARI is to achieve and maintain a position as a world center for advanced research and education in ocean science and technology, and to do so through the development of better instruments, systems, and methods for scientific research in the deep waters of the ocean. MBARI emphasizes the peer relationship between engineers and scientists as a basic principle of its operation. All of the activities of MBARI must be characterized by excellence, innovation, and vision.”

From the first wharf, through salt harvesting, sardine canneries, and a whaling station, and surviving proposals for an oil refinery and supertanker port, the Moss Landing area has become world renowned for its leadership in marine science and technology, and is part of a consortium of about 25 marine research and educational institutions around the margins of the bay that is second to none.