Politicos Witness Live Birth

“And over here in this tank, we have a fish giving live birth,” our instructor announced.

LIVE birth. Little did she know, this fish would become quite the center of attention during our trip around the Bay.

On June 25, 2012, my summer employer, the San Francisco Estuary Partnership, invited members of the Association of Bay Area Governments and other local elected officials to join them for a day on the Bay. Aboard the R/V Robert G. Browneles, we learned about the health of the estuary and the importance of freshwater flows into the Bay. The part I found most interesting, however, was the more physical side of this trip.

The R/V Robert G. Browneles, operated by the Marine Science Institute, is a vessel specifically designed for outdoor education. Most of the people they educate are kids. I had participated in a MSL program earlier this year at the age of eighteen, through my high school’s environmental science class. While on the boat, my class learned how to travel for organisms living in the bay water and scoop for organisms hidden along the bay’s floor. This time, however, I helped pull ropes and yell “heave ho” alongside full-grown adults, not dumpy teenagers. The sight was endearing.

To bring up the outer trawl net, we had to gather in a single file line and pull heavy ropes around and around in a circle. I was amazed at the variety of species we brought up to the deck. There were many silver fish (anchovies), a snail fin midshipman, baby crab, a baby leopard shark and even a bat ray, as well as the small Shinier surf perch (Ompokogaster aggregata) nonchalantly giving birth to her little red baby. Forget the fat ray; the surf perch stole the show, with everyone aboard stopping mid conversation to check her progress. I kept thinking more of the red baby would pop out, but the MSL instructor informed me that surf perch actually take a few days to give birth. “Ouch” is all I can say.

For Sepi Richardson, the former mayor of Brisbane and a current city council member, this trip on the Bay was deeply moving. “As policymakers, we respond to the people in front of us, who ask questions. But on this trip, I became aware of creatures in the water that have voices I’m not hearing, because they are not in front of me,” said Richardson. “Now, when I’m thinking about the Bay, when I’m reading a chart, when I’m considering flows, I have a picture.”

She’s right. The MSL program is built around kinetic learning and exploration, and the perfect excuse to get out of the cubicle on a Monday morning. It seems to me that much of policy making involves reams of paper and countless office hours. This trip provided the exact opposite experience.

When asked about the general level of awareness of bay issues among elected officials, Clayton Councilmember and ABAG Vice President Julie Pierce replied: “It’s hard to remember how complex and fragile the ecosystem is until you see hundreds of different little fish come up in the net. Elected officials need to be reminded there’s a whole ecosystem here that needs to be preserved, or we lose that delicate balance that makes it so special.” I agree. Raised by two environmentally-driven health food freak parents, I learned at a very young age that an estuary is the meeting of a river with the ocean, resulting in brackish water wetland habitats easily disturbed by man’s ever encroaching reach. Talk about fragile.

When you are out on the bay surrounded by soft rolling whitecaps, rather than looking out at them from the shore, you own insignificance comes to mind. “Undisturbed” also comes to mind, although ironically the bay is a micro-managed waterway with ports and marinas and pollution.

John Reed, the Vice Mayor of Fairfax, shared an earlier experience at the Bay Model in Sausalito, which was originally built to test changes to the estuary like the building of a peripheral canal. “[The guide] talked about testing the salinity wedge as it moved up to a proposed canal. What they found, as soon as they started extracting any water from the model system, was that this was not a solution that was viable. [And now a similar diversion] is back on California’s agenda.” Reed alluded to the reality that our bay could change drastically in the coming years with the extraction of more water from the Sacramento River, via two new tunnels under the Delta, water that could have flowed to the Bay.

On a more positive note, John Gioia of the Contra Costa Board of Supervisors and the ABAG Executive Board, reflected on his boat trip experience by stating: “I do think that being out, seeing, and touching helps put the larger policies in perspective. That’s why this is really useful.”

As we headed back to the Berkeley Marina, I said goodbye to the surf perch giving birth, wishing her baby a safe arrival into the place we both call home. 10

Tina Okamoto is an SFEP intern heading to UCLA as a freshman this fall. To see a video of a live surf perch birth go to: www.youtube.com/watch?v=pPwMfaSBnQ