

*Delaware*  
**SMOKEHOUSE**  
*AND THE EEL MAN*

One man, two hands and 500 feet of Delaware River rock: Ray Turner on his eel weir.





## RAY TURNER REPLACES HIS TOMBSTONE

every year—670 pounds of river rock. The ice and high water in winter push the rock slab a little downriver, and he has to pick it up corner-by-corner and hand-by-hand, and push all 670 pounds back on top of the eel weir in the Delaware River. When he dies, the stone slab will mark his grave, but for the moment, the rock is a small part of a 500-foot weir of stones Ray Turner built by hand across most of the Delaware River in order to catch eels for his Delaware Delicacies Smoke House. It's part of the unbreakable contract Ray has between himself and Mother Nature. The river gives him her eels. Ray gives her his life.

Ray Turner was trained as a civil engineer. Spent some time in Vietnam. He's what some rugged individualists would call a rugged individualist. By hand, he built his house of stone from the river. He constructed it alongside the Delaware near Hancock, New York, on a piece of land his dad obtained after the Korean War. Sometime in the 1960s, he and Billy Gibbons from ZZ Top both stopped shaving and cutting their hair. At this printing, they look about the same, and what Gibbons does to a guitar riff, Ray Turner does to smoked eels and

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(Left) Signs on a long dirt road mark the path to Ray's smokehouse. (Above) Inside the mouth of the weir. Eels migrate downriver and are directed into the weir by rock walls.

bunches of other things.

I told him we were going to do a story on him for an online magazine. He obliged, but he couldn't have cared less.

"Great, I won't read it," he said. "I don't own a computer; I don't own a BlackBerry; I don't own an iPhone; I don't own an iPad; I don't own a laptop and I don't give a crap. I tell time by the light in the trees on the river and I get my news from the eagles and Mother Nature. They tell me everything I need to know. The newspapers generally have nothing I need."

The freshwater eels (genus *Anguilla*) evolved around 50 million years ago. The version that's in the Delaware now

migrates downstream in August and September, and Ray is waiting for them. On successive nights, he'll catch upwards of 2,000 eels in mid-September. Then he'll smoke them and sell them all over the world, along with pheasants, turkeys, trout, shrimp, perch, ducks, cheese, Cornish hens and more. The Smoke House is a few miles down a dirt road out of Hancock. Ask around. You've gotta want to get there, but if you get there he'll sell you something smoked, and it will raise your eyebrows. You will not regret—or forget—being there.

His office is the river. He paddles a canoe to work every day about a quarter of a mile upstream. Bald eagles sit in the





(Clockwise from top left) A manual labor of love. Eels in a holding pen prior to smoking. Netting the day's catch. Fresh from the river.







trees and watch him go to work. They wait for their fair share—an even measure from their friend, Ray Turner. The weir is actually two long rock walls, built at an angle to the river, that create a “womb.” The center is a trap made out of wood that collects some of the eels as they migrate downstream. They just swim right into it, along with all the other life in the river, which he in turn releases. The weir partially collapses from ice and high water in winter, and Ray rebuilds it by hand every summer.

He builds the weir to take advantage of the natural hydraulics of the river, just as ancient fishermen did before him. In that same manner, he approaches his work as a shaman—an intermediary between the spirit world and the human. All life in the river floats into and out of the weir. A few of the migrating eels, and Ray, never leave. In the meantime, the bald eagles along the riverbank and the tombstone slab in the river wait patiently while Ray Turner finishes his work. 🌊

(Above) Ray also smokes rainbow trout, along with pheasant, quail, shrimp, cheese, salmon and more. (Right) He doesn’t have a web site, but if you want to find Ray, ask anyone in Hancock, NY, or call 607-637-4443.

